

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE PALM SUNDAY PARADE"

St. Mark 11:1-10

Text: "And those who went before and those who followed cried out, 'Hosanna!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" St. Mark 11:9

Recently I read the story of a little boy who heard that the circus was coming to town. Since he had never seen the circus, he began to save his nickles and dimes and pennies. At last he had saved enough money to go to the circus. Of course, there was a big parade of the circus down main street and he got himself a spot on the best corner to see the parade go by. He watched the horses and the elephants and the clowns and the midget and the bearded lady and all the other members of the circus as they paraded by. At last the parade drew to an end. As the very last person in the parade passed by, the boy stepped out into the street and handed him his money he had so carefully saved. He never got inside the big tent, never saw the three ring circus, never saw the performers do their acts. No, he thought there was only the parade.

Now, a lot of people are like that when it comes to the Christian religion. They never get inside. They never participate in the real thing. They just watch the parade go by. In a sense that is exactly what happened on Palm Sunday. The Bible says that a lot of people lined the street when Jesus passed by. Somebody said God's big circus had come to town, that the Messiah had come, so they lined the streets and cheered. You see, when somebody else runs your country, as the Romans ran theirs, when you have been treated like so much dirt by the Roman soldiers so that if he demands it, you have to carry his packages for at least a mile; and when you think God is finally sending someone to right a wrong and to square an injustice, why you would cheer that person, too. The only problem is, they went to the parade and never saw the circus!

Do you realize that five days after they cheered him they crucified him? Isn't that incredible? Does that make any sense to you? Why would they welcome him with a hero's welcome on Sunday and nail him to a cross on Friday? Maybe it is because they never saw the circus--maybe it is because they never really understood what the parade was really all about.

See how it works! Jesus said, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Is there anything you would like to be free from? Would you like to be free from worries, your weaknesses, your fears, your sins? Would you like to be free from tensions and stress? Most of us would.

Notice in the first place that the Jews needed to be freed from their idea of God as Santa Claus. You see, they misread their own history. They looked back and saw how God had raised up an Abraham or a Moses or a Jacob or a Joseph. And they said, "hey, that's what we need! We need a leader of God who will shoulder all our problems and get us out of the mess we are in."

Do you ever do that? We decide what we want and how we will get it and we start out to achieve our objectives. But somehow things go wrong. Suddenly our plans go awry, things begin to collapse on us, and the next thing we know life has simply caved in on us. And we look at God and say, "Lord! you failed me. You let me down. How could you desert me just when I needed you?"

Do you find yourself saying something like that? We decide what we want in life; we set our goals and we go after them. Then, when things don't work out as we had hoped or dreamed, we begin to blame God. We say, "Lord, how can I believe in you any more. Everything I have worked for and dreamed about has exploded in my face and I don't see how you could do this to me if you are really God."

Isn't that what the Jews wanted? They wanted a Santa Claus God. They wanted God to send a leader who would rally the nation, organize an army, lead them to political conquest and free them from hated Roman oppression. And when Jesus didn't do that, in their anger and frustration they nailed him to a cross.

Did you ever want to do that to God? I know I have. God won't play Santa Claus. When God didn't make my dream, my ambition, my hopes come true, then I wanted to blame him for it. But Jesus said that God isn't like that. He went into the temple and overturned the table of the moneychangers and he cried out, "My Father's house shall be called a house of prayer."

In the great Protestant Cathedral in Copenhagen, Denmark, there is a remarkable statue by the great Danish sculptor, Thorvaldsen. It is a statue of Jesus and is considered to be one of the great art pieces of the world. You see, Thorvaldsen was fascinated by Jesus even though he was not a believer in him. He was impressed by the great mind of Jesus and he once said, "With that brain, He will conquer the world." So Thorvaldsen decided that he would make a great, heroic statue of Jesus. He went to work and moulded him in clay with outstretched arms and hands of command and authority. When he finished, he had a man with a regal, dominating figure. Thorvaldsen was satisfied. "Jesus," he said, "is the greatest figure in human history and this statue will so represent him."

That night the artist put his clay figure in a shed to cure and dry. But as darkness came, the mists from the sea rolled in and began to work a strange miracle on the clay. The next morning when Thorvaldsen came to see his work he discovered that the upstretched arms and hands had dropped from their lofty, imperious gesture of command to one of supplication. The hands were now in pleading position; and the face, which had been raised in confidence and near arrogance, was lowered, with a look of infinite compassion. Because he was a great artist, Thorvaldsen knew instantly that this was a far greater work of art than his original and a far truer portrayal of Jesus. Instead of inscribing on the pedestal, "Follow my Command," as he had intended, he wrote instead, "Come unto me." In the Cathedral of Copenhagen along the walls are statues of great heroes of the faith--Peter, Matthew, John, and all the rest. But in the center at the altar is Thorvaldsen's commanding statue of Jesus, "Come unto me."

Do you see? We watch the Palm Sunday parade and we think, "He is a hero, a great general, a great leader, a commanding figure who can lead the world or make my life work out as I want. But when we get inside we discover instead one who says, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Does that make sense to you? God isn't a Santa Claus who gives us everything we want. And, do you know, if we had everything we wanted, it wouldn't assure our happiness. No, God wants to deal with our hearts. He wants us to have his desires and ambitions and hopes and dreams. He is one who says to us, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful. When you get inside the circus that's what you discover--you discover that God wants to deal with the desires of your heart and for us to make our will his will.

Suppose Jesus had given the Jews what they wanted that day. Suppose he had given them freedom from Rome, political freedom, national greatness, and economic abundance. Suppose Jesus had been that sort of messianic Santa Claus. Would it have made people happy? Would it have met their deepest needs? Would it have filled the longings of their hearts? And the answer is no. No, that's not how the needs of the heart are met.

A lot of people today want God to be a big Santa Claus. They want him to meet all of their needs, deal with all of their problems, bless all of their efforts. But even if God did that, do you think we would have a happy world? The answer is no. A lot of people are just watching the Palm Sunday parade and they think that's what Jesus is about. But when you go to the circus, you find out it is far different. No, Jesus deals with our hearts. He reshapes our desires, our longings, our wishes. And when our hearts are in tune with his, we find true happiness.

I know that's hard to believe. We are so success oriented, so goal and achievement oriented, we think that's where we will find happiness. But it just isn't so. The only true happiness and contentment we will have is when we are in the will of God and he is dealing with our hearts.

How is it in your heart this morning? Maybe you are fairly content right now-- maybe things are going reasonably well for you. But if your heart is not surrendered to Jesus, you are just watching the parade go by. Or maybe you are lonely and fearful; maybe you are anxious and afraid of life; maybe you are bitter and disillusioned. You saw the parade, but never got to see the circus--to find out what God really could do for you--or wanted to do for you. I had a man come to me once and he said to me, "Dr. Jumper, I can't believe in God any more," and I said, "why not?" He said, "Well, it's an evil world we live in and I can't understand all of this." Our only child has gone wrong and her marriage is breaking up and my heart is broken over it. My relationship to my wife has gone bad after all these years and we're not happy together. Everything in my business has gone wrong and I just can't believe in a God who would let things like that happen to me." He was wanting God to be a Santa never willing for God to deal with his heart.

Recently I got a letter from an old friend down in Texas. She lived in a city about fifty miles from my church, but somehow she came to me for help. Her situation was desperate. Her husband no longer loved her and was seeing another woman--all her life had simply blown up in her face. As she put it, life was in a million pieces. As we talked together she came to put her trust in Jesus. She let him into her heart to deal with her needs, with her hurt and with her pain and her loneliness-- and yes, with her bitterness and anger. As Jesus took over the lordship of her life, she found that with his strength she could begin to deal with all of those terrible feelings she was experiencing. Her letter said, "life hasn't been easy, but I find that I can cope and there is a quiet peace and joy in my heart. Things haven't worked out as I hoped they would or prayed that they would, but during all of this time I have found that his strength is sufficient for me."

Is that true in your life? We watch the parade go by and we think, "Wow! If Jesus is really God, he can take away my problems, make my dreams turn out the way I want, and then I will be happy." But that's just the appearance of the Palm Sunday parade. When you get to the circus you find out that Jesus doesn't necessarily change your circumstances, he changes your heart. He changes your wishes and your desires. And in the end, that and that alone is what will make you happy.

Do you know, I suspect a lot of us are Christians--we are in church this morning-- because we have got a bad case of the "gimmies". We say, "Lord, gimme this; Lord, gimme that" and we think we will be happy. But Jesus says, "He who loses his life for my sake will find it." You see, he wants you to give him your heart--your life--this morning.

Have you done that? Have you surrendered your heart and your life to him and given him control? You see, if you don't you are always watching the parade--or else you end up nailing him to some cross.