

## Meeting the Master ... Amidst a Cheering Crowd

Sterling UMC  
April 17, 2011  
Matthew 21:1-11

This morning I would like you to transport yourself in your mind to that first Palm Sunday. Imagine with me that you are there along the streets of Jerusalem with that great crowd of people witnessing the arrival of the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus Christ into the city.

As you look off into the distance there is something on the horizon. Dust from the dry desert road rises as a crowd approaches. People begin to gather to see what is happening. Then someone comes up from a distance out of breath saying that it is Jesus. Jesus is coming!

The word begins to spread like wild fire. Soon the crowd is growing larger. People are lining the street, pushing in on each other to get a better look. There is an explosive air of expectancy and uncertainty everywhere.

Suddenly, as the procession nears you can see him. It is Jesus. The Master, the Messiah. But he is riding on the back of a donkey, a simple beast of burden. Journeying with him were his most loyal disciples - Peter, James, John - and even Judas. From Bethany a host of loyal followers come after him.

As he approaches their enthusiasm grows and the people start taking off their coats and throwing them in the road. Others break off branches from the palm trees and spread them in his path. Some are even carrying palm branches in their hands, a sign of victory. All around there are cheers and shouts. As he comes nearer you can hear what the people are singing, "Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna! Hosanna in the Highest!" The atmosphere becomes almost infectious.

It was a strange conglomerate in the holy city that day. There were many different people who encountered Jesus amidst that cheering crowd. They were there for different reasons, different motives, and different motives.

Let's take a look at some of the people who may have met the Master that day amidst the cheering crowd.

You scan the crowd and first you see the face of a woman. Her face, once downcast with shame and guilt, is now radiant with beauty. Her eyes which once would not even rise to meet the eyes of Jesus because she was a Samaritan and he was a Jew, now lovingly gaze at the one who offered her living water beside Jacob's Well. Once a shameful five-time divorcee now her life is a living testimony to the transforming grace of Jesus.

Next to her we see a man who until recently had lived in a world of darkness. Blind from birth he was reduced to begging along the dusty road simply to try to gather enough money just to put some food in his belly. Now his eyes are bright and alive and his vision is sharp and clear. Once a lowly beggar, an outcast from society, now he is a bold witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that He can not only open the eyes of the blind but can transform the heart of the spiritually blind as well.

You look closer and see the face of another man, who only a few weeks earlier

had been dead and buried and in the grave for four days. His stiff, cold body, surrounded by the stench of death was now walking, running, jumping, and shouting "Hosanna!" to the one whose voice called him out of the stone cold tomb.

These are the faces of his friends. His followers. His disciples. These are those who had been drawn to him at some time during the preceding months. They had heard him preach or had seen him do some mighty work - like feeding 5,000 hungry people, healing the sick, or even raising the dead. Their lives had been touched in some way by his gracious deeds and their lives had been changed. Utterly transformed. And they would never be the same. Their love and devotion to him was written all over their faces. There was no mistaking it.

Next we see the face of another man. Earlier he had been asking a lot of questions, wondering, "Who is this man Jesus, and what is he doing?" Now because everyone else seems to be excited about this man on the donkey he gets caught up in it too. He joins the chorus of voices shouting, "Hosanna!" But as you look at him you can't help but sense that he is just shouting empty words. His roots are shallow, and devotion temporary. There is no depth to his belief. It is purely superficial. He is what you might call a well-wisher in the crowd. Here is a man with no previous exposure to this Jesus. He sees no harm in him and feels that the cause he represents is good. So he waves his palm branch for the sake of the cause but makes no personal commitment. When the cheering stops and the excitement of the day has passed, so does his dedication.

Next you're startled to see a man pushing and shoving his way to the front of the crowd. He is doing everything in his power to get to Jesus. You see a look of determination on his face. Obviously he wants something. He begins screaming at Jesus trying to get his attention. But Jesus continues his journey without acknowledging the man. So he then tries another approach. He grabs a branch from a nearby palm tree and runs and waves it in Jesus' face thinking that will surely make him listen.

Perhaps Jesus senses his attitude because Jesus seems to look right through him. So you watch as this man throws down his palm branch in disgust and walks the other way. He is what we would call an exploiter. You know, those people who affix themselves to one movement in order to sponsor another. He was there to get for himself and to further his own cause. He wanted the fringe benefits he could get by supporting the things Jesus stood for. He would accept the benefits of Jesus Christ but was not willing to give his time, talent, or possessions for his cause. He was there to take, not to give. And if it didn't work out in his favor he wanted no part of it.

You scan the crowd and your eyes come to rest on another face. This is the face of a strong young man with a helmet on his head and a sword in his hand. He is a Roman soldier, standing on the sidelines. During the Passover thousands of extra Roman troops were brought in as reinforcements --to make sure the Jews were kept under control.... they were there to keep the peace, make sure no trouble erupted... To put out any fires before they grew.

And we can be sure when this crowd of thousands began their celebration that it got this soldier's attention. But he quickly discovered that this was a harmless gathering and offered no real threat to them. It was best he determined to just leave them alone. His attitude was just stay in your place Jesus and don't bother me, and we'll leave you alone. He was indifferent to what was going on in the streets that day.

Next you catch a glimpse of a robed man. His face is angry. You can tell by the

way he is dressed that he is one of the religious leaders, part of a group known as the Pharisees. He is a part of the crowd but he is certainly not part of the celebration. He can't stand the shouts of the crowds calling Jesus the King and the Son of David. Each Hosanna rips through him like a knife. He feels all of this cheering and shouting of praises is sacrilegious and blasphemous. "Just who does this Jesus think he is, challenging our religious authority?" He was one of those who felt most threatened, because Jesus had brought the searchlight of criticism down upon his holy places, his cherished teachings, and his traditional legalistic practices, exposing his hypocrisy. All of this cheering and shouting was just stirring up trouble.

Somewhere along the parade route he can no longer contain his boiling anger. Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer you see him go up to some of the disciples and tell them to make Jesus to tell the people shut up. But Jesus answers by saying, "If they be quiet, then the very stones would cry out." There was no kindness in his face, only hatred, anger, and bitterness, as if he were plotting some sort of evil. The Pharisee was lost in his stubborn pride and his refusal to acknowledge Jesus.

There is one other face in the crowd. It looks strangely familiar. It is one that you have seen countless times before. You recognize it as your own. You find yourself amidst the cheering crowd. Take a look. Take a good hard look. What do you see? Does your face bear any resemblance to any of the other faces in the crowd?

Do you see the face of a Pharisee? One consumed with legalism. Concerned more with traditions and outwardly doing all of the right things, saying all the right words, and yet under that mask of holiness there is the face of hypocrisy? Unwilling to give up your own power, pride, and wrong attitudes?

Maybe you look and you see the face of the indifferent Roman soldier, a face that says, "just don't bother me Jesus, you can go on with your parade, let other people praise, serve and worship you. I just want to live my life the way I want, do my own thing, and not be bothered.

Perhaps when you look into your own face you see the face of the exploiter. Your only interest in Jesus is what you can get from him. As long as Jesus follows your plan, fulfills your needs and desires, as long as Jesus agrees to act like a puppet on a string or a genie in a bottle, making no demands, then you shout his praises. But when the road gets rough and rocky or when you have better things to do you are the first to throw down your palm branch and leave the parade. You're willing to take, take, take, but you're willing to give nothing.

Or does your face resemble that of the well-wisher? You smile and acknowledge Jesus because it seems to be "the thing to do". Or, "Everyone else is doing it." So on Sunday mornings or on special days like today you smile, and wave your palm branch to pay homage to him as he passes by, but on Monday mornings you forget all about him.

Or is your face the face of a friend? A disciple? A true follower of Jesus Christ? Does your face glow and radiate his love? Do your eyes blaze with the fire of devotion? When people look at you can they tell there is something different about you because Jesus Christ has touched your life?

There are many who met the Master amidst the cheering crowd, many faces in the crowd. Which face is yours? What do you see? Do you like what you see?

The good news this morning is that there is hope! The same Jesus who has

touched the lives and changed the faces of so many others can touch your life, change your heart and change your face. He wants to do it. But he won't do it by force. This morning take a good long look at your face. Why not take off your mask. Why not remove all of the make-up that you use to cover up your face and let Jesus do what he desires to do. Open your heart and let him touch you. If you will, just as he marched victoriously into the holy city on that first Palm Sunday, he will come into your life today and touch your heart, change your face, and make you a person of true beauty.