

April 1, 2007
A Palm Sunday Call to Commitment
Matthew 21:1-11

I mentioned last year how difficult it is to preach on the Palm Sunday text simply because we know what they didn't even suspect or understand — that the Jesus they welcomed into the city amidst victorious cheers and waving palm branches would be dead in less than six days.

After telling His disciples for the third time (just one week before it happened) in Luke 18:31-34 that he would be beaten and flogged and killed, Luke writes: "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what He was talking about."

Which means the whole celebration was based on the false assumption that Jesus was going into the city of Jerusalem to enthrone Himself as king, and set up His kingdom rule over Israel.

Luke tells us as much in Chapter 19 verse 11 (the parable immediately preceding this morning's passage) where he says:

"He went on to tell them a parable, because He was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once."

The parable was about a King going away to a distant country for a time and putting his servants in charge until he returned. But they obviously missed the point of that as well — that He would not set up His Kingdom rule (as they imagined it) until he *returned* from that distant country (heaven) after a significant time away — meaning He would not consummate the Kingdom until the time of His SECOND Coming.

Yet, even though the whole scenario of joy and celebration is based on erroneous notions, and may have been more solemn and tearful event (or not happened at all if they had understood what He told them about being handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, and insulted, and spit on, and flogged and killed) we can still learn many things about Christian commitment from this passage of Scripture.

FIRST, we can learn that being a disciple, and being able to serve God does NOT necessitate a full, complete, comprehensive knowledge or understanding of Biblical facts and events before we can start ministering to others and sharing with them about Jesus. If it did, even the disciples would have been excluded!

They had spent 3 years with Jesus (the best teacher who ever lived!) learning from Him night and day, but they still didn't grasp everything He was trying to tell them. In fact, they still didn't grasp the most basic and essential aspects of his teaching:

What the Kingdom of God was like, and when and how it would come, or the fact that the Son of Man needed to suffer, be killed, and would then rise from the dead on the third day! I mean, that's pretty basic stuff!

He had given them massive amounts of instruction about the Kingdom, and had told them three times about His need to suffer, die and rise again. But according to Luke they "didn't understand any of it!" They just didn't get it. Yet they were out there ministering (and had been for 3 years)!!

I find that odd in light of the requirements we often put on people before we will allow them to start serving. Aren't we sometimes made to feel that in order to really serve God we first need to spend a year or two in Bible school, or seminary, have a degree in theology, or a comprehensive grasp of most ALL the doctrines in the Bible?

Don't we sometimes feel that only others who are more knowledgeable, or educated, or gifted, or outgoing, or charismatic are suited to serve in the church or serve God?

This passage blows that concept out of the water! Because here we see that Jesus is a lot more inclusive, and a heck of a lot more willing to delegate ministry responsibility to earnest but misguided people than we ever are!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point: That for Jesus earnestness and desire and a willingness to simply jump in and grow as you go is more important than the various requirements and qualifications we often tend to place on people as necessary pre-requisites to jumping in and getting involved.

And I'm not saying that training is bad. I deeply appreciate the training I've received, and I know many of you are grateful for training you've received. But such training should never be used or perceived as the litmus test that qualifies us for service in the body of Christ.

To this day I am grateful that the Christian Service Corps, and New Horizons Youth Ministries, both accepted me for overseas service in the Dominican Republic, at 23 years old, even though I was less than four months old in the Lord by the time I arrived, and had very little biblical knowledge. To use the old adage, "I had zeal without knowledge." (**Dangerous combination!!**)

And yes, I made many mistakes. I taught many things I would not now teach and did some things I would not now do (even telling one boy in 1980 that I thought Jesus would return by 1985 — Yikes! By Old Testament standards I could have been stoned to death as a false prophet!)

Yet they were willing to give me a chance. They allowed me fail, directed my sometimes misguided zeal, and showed me a better way. They taught me as I went, showed me a different way to look at things, and shared the wisdom they had gleaned from their many years of experience.

The head of the mission let me teach Sunday school, be the liaison to other missionaries on the island, and even asked me to fill in and preach when the chaplain of our mission station left — and I was only about a year and a half old in the Lord by that time. And his encouraging comments on those few occasions that I preached were what led me to Gordon-Conwell to train for the ministry.

It has lead me to see that what often matters more than training is desire, and what matters more than ability is potential. Jesus was pleased with their zeal though misguided.

The disciples who followed Jesus were often lacking in grace and ability, but as history has shown, they had potential, and Jesus was able to draw that out. Jesus never required perfection, He merely required a willing heart and a willingness to be taught by Him.

He was in the business of taking imperfect, theologically ignorant, zealous but often misguided people and bringing out the best in them! Putting untrained people into His service and then training them as they went — using their successes and failures to help them learn. (Even going so far as to let Peter fail miserably so that he might learn to be a bit more humble).

And that's what Jesus is still looking for today: ***Not trained experts, but people with a willing spirit. Not a long list of degrees, but an earnest desire to make a difference for the kingdom in someone's life. Not people who already know everything, but people who are willing to try, and learn or grow as they go!***

Then **LAST**, this passage tells us something else about the COMMITMENT of the disciples — they were willing to risk all for Jesus. We read in verse 38 that the disciples cried out in a loud voice: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" A statement that immediately causes the Pharisees to say to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

Why? Because being under Roman occupation Israel already had a king! His name was Caesar and he ruled over the empire from Rome! And to call or swear allegiance to anyone but Caesar as “king” was punishable by imprisonment or death as treason or sedition.

In fact, it was that crime — the crime of claiming to be king of the Jews that ultimately got Jesus crucified. As the sign placed over his head on the cross said: “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.” That was not his title as much as it was the crime for which He was being crucified!

The Pharisees are upset because here’s a whole mob of people cheering Jesus as the KING who comes in the name of the Lord! Which means this is not merely a harmless little religious parade—it’s an act of treason! It’s an illegal uprising; a mutiny; the seedbed of sedition against Rome — a revolution in the making! A crime punishable by imprisonment or death!

And the Pharisees want Jesus disciples to be “quiet,” because if the Roman garrison ever heard or got wind of what was going on (troops stationed not far away) they would be sent out to deal with all those involved, either arresting or killing all those involved.

That’s why I say this passage is a display of the disciple’s commitment. They knew everything I just told you. They knew that what they were doing was risky and illegal and could have cost them their freedom or their lives. Yet they did it anyway. They were willing to risk everything for Jesus.

My question is this: Will you? Will you commit to serving? To risking for Jesus? To getting involved in some type of ministry even though you might feel you lack knowledge and experience?

Jesus doesn’t need perfection (He wouldn’t find it outside himself anyway)! He’s merely looking for a willing heart. A person with little other than a desire to serve.

A person willing to be used, and instructed as you go — realizing that he who calls you to do something, by laying it on your heart, will also be with you and equip you for that task. He’s calling — will you answer?