

Onward!

Matthew 21: 1-11
Hebrews 12: 1-3

PREPARED BY
KEN GEHRELS
PASTOR
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA
ONTARIO, CANADA

If I say these two words, what images come to your mind?

- Crowds
- Carpets

What do you tend to think of?

If like many of us, your mind may have gone to images you've seen of gala award shows, such as the Grammys and the Oscars.

The red carpet is rolled out. Photographers on all sides, jostling for the best vantage point. And the crowds - in person, some; and the millions who sit in front of their flat screens to watch it all unfold.

These events are so popular that advertisers were willing to pay almost \$2 Million for each 30 second spot in this year's Academy Awards show. They know the crowds are tuned in, ready to take part in socially important and transforming debates such as:

"Can Jennifer Hudson truly not afford to pay someone to make her dress fit properly?"

And

"Why did Cameron Diaz forget to wear some jewelry to accent her Dior gown?"

Crowds - perhaps the only place other than show biz where you're guaranteed where you're guaranteed to draw is to big time sporting events, like those at the cathedral of culture in Kanata. What's it been now - 29 straight sell-outs to watch the Senators play?

For comparison, how many do you think would come out for an evening of packing boxes at the Ottawa Food Bank warehouse? Or to discuss immigration policy in the wake of Friday's announcement of 2007 numbers? Or to pray?

Actually, one more event that's sure to draw a crowd - and that's the annual ritual of Boxing Day sales. Crowds jostling because there's one more deal to be found on something that they just **HAVE** to get. So, **"OUTTA MY WAY!!"**

Yup, crowds can be found in our culture - but just about always it is to be entertained and stimulated into feel-good mode. And only if not too much is demanded by way of commitment or involvement.

We are a self-indulgent society, a sit-on-the-sideline, lay-z-boy kind of culture. Show me. Make me smile. Or give me a thrill.

Yes, it's what attracts.

Does it attract you? Are you part of those crowds?

Want to see what attracted another crowd?

Read with me from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 21 where we see a real change in Jesus' ministry. Up till now Jesus has been doing his level best to keep out of the public eye.

In chapter 8 he cleanses a leper, and commands him, "*Don't tell anyone....*"

In chapter 9 he heals two blind men, saying "*See that no one knows about this.*"

The gospel of Mark shows this trend in even more detail - in chapters 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9 - "*Don't tell anyone what you've seen or experienced.*"

Chapter 21 describes how Jesus went public, and the very large crowd that gathered. Read the account with me, and try to figure out, if you can:

What draws this crowd?

What are they wanting?

[MATTHEW 21:1-11](#)

Have you figured out what drew them? And what they wanted?

Any sense of whether they were any different than the crowds attracted by red-carpet glitz, stanley cup fever or midnight sale madness?

It was an intense time in Metropolitan Jerusalem. Passover season. One historian suggests there may have been almost 3 million tourists in the city at the time. Some of them would have been from the Galilee area and have witnessed some of Jesus' miracles. They'd heard the wise, compelling words. Those were the

ones who gathered in a crowd around Jesus as he approached Jerusalem. Fellow pilgrims, with him, to the holy city.

They think about the relief they'd seen Jesus give in their hometowns and wonder if now he will bring it to the whole nation. Just like the hero Judas Maccabees had done in 175BC - Judas the Hammer, he'd been called, defeating the hated enemy king who had been horribly oppressing the Jews. Judas had then gone into Jerusalem in a parade remarkably like this one. Perhaps the crowd thought Jesus would be the next Judas, kicking out the Romans and giving them freedom again.

They cheer.

And they sing.

They sing a song that was sung every year at Passover. A song that Judas' followers had sung. One found in the Bible as Psalm 118. It speaks of the coming of Messiah, the servant of God who would set the people free from suffering and oppression,

the one who would bring...

... peace.

Listen to some of the words:

"This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

O LORD save us....

(that, by the way, is the meaning of this strange word "Hosanna!")

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD....

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession to the altar."

They get all excited. Here was the one through whom God would answer their cries of "*Hosanna! Save us!*" A new Judas!

And Jesus goes along with it all.

For He **IS** coming to bring peace. He, deliberately, is fulfilling what a prophet spoke of him many, many years before:

Zechariah 9:9 "Rejoice greatly... Behold, your King is coming to you... Lowly and riding on a donkey..."

You noticed that - right? The bit about the donkey?

Powerful, impressive animal, eh?

Judas the Hammer came with open power, troops beside him.

When the Romans came, bringing their vaunted *Pax Romana*, they came with shiny standards, swords bucked at the side, riding huge horses.

Jesus comes.....

lowly and riding on a donkey.

The peace Jesus brings will come another way than by stallions, chariots, smart bombs or cruise missiles.

Because Jesus isn't out to simply impose an external quiet on the world –

- the way armies are trying to impose quiet in Darfur or the Middle East or Iraq or Afghanistan
- the way the Romans tried to impose quiet on Palestine

External quiet isn't peace.

Ask anyone who lives in Kosovo these days.

Just because people aren't dying, doesn't mean everything is alright.

Just because no foreign troops are in your city, doesn't mean everything's alright.

Bring it a little closer to home:

Just because your RRSP is topped up and your mortgage is paid off, doesn't mean everything's alright.

Just because your grades are good at school, and you've got a shot at a scholarship next year, doesn't mean everything's all right.

Peace is something deeper.

Something no diplomatic mission, embargo or smart bomb could get to.
It's something deep – something spiritual.

Peace is when the lines of life are drawn in truly right and beautiful places.
When things really ARE as they should be.
When it truly is WELL with my soul, and body and society and creation.

The lack of peace - down deep at the root, it is the result of a curse:
– the curse of sin on all creation;
on sandy, impoverished Patchecutec;
on HIV/AIDS crippled Africa;
and on you and me.

And to bring peace, Jesus didn't need to build an empire or an army.
He had to destroy sin and sin's curse-hold on creation.
By surrendering his life, and by walking a road of obedient peace.

That's why the parade was humble.
King of the Cosmos on a donkey.
The prophet Isaiah, said(Isaiah 53)
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him.
Nothing big, bold and beautify.
No glamour or glitz.

Isaiah continues -

He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed... The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

The New Testament picks that same theme up – the theme of Jesus carving a place of peace in this broken up and hate-filled world:

Being found in appearance as a man He humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross. (Philippians 2)

From a glory throne in heaven..... to a donkey's back in some enthusiastic but humble parade..... and onto a cross.

Suffering and death in order to wipe out the curse that was holding back peace from ever possibly resting on earth.

A suffering and death we'll remember next Friday when we parade back to this place and gather in a solemn service at the foot of the cross; when we take part in Holy Communion.
The Son of God bringing peace.

This parade is the last big, bold statement Jesus will make about His intentions before heading into the greatest battle with the commando forces of sin –

with Satan himself;
the battle He waged while hanging on the cross.

It's a parade that happens at the beginning of the biggest week in Jesus' ministry. And he begins it with this big crowd of followers.

They excitedly tell people about Jesus that Sunday as he rode into Jerusalem!

And on Monday they will be excited about Jesus, and on Tuesday, and on Wednesday ... and on Thursday...

--No! Wait a minute. By Thursday those in that crowd weren't excited at all about being with Jesus.

Yes we who know the whole story; we know what these happy disciples do next.

- Judas danced with joy that day. Judas later sold Jesus out.
- Peter danced in his joy that day. Peter later denied even knowing Jesus.
- Matthew and Mark and Andrew and James and John and Thomas and Bartholomew and Thaddeus and the other James and the second Simon all danced for joy that day and then they ran off into the shadows, abandoning Jesus and leaving him to face his captors alone.

Know why?

Because, you see, there's another crowd.

Matthew 21 just hints at it in verses 10 & 11.

When the parade hits Jerusalem, the parade gets "rained on" so to speak by the city, undies in a knot, wondering "who is this?"

That represents the authorities, the powers that be.

They had a pretty good thing going, actually.

And didn't want the status quo upset.

They had an understanding with the Roman authorities.

They had a comfortable place in the economic food chain of Israel.

Their social status was ensured.

Jesus represented a threat to them.

And so they stop the crowd from their celebrating with the questions.

They shut them right up, as a matter of fact.

Yes, two crowds.

The first crowd had come with Jesus from up north.

The second crowd was the establishment's crowd. They were the locals from Jerusalem. They were the ones happy with the way things were. They were the friends and relatives and neighbors of the people in power.

And by the end of the week they had intimidated the others into either silence or hiding.

Leaving Jesus to travel on alone.

To the cross.

Alone.

Thank God that Jesus didn't quit, or change His direction.

- He kept standing up to the authorities and confounding the leaders.
- He kept on loving His followers.
- He kept His cool under Pilate's interrogation.
- He kept struggling on to Calvary beneath the weight of that cross.
- He kept the faith, He won salvation – *Hosanna*, He did come to *SAVE!*

And as a result, we are freed from sin, free to follow once again; and sing,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

And we will, along with all who believe and remain faithful

We **will** take part in that kind of a parade.

Another parade.

As part of another crowd.

The last book of the Bible describes it – believers from all nations gathered in the place of eternal peace:

"...before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (Revelation 7:9).

A place where no little children will need to peer through bars, hoping desperately for something to eat and a safe, warm place to sleep and freedom from bombs, bullets and bullies.

A place where death won't terrorize; temptation won't haunt; and sickness won't cripple.

A forever place in the presence of God.
The New Creation place.
A *Hosanna!* place.

A place for which we can
 pray
 and long
 and work.

Which brings me back to the opening segment of our story.
Jesus sends his disciples to get the donkey, with this message for the owner:
 "The Lord needs it."

The Holy Spirit, who is right here in this place, is
 I know
 looking at my life, and at yours, and saying,
 "The Lord needs it."

The Lord needs your life.
He needs you to give it to him.
After which, as it were, he gives it right back to you - immediately -
 so that you can put it into service for Him.

Jesus does His greatest work through that which people give Him -
 He stands up in a boat given by a couple of fishers, and speaks great words of wisdom to the crowd.
 He receives 5 barley buns and 2 smoked fish from a child, and multiplies them into food for thousands.
 He even borrows a grave from Joseph..... and rises from that grave as the Lord of life, the Victor over
death.

 Jesus seeks the common things, the things of our lives that we consider small or unimportant – like a
donkey.
 But when they are dedicated to him and placed at his disposal
 he makes them effective and powerful.

What have you got to offer the Messiah King?
 The Lord needs it.
The big things and the little -
 the Lord needs it!

"Hosanna to the one who saves us!" we sing on Palm Sunday.
"Hosanna!" sang the crowd on that Palm Day so many centuries ago.
 We know how quickly the crowd disappeared when things got tough.
 In which direction will you turn when you finish your coffee, and drive out of the parking lot?
 When it comes to the crunch in your coming busy week, how will it be for you?

Will we duck in shame when someone challenges or misuses Jesus' name?
Will we forget all about Him in the flurry of day to day activities?
Will you lay your life down for Jesus - or is it more important to protect what you have?

Friends, there are two crowds we can join.
 There is the crowd in our city - a big crowd, a busy crowd, a crowd that doesn't want the status quo
challenged or changed; the crowd that quickly seems to swallow up all other voices.

And there a holy crowd - what Hebrews 12:1 calls a great crowd of witnesses; the crowd that perhaps we can't see, but that is very real. The heavenly crowd of faithful believers who have gone before us in the service of Jesus.

They're the crowd that gets excited for the Lord and for the spread of His work. And they want us to get excited, too - yes, even more excited than when Gerber posts a shut-out.

I believe that this crowd in heaven can see us - even now when we're gathered here. And this crowd, says Hebrews 12:1, will be cheering us on this week.

"Go, believer."

"Be strong for Jesus, believer."

"Don't give in to the temptation, believer."

"Don't be ashamed of praying in that public place, believer."

"Don't be afraid of picking up the phone and standing for what you know brings peace, believer."

"Go for the goal, believer!"

Which crowd will you follow?