

4/17/11 Palm Sunday

WHAT A WEEK
(Matthew 21:1-11)

A few years ago my brother-in-law Bob decided he was going to run for president. He had a very simple platform that didn't have anything to do with balancing the budget or health care reform or the war in Afghanistan. Bob's entire campaign was going to be based on one promise: that he would never visit New York City while he was president.

Bob and my sister live in Manhattan. And every time the president comes to town, nothing moves. All the streets are blocked off so the presidential motorcade can zip around the island. What really pushed him over the edge was the time Bill Clinton and Hillary and Al Gore were all in town for separate events. It was chaos – and the final straw as far as Bob was concerned.

He figured there were 8 million New Yorkers who were as annoyed as he was, so he had a ready-made constituency and could count on their votes. Of course, there was a flaw in his platform: it wouldn't appeal to voters in California or Texas or Florida or Illinois or any of the other states he would need to win. In a close race, though, he might have had some leverage and could have made a deal with one of the other candidates.

Jerusalemites must have felt pretty much the way Bob did during Passover. Their city was overrun with pilgrims who came from far and near for the great festival. The Jewish historian Josephus put the number at 3 million, which is a fantastic number and clearly exaggerated. A reasonable estimate is more like 100,000, but even that would have been overwhelming. Jerusalem's normal population was around 80,000, so it more than doubled during Passover, which must have put quite a strain on city services and tied up traffic in the narrow streets to a fare thee well.

With all that going on, we have to wonder just how much attention Jesus and his followers really got on Palm Sunday. They could have just blended in and got lost in the hubbub and hullabaloo and no one would have even noticed one more ragtag band of pilgrims. If Matthew is right and Jesus put the whole city in turmoil, there must have been something that made him and his crew stand out.

What would have gotten everyone's attention were the shouts of Jesus' followers: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Son of David" was a messianic title – the title of a king. The shouts of Jesus' followers were a political statement, an act of defiance that was bound to spell trouble when the Romans got wind of it.

Those shouts set the stage for everything that was going to happen in the week to come. It didn't take long for the empire to swing into action. By the end of the week, Jesus is going to be in real trouble. Shouts of "Hosanna!" will give way to screams of "Crucify him!" We know that this morning even as we wave our palms and shout "Hosanna!" ourselves.

In one sense, the Romans who occupied Jerusalem were no different from the Jews who lived under their boot: they both imagined the messiah as a leader who would challenge Rome's power. The difference, of course, was that the Jews saw the messiah as a promise and the Romans saw him as a threat. The Jews would gladly put the messiah on a throne; the Romans would much prefer a cross.

Every pilgrim who went to Jerusalem during Passover went with hopes, dreams, and expectations, no matter how vague and ill-defined. They might not even be able to articulate what they were looking for. But with that many people in town and so much excitement in the air, it was easy to think that something might happen and to imagine that anything was possible.

In 1931 when India was trying to get its independence from Great Britain, Mahatma Gandhi went to England to represent the Indian National Congress in talks with the British government. Instead of going to 5-star hotel, Gandhi stayed at a social service center in the lower class East End. He went to tea with the king and queen wearing his loincloth and wrapped in a bedsheet. Winston Churchill was scandalized at what he called "the nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this one-time Inner Temple lawyer, now seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy's palace, there to negotiate on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor."

Churchill probably wouldn't have been any less offended if Gandhi had shown up wearing a cutaway coat and silk top hat. He was quite a bigot and had contempt for Indians and other what-he-considered inferior races. He couldn't get his white European mind around the idea that Gandhi was an important leader because Gandhi didn't look or act like any leader Churchill had ever known. His expectations got in the way and blinded him to reality.

Jesus constantly turned expectations on their head, and never more than on Palm Sunday.

How many of you remember the Rolling Stones' song *You Can't Always Get What You Want*? Do you remember the next line in the chorus? "But if you try sometimes you just might find / You get what you need." That pretty well sums up Holy Week.

The crowd on Palm Sunday had hopes, dreams, expectations. They wanted something and they thought they knew what that was: a messiah, a savior, a liberator. Of course they didn't get what they wanted, or what they *thought* they wanted. But it turned out they got what they needed: a messiah, a liberator, a savior – just not the kind they imagined or expected.

That Jesus was a different kind of messiah becomes clearer as Holy Week moves along. Jesus doesn't go straight to the palace to confront the political rulers; he goes to the temple and cleans it out to remind people it's a place of worship. He doesn't issue a political manifesto challenging Rome; he tells parables about the reign of God. He doesn't hold a fancy state dinner; he gathers his closest friends in an upper room. When Pilate asks Jesus if he's a king, he answers that his kingdom isn't of this world.

Jesus came in the name of the Lord, not to smite the Romans or strike a blow for Jewish independence, but to conquer the power of evil and sin and

death. He came in the name of the Lord, not to claim earthly power, but to usher in a reign where those who are blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Jesus upset the expectations of the Romans and the religious leaders, too. They thought they could kill the King of the Jews, and they could and they did. But they couldn't take away his sovereignty. Even their ultimate weapon, the cross, couldn't thwart his reign.

Palm Sunday kicks off a week when worlds collide, when expectations are turned upside down, when the crowd finally gets an answer to its question "Who is this?" We may find the answer to that question, too, maybe not the one we want, but the one we need.