

When JESUS Rode into Town

by Greg Albrecht

In “western movies” a ruggedly good-looking cowboy like John Wayne, Clint Eastwood or Denzel Washington rides into town and delivers the people from their suffering and sets them free. After saving the town and its citizens, the hero rides off into the sunset, with the town left living in a new freedom and peace.

The setting wasn't that much different *When Jesus Rode into Town* on the first Palm Sunday. When Jesus entered an occupied, subjugated city only days before his crucifixion and resurrection the crowds cried out for relief and deliverance.

A COWARD RIDING A DONKEY?

The crowds greeting Jesus wanted a hero on a white horse. But within the space of a few days, they were horribly disappointed because it seemed to them the guns-blazing conquering king they desired was *nothing but a coward on a donkey*.

We often fail to see the real Jesus because inevitably, when we look at Jesus, we see what we want to see.

The crowds desperately wanted Jesus to fit their culture's picture of a conquering king entering a city in triumph – that is why many biblical commentators have called the first Palm Sunday a “triumphal entry” (see Matthew 21:1-11).

The crowds yelled out “Hosanna” – a pleading request for Jesus to save them from the brutal military occupation of Rome and the oppression of Roman taxation. “Hosanna” (*save us now or please save us*) is a cry for physical relief. When Jesus rode into town the crowds were celebrating what they anticipated as a decisive military victory by King Jesus. But many of the traditional elements for a conquering King and great military leader were missing in that parade.

Jesus gave them a spectacle all right, but it was something like street theatre. We might describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a satirical parade, on a

grand scale. Jesus riding a donkey is but one paradox of the kingdom of heaven where the things of God are not as they seem to human eyes and perceptions.

Jesus was consistently misperceived and misunderstood (truth be told, still is). The significance of who he was and what he was doing was missed even by, and perhaps we should say, especially by, the religious authorities and the religious industry. *The triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was the upside-down kingdom of heaven on parade.*

The “triumphal entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem parodies triumphal entries of kings, riding high on a warhorse, surrounded by an awesome display of their military power. King Jesus rode into town on an ass, a baby donkey, with no weapons of any kind on display.

KING JESUS WAS NO JOHN WAYNE, CLINT EASTWOOD OR DENZEL WASHINGTON



When King Jesus rode into town his purpose was not to overwhelm, conquer and kill those who opposed him. He rode into town to be killed by those who hated and opposed him.

King Jesus did not ride into town to take power

by killing but to heal and give life, to save and to comfort, by giving his own life. King Jesus came to triumph through weakness.

Passover was approaching and pilgrims were crowding the city of Jerusalem. They were telling the story of Moses and the Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, of God's deliverance from Egypt — they were telling the story of their freedom. It was God's story and they were part of it — it was who they were. They loved to tell the old, old story — and the story was correct as far as it went — but a new story was being written in front of their eyes, and they completely missed it.

The crowds got it wrong — the crowds almost always get it wrong.

Jesus takes the old, old story, and while honoring and respecting it, as athletes today often say, Jesus takes that old, old story to a “whole other level.” Jesus transforms and re-interprets the familiar Passover story of freedom and deliverance.

The crowds got it wrong because they were looking for another dramatic story like the plagues that God visited on the nation of Egypt, finally convincing Pharaoh to “let my people go.” They wanted Jesus to dramatically command Rome to “let my people go.”

The crowds wanted Jesus to go clean up the town, but Jesus didn't draw his six-shooter because he wasn't wearing one. The crowds wanted a showdown at the OK Corral, with Jesus, the new sheriff in town, mowing down his opposition. ***But that's not why Jesus rode into town.***

A few days after Jesus and his disciples rode into town Matthew 26:52 tells us Peter drew his sword to oppose those who came to take Jesus away to be beaten, scourged, tortured and then crucified, and Jesus told him, ***“Put your sword back in its place... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”***

The crowds wanted political and economic freedom now — they wanted physical relief now. The crowds got it wrong — they believed in their story and they didn't want anyone to change their story. Jesus offered a transformed story in which Passover and the deliverance from Egypt was simply a metaphor, a shadow of the story that Jesus was living and which he invites us to share with him. Jesus offered a spiritual Promised Land, a spiritual kingdom and it was not an exclusive kingdom for the Jews, but for the entire world.

THE MESSAGE OF PALM SUNDAY

Palm Sunday demonstrates that we cannot count on the opinions of others. Palm Sunday clearly demonstrates that the crowds are fickle and will always vote their own pocketbook and thus often throw truth and love under the bus in an attempt to self-satisfy and self-indulge.

Palm Sunday teaches us when all is said and done, we can and we must count on Jesus. Ironically it was many of the same voices who joyfully welcomed Jesus with cries of “Hosanna” — save us now — who yelled “Crucify Him!” when Jesus failed to live up to their expectations.

It is at and on his cross that Jesus ultimately and absolutely identifies with you and me. On his cross, Jesus opens his arms to everyone — he opens his arms to the ends of the earth — to every corrupt and greasy self-absorbed politician and tinpot dictator — to every addict and diseased

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“See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.” —Zechariah 9:9

was offering the peace his followers would need to face all that would happen to him, and, all that would eventually happen to them, as well.

Jesus said, *“Let not your heart be troubled.”* The word, “let,” indicates that we have the chance to choose to participate in his peace. The peace of Christ does not force itself upon us. The Holy Spirit does not violate our free will. Instead, we choose to let, to allow, his peace to do its work within us. We share in the process of transformation that takes place. As we “let,” we face our own troubling events in life with a deep sense of calm. Christ in us calms us.

We participate in a collaborative effort. We know the peace of Christ resides within us through the Holy Spirit.

We focus on that peace, give thanks for it, and “let” it complete its perfect work. No matter what we may face, by Christ and his indwelling peace within us, we allow there to be space around our troubles.

We breathe and stand fast in him, remembering how he concludes his conversation:

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you . . . let not your heart be troubled.” (John 14:27, KJV).

With all we’ve lived through together these last twelve months, we give thanks that Christ in us gives us peace and a sense of calm. May you have a wonderful Easter season! □

Ed Dunn is an associate editor with Plain Truth Ministries.

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homeless person – to the poor, prophets, priests and prostitutes.

He opens his arms to you and me and everyone not by our deeds – not by how well we have done, not by how we have measured up or how we failed to measure up – he opens his arms to us by his goodness and his supreme love, demonstrated for us on his cross.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann points to Jesus on the Cross, “This is God and God is like this.”

Jesus rode into town for the godforsaken and the rejected and spurned and the impoverished and the oppressed – ALL are invited to come to know the crucified God. It is in his death that God is with us – ALL of us.

It is in his death that Jesus opens his arms to us all, and in the other bookend, his glorious resurrection, that he collects us all, drawing all of us to himself. As Jesus said, in John 12:32, *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*

Christ-less religion presents a tame, manageable, easily manipulated God – a god it has remade in its image to please its own agenda. But God cannot be confined to a religious cage – he is not frilly and cuddly and decked out in pastel colors like those found on Easter eggs.

God will not be defined or manipulated or managed by anyone – he is who he is. Let us celebrate him as he is on Palm Sunday, rather than a god we

wish to create in our own image.

When they crucified Jesus they crucified the great I AM of the burning bush – the bush that burns and burns and remains, no matter what, because of the great I AM. *The burning bush did not burn up.* The crucified Jesus did not remain dead in his tomb.

It was the great I AM of that burning bush, who religion had thought was dead and confined to a tomb, who burst out of that tomb, in a flash of blinding light. In his resurrection King Jesus, with his counter-intuitive, upside-down, paradoxical kingdom of heaven confounded them again. Jesus cannot be destroyed or silenced.

Jesus comes to us in his vulnerability but yet in one of those stunning and shocking paradoxes of the gospel, it is in his vulnerability that he lives in us, forever and ever. Our risen Lord is not with and in us now by virtue of military power or strength of arms as we perceive strength and power. Our Lord Jesus Christ is with us and in us by virtue of all those things we determine to be weak and vulnerable.

- In return for torture, hatred, violence and crucifixion, Jesus gave forgiveness.

- In return for abuse, he gave an embrace.

- In return for evil, he responded with love and goodness.

We humans never showed so much hate for God as when we crucified him. In the person of Jesus, on his cross, God never showed so much love for you and me than when he accepted all of our hatred and forgave us. □

Greg Albrecht is president and pastor of Plain Truth Ministries.