



CROWDED OUT
Luke 19:28-42

It is a difficult and disappointing experience when those who once welcomed you turn their backs against you. The crowds that once cheered – turned to jeering. President Woodrow Wilson led our nation during the difficult days of World War I.

When that war was over Wilson was an international hero. There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe for democracy.

On his first visit to Paris after the war Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. He was actually more popular than their own heroes. The same thing was true in England and Italy.

The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that the political leaders in Europe were more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace. At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President's health began to break. In the next election his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year or two earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken man.

It's a sad story, but one that is not altogether unfamiliar.¹ The same experience happened to Sir Winston Churchill. He rallied his nation during the dark days of Hitler's Germany and Nazism and their attempt to rule the world.

We remember his great speech "**Blood, Sweat, and Tears.**" He became a national hero. There was no more hallowed name in Great Britain for a season. The British people – in response to his great leadership – voted him out of office.

He was deeply hurt and stunned. His wife said, "Winston – it is a blessing in disguise." Winston Churchill said, "My dear, it certainly is a disguise." He was crushed. Perhaps you have known that reality in your journey of faith.

One of the most frightening experiences in my life was when I took Mary and our children (smaller then) to a Fourth of July fireworks celebration in New York City. The fireworks were spectacular. The crowd of over 200,000 went crazy. Trying to make our way from the base of the World Trade Center towers back to the subway

entrance was a nightmare. A crowd mentality and hysteria broke out. I feared for the life of my family. I literally grabbed hold of them all – and cut across the grain at an appropriate point and made our way to a different subway entrance that a policeman directed us to. I was most relieved to get back to the Milford Plaza Hotel. To this day I use discernment and caution around and in crowds – even a Penn State crowd.

When Jesus launched his public ministry – we know crowds began to follow Jesus. He cared for the crowd of 5,000 – but he spent most of his life training 12 men – a much smaller group.

Palm Sunday is always a big day in the life of the church. We have special music like we have today. I love it and cherish it. More people come to church on Palm Sunday than Easter. I can remember my first Palm Sunday sermon, 1978, in Weatherly, Pa. I said, “Did you come here to church today to show off your new hats and clothes – or did you come here today because you love Jesus and want to pick up the cross and follow him?” “Are you here today because you mean business?” Afterwards a delegation of church leaders came to see me – and wanted to know if I was not feeling well that day.

We like parades because they allow us to sit safely on the sidelines – while life passes us by. Discipleship is another story. Parades are appealing to us – putting our hands to a cross is another story. Jesus is not here in Jerusalem for praise and entertainment. He is here for ministry and mission purposes. With passion he comes back day after day after day.

Jesus is not here for recognition or fame. His life and spirit is not fueled by a narcissistic need to be in the spotlight. Jesus said in **John 4:34**, “My food (my bread) is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

Jesus has further said to his disciples in **Luke 9:23-24**, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it – but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”

However, I can fully understand how – in the excitement of the moment of the Palm Sunday procession – and the adrenaline rush it produced – that those words were lost or crowded out for the moment. Praising the Lord is easier in such a moment. However, as one wise saint of the church said, “It is not how high you can jump for Jesus that counts – it is what you do when you come down.” There is nothing wrong with building and pursuing a good life. However, a good life is good because it is built on truth that lasts and endures when life is not so good.

M. Scott Peck wrote an insightful book 25 years ago entitled, **THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED**. He begins the book with 3 words: “Life is difficult.” Many of us can resonate with that. Dr. Peck further shares that our culture deceives us into thinking that life should be easy. That explains why so many were eventually disappointed and why so few really got involved. Love can and will be crucified – but never defeated.

Yes, Jesus heard the roar of the crowd – but he was not taken in by it. He remained in control of his vision and the Father’s will for his life.²

One of the greatest threats in our modern world is that of ‘identity theft.’ You have seen the television ads. However, biblically speaking identity theft has been going on since Adam and Eve’s deception in and expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

JESUS KNEW WHO HE WAS. In a moment of great excitement and expectation Jesus enters the Holy City with the crowds following behind. They were convinced they had a winner. He was the Messiah who would topple the old order of Roman imperialism – and bring in the New Era. Many of the Jewish believers – as was their tradition – sang one of the great processional hymns – **Psalm 118** – which we sang a few moments ago. However, with emotions at a feverish pitch they made a small – but crucial – change in the psalm. The Jewish believers – instead of chanting “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” – chanted “**Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.**” Then the disciples – instead of chanting “From the house of the Lord we bless you” – chanted “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” Unless Jesus had been a keen student of sacred scripture – a subtle form of identity theft was in the making.

JESUS KNEW WHO HE WAS. Yes, he was their King – but not the king they envisioned. They envisioned a mighty warrior king who would lead them with swords against their enemy. Jesus’ mission and ministry were much greater and deeper. His battle was against the powers of sin and evil – and not a mere political opponent. **Jeremiah 17:9** clearly taught “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” Who can understand it? Only God. To change one political regime for another would do nothing. It never does.

The people were right and they were wrong. Jesus – with great intentionality – chose the beast he would ride on. He fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah. This would define his identity. They could clearly see the donkey – not a white prancing stallion of war. He was their King – but not the one their hearts desired.

SECONDLY, JESUS KNEW WHO HE WAS. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. He was the Savior of the world. Luke understood this revolutionary concept when – at the birth of Christ – the Spirit inspired him to write “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The church of Jesus Christ has struggled with that word ‘all’ for 2,000 plus years.

Let us now turn in our Bibles to **Romans 8:19-22** (the words will come up on the screen.) Here we learn the whole world needs redemption – not just the Roman Empire. Starting in **verse 19** “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the

children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Jesus has come to begin a new creation. Here is the One for whom all creation waits. When the Pharisees tell Jesus to rebuke his disciples, Jesus responds by saying, “If they keep quiet the stones will cry out.”

As the great Lutheran preacher, Dr. Paul Scherer said years ago, “There is a truth coming into the world that cannot be stopped. It is truth with a **capital ‘T.’** Jesus is the ‘Truth’ – the ‘Way’ – that ‘Life.’”

So today we join those voices down through the corridors of time that lift their voices and hearts to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving.

It was Dr. Bard Thompson who taught us at Drew Theological Seminary that – in the early days of the church history – the palm branch was a symbol of martyrdom. When you receive a palm branch at the end of our service today – please consider what it means for you to carry it. Perhaps what I said in my first Palm Sunday sermon years ago holds true: Are you here today because you love Jesus – and mean business?

Know **who** you are!

Know **whose** you are!

Your very life and identity depends upon it.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to www.sermons.com for this illustration.

² Thanks to Dr. John Killinger for this insight.