

“Palm Sunday Questions”

Luke 19: 28-44

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Palm Sunday

Why did they turn on him? How could the crowd that so enthusiastically welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Sunday cry out for his crucifixion on Friday? Evidently, he did not meet their expectations. He was not the God they were looking for and when they realized it, they joined forces with those that wanted to silence him.

What were they expecting? What did they want Jesus to do? They wanted him to make their lives easier. They were looking for a God that would validate their beliefs, approve their lifestyles, reward their successes, make them happy and guarantee prosperity. Most of all, though, they wanted a God that would overthrow the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom with defined boundaries and plenty of powerful positions of authority. Specifically, they were looking for a God that would change the world through rules and laws and by force and violence.

Naturally, they thought if Jesus was God’s chosen one, he would work closely with existing leaders to bring all these things about. When he did not collaborate with the established leaders but challenged them as he had done for three years, the crowd became disillusioned. By Friday, they blended their voices with the threatened leaders that demanded his crucifixion.

This leads to another Palm Sunday question. **If Jesus did not propose to change the world and usher in the kingdom of God through violence and bloodshed, how did he advocate doing it?** He taught and modeled that positive and permanent change would occur through the redemptive power of suffering love.

Nine days ago, our city was traumatized by the slaying of four citizens, including a superior court judge. The largest manhunt in the history of Georgia ensued. Hundreds of law enforcement officials combed the area for a fugitive by the name of Brian Nichols.

Twenty-six hours later, to everyone’s surprise, the suspect surrendered without trying to kill anyone else or committing suicide. Why? What changed this man’s violent behavior? Why did he quit killing people and surrender? He was influenced by the redemptive power of suffering love.

Hours before he surrendered, he entered the apartment of Ashley Smith, a twenty-six year old widow. Her reaction and response to him Friday night made it possible for God to change Nichol’s heart and behavior.

Sunday night, I sat spellbound as I listened to Ashley’s interview on CNN. I cannot recall the last time I heard the Gospel so clearly proclaimed.

I shall never forget her answer to the questions, “Why did you do what you did? It was so risky and dangerous. Why didn’t you escape when you had the chance?”

Ashley replied, “After a while, I knew that I could escape but I also knew he would, too, and I did not want him on the streets killing more innocent people. My goal was not to save my own life as much as it was to keep him from hurting other people, including himself. I know what it is like to suffer because of the violent death of a loved one. Four years ago, I held my own husband and watched him die after he had been stabbed. I did not want anyone else to experience this.”

So, what did she do? She showed him kindness. She talked to him. She read to him. She asked him thought-provoking questions. She showed him the autopsy report from her husband’s brutal murder. She showed him pictures of her little girl that was growing up without a father. In other words, she exposed her own pain and struggle to show him the consequences of his flawed thinking and behavior.

In addition, she offered him alternatives. She encouraged him to lay down his weapons and quit fighting. She gave him hope in a time of deep despair.

Was she a fool? Was she idealistic? Was she naive? Did she endanger her own life? Sure. Why did she do it? She did not want to see other people hurt. She did not want to see more children growing up without their parents and she believed that even a violent criminal could respond to the redeeming power of suffering love.

Listening to her reminded me of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote after pointing out that his people's hands were full of innocent blood, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" Isaiah 1:18.

"Come now, let us reason together." This was what Ashley Smith convinced Brian Nichols to do. It was what Jesus tried to get the leaders of his time to do, but they refused to cooperate. They refused to examine their hearts and decisions. They rejected his message of changing the world one person at a time through sacrificial love and convinced this crowd to do the same by the end of the week. More laws, tough talk and violence were the only things that would usher in the Kingdom of God, they thought, and they were ready to take up arms and follow anyone into battle that would lead them. They thought Jesus might be that man and this could be the week. However, Jesus was not that person and opposed what they were planning. This left them no choice but to discredit and silence him.

Was Jesus aware of the risk and danger he was taking when he rode into Jerusalem that day? Did he know he would not meet their expectations, that he was not the God for which they were looking? I think he did.

What did he do when he topped the hill and looked down upon the city? According to Luke he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes" Luke 19:42.

How ironic. The city whose name means "vision of peace" would never experience it because its citizens rejected God's message of love and the messenger that so boldly and courageously proclaimed and modeled it.

I think Jesus is still crying. Peacemakers are being killed in our world as people attempt to resolve differences through violence and bloodshed. Perhaps this is because people are still looking for a God that meets their expectations. They are searching in vain for a God that will make their lives easier, validate their beliefs, approve their lifestyles, reward their successes and guarantee prosperity. They don't want a God that challenges their decisions and changes their hearts. They don't want to be a part of a kingdom where true riches are found among the poor, true strength is found among the weak and the power of love replaces the love of power. Following this God and ushering in His kingdom are too risky, dangerous and costly.

How could the Sunday crowd that waved palm branches turn into the angry mob that demanded Jesus' crucifixion? He did not meet their expectations. He was not the God they were looking for. Never mind that He was the Chosen One God sent to lead and deliver them. He was not what they wanted so they rejected him and immediately started looking for another.

I have a friend that says that we have to be willing to give up the God we've been looking for in order to find the God that is looking for us. That's what the people waving those palm branches needed to do. Maybe you and I need to do this, too.