

Who was watching the parade on that fateful Palm Sunday? Who were the faces in the crowd? Just like at any modern parade or mass gathering, there were people from different walks of life represented on the Palm Sunday parade route. John mentions at least three distinct groups of people who were there when Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey's colt. These groups and individuals each had their own ideas and expectations about the One for whom this impromptu parade was thrown. For a brief time, they seemed to be united in their excitement, shouting, "Hosanna!" a word taken from Psalm 118. It is a Messianic Psalm, and the word Hosanna means "Save us now!" But don't you wonder what all these different people were asking to be saved from?

Who does John mention in this passage? First of all, in verse twelve we are introduced to "the large crowd that had come to the feast." The feast mentioned here is the feast of the Passover. The population of Jerusalem would routinely swell during the big holy days, and it is this combination of residents and guests that go out, with palm branches in hand, to meet Jesus. The palm branch was more than just a handy thing to wave—it had become a symbol of the Jewish nation—a Jewish nation that deeply desired independence from Roman rule. Their enthusiasm to greet Jesus was fueled by reports that he had actually raised someone from the dead. Could this miracle worker be the one to restore Israel and be its new King? The Large Crowd That Had Come To The Feast seemed to think so.

The next group John mentions is "the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb." A couple things are implied here. One is that this group accompanied Jesus along the parade route and were distinct from the crowd that came out of Jerusalem to greet him. Another is that this group included the twelve disciples. What is not implied but explicitly stated is that this group "continued to bear witness" about the great sign Jesus had done in raising Lazarus from the dead. This bunch we might call the "true believers." They had seen many of Jesus' miracles, and they themselves had said things like "we believe and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" to Jesus. But, in the spirit of full disclosure, John also reports that they "did not understand these things at first," and it was only after Jesus was glorified that they could see the big picture.

The last group John names is the Pharisees, the obvious enemies of Jesus. Already in the fifth chapter of his gospel, John had revealed that the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus because of his allegedly blasphemous comments. Now this Palm Sunday parade only added to their desperation. "It's useless," they say. "The world has gone after him." But Jesus' surging popularity does not make them give up—on the contrary, their plan to get rid of the rabble-rousing rabbi goes into overdrive.

So that's quite a mix of people lining the palm-strewn path. You have curiosity seekers, you have those who are willing to jump on the bandwagon if it means an independent Israel, you have the true believers who had been with Jesus from the beginning, and you have his sworn enemies. All with their own hopes and expectations about this man on the donkey's back. And all of them—the curiosity seekers, the bandwagon jumpers, the enemies, and the true believers—will be forced to re-evaluate their hopes and expectations when the parade grinds to a halt at the Hill of the Skull. For some, the death of Jesus on a cross was disappointing, but not earth-shattering. For others, it was a terrible tragedy. For still others, it was “problem solved.” But all of them were sure that the story of Jesus had come to an end.

If you were to somehow be transported and dropped into the crowd on that Palm Sunday, where would you fit in? Would you find company among Jesus' enemies? Are you skeptical of the claims that Jesus makes? Would you prefer not to have to listen to or deal with this Jesus at all? There are many who still seek to silence the Son of God.

Would you find kindred spirits among those who hoped that Jesus would guarantee worldly prosperity? Are you looking for Jesus to come through with a big miracle that's going to improve things for you? If he doesn't do what you ask, are you going to walk away? Jesus did not come into the world to give us whatever we want—yet many hold Him to this standard, and reject him when he doesn't deliver.

Would you find a place among the true believers—ready and willing to follow Jesus wherever he might lead? Are you sure about that? Even if that means following Jesus into a suffering like His? Even if that means people look at you funny? Even if it meant that your life was on the line? Many people want the benefits of being a “true believer,” but are you willing to pay the personal and social cost of being a follower of Jesus?

No matter who you identify with in the Palm Sunday parade, the cross of Jesus gives you reason to re-evaluate the expectations you have of Him. Here's what I mean:

Jesus did not ride that donkey into Jerusalem to improve our lives but to save them. The King of Kings did not ride into Jerusalem to replace Roman rulers but to rescue the human race. Jesus did not endure the agony of the cross to change the political landscape, but to fundamentally change you. Instead of marching immediately to a throne, Jesus stumbled up the Hill of the Skull and was executed. This was not some accident—it was the plan. It had been all along. God punished His Son, the Messiah, the Holy One of God, instead of punishing human beings for their sins—instead of punishing you for your sins. By going to the cross, Jesus answered the Hosanna request. We are saved now—saved from torment; saved from eternal separation from everything good and godly; saved, in other words, from hell—because Jesus took our death sentence. The King took the punishment His people deserved. This was not the salvation that anyone was expecting. It's not always what we're expecting or looking for from God. But what Jesus has done meets our deepest need. You can know you are loved and forgiven and that God is for you, not against you.

Whatever your expectations of Jesus were when you entered this building today—please hear me on this: Jesus has died your death and offers you a brand new life. You are forgiven of all your sin. You have eternal life starting this moment. Jesus is alive and He is with you in your pain, as well as your joy. When sinners pray “Hosanna! Save me now, Lord Jesus,” He says, “I have; I will.” Then He forgives sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and He adopts people through water and His Holy Name, and He feeds people His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of faith. Hosanna! This is our word now. It is what Jesus does.