

One major problem people face in relationships is when expectations are not clearly communicated—if they are communicated at all. Most people are not mind readers. We need to know what our spouse expects of us—what our parents expect of us—what our boss expects of us—what our teachers expect of us—even what our friends expect of us--so we have something to shoot for. It isn't fair to punish someone for not living up to expectations that have never been stated—but that doesn't stop it from happening all the time.

Expectations are a part of life. You call 9-1-1, you expect help to come. You go to a movie, you expect to be entertained. You go to church, you expect to hear about Jesus. You'd have a right to be disappointed if those expectations weren't met.

And so it is that some of you came here today with the expectation that you would hear about the events of Palm Sunday. You would hear about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. You would hear about people waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" which means "Save us now!" You would hear about people laying their garments on the road and the Pharisees voicing their disapproval. Now, make no mistake, this is a victory parade—the King has come to the city of peace in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. At the same time, it is worth asking: what were the expectations of the people who were waving the branches and cheering for Jesus? What were they expecting Him to do?

The Palm branches for which this day is named provide a major clue. Palm fronds were a symbol of triumph. Today we would wave a flag or a sign. But during the years of the Roman occupation, the palm branch took on even more symbolic value. Dr. Paul Maier writes that "the palm was the national emblem of an independent Palestine. These were Jewish flags!" Having seen Jesus do the miraculous, many were convinced that He would use His power to break Roman rule and turn back the clock to the glory days of King David. When they shouted, "Hosanna/Save us now," they were shouting: "save us from these rotten Romans." When Jesus is blessed as the King of Israel, the people have a political kingdom in mind. Their expectations of Jesus were colored by their circumstances, and when their Messiah-led rebellion seemed to end in utter failure at the cross, well, we don't hear anyone shouting "Hosanna" at Calvary, do we? In less than a week's time, those Messianic expectations were dashed to pieces.

Expectations. What expectations do you have of Jesus? Could it be that our expectations are similar to those held by the people on the Palm Sunday parade route? Those folks wanted Jesus to lead them straight to glory, to get rid of what they perceived to be their biggest troubles, and many abandoned Him when He did not. Don't we want a Palm Sunday Jesus? Don't we often expect Jesus to answer all our prayers with a "yes"? Don't we expect God to only improve our quality of life? Don't we tend to pull away from Him a little (maybe a lot) when He doesn't do things our way? The God we want is one that will guarantee us victories in life—that with a little bit of God, not too much, mind you, our general mood will be better, our relationships will be more fulfilling, we'll feel better about ourselves, maybe find a better job, have more money to go

around, we'll have more security and prosperity in our lives. Are those expectations right? Is that why Jesus went to Jerusalem that day?

Jesus' own expectations were always crystal clear. He told his disciples in straightforward language that he was going to Jerusalem to die and rise again on the third day. His disciples were confused by this and you may remember that Peter tried to talk Jesus out of it. There is some irony to the shouts of "Hosannas" and "Save us nows" of that first Palm Sunday, because that's exactly what Jesus had come to do—just not in the way anyone expected.

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 us. Instead of marching immediately to a throne, Jesus stumbled up the hill of Calvary and was executed. This was not some miscalculation on Jesus' part—it was the plan. It had been all along. God had a choice—he could either punish you for your sin, or He could punish someone else instead of you. His own Son Jesus was that "someone else." Jesus answered the Hosanna request. We are saved now 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 looking for from God. But what Jesus has done meets our deepest need. You can know you are loved. You can know that you are forgiven. You can know that God is for you, not against you.

Jesus did not go straight to glory on Palm Sunday—the cross came first—but Jesus would be glorified. That would happen three days after His death, when He would physically resurrect and live again. I think it's safe to say that no one in Jesus' inner circle really expected this to happen, even though Jesus had told them in advance. But here we see God delighting in doing the unexpected and, indeed, the impossible. He lives after dying. He leaves the grave behind. If you believe that Jesus rode into Jerusalem to go to the cross and then live again, and that He did it to benefit you, then you will also leave the grave behind. You can expect to be with the Lord forever because of Jesus' actions on your behalf. This is the Christian faith in its purest form. "Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life." Everything else that happens to you in your life, whether wonderful or terrible, happens around the core of this expectation. The greatest joys we experience in this life are blessings, to be sure, but they cannot compare with heaven and the life of the re-created world to come. The pain and sorrow of life and the grief and terror of death are balanced by Jesus' suffering and death and overturned by His resurrection.

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 right now. Jesus is alive and He is with you in your pain as well as your joy. He has joined Himself to you in Holy baptism and is absolutely faithful. He will never leave you or forsake you.

To which we can say: "Hosanna! Save us now, Lord Jesus!"