

## **“The Power of the Question: “Who is This Person?”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 118:1-4 19-29 (VU #837, Parts 1, 3, and 4); Matthew 21:1-11  
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

There are different ways to measure who someone is when we meet them. It is said that it takes us 20-30 seconds to decide if we will find someone interesting, or worth meeting. We also have our own way of measuring up a group and determining how things will unfold. But there can be experiences where even the most careful planning and insight may be lost once there is a real, live experience of tension, worry, or uncertainty.

Group experiences can be enlivening, and also scary. As a University Student just after the radical sixties, I lived through some uprisings that caught me off-guard. When the Robarts Library was announced for the University of Toronto, it was determined by the Senate to be a graduate institution and undergraduates would have limited access, if at all. It caused quite a stir, and sounded like an elite building for those with advantaged educational opportunities already. By the mid-1960’s there were many students who worked long and hard, as did their parents and families, to help them get an education, and they wanted the best opportunities possible. Those students, a growing majority within the university, would not stand by for what they deemed to be second-hand opportunities.

In a protest against the Senate’s policy on the new Robarts Library, students first sat outside the President’s Office, then took control of the Senate Chambers of the University. It seemed peaceful enough in the middle of winter, with the tracking of mud and dirt onto the carpets being the worst that happened, but then some more militant people started throwing furniture, barricading doors, and threatening to damage property. All of a sudden a peaceful demonstration became a scary place to be, and some, like yours truly, departed to the safety of home.

I often wonder if Palm Sunday was just another event controlled by a sense of the crowd being whipped up into a frenzy, those both pro and con Jesus, and the uncertainty of the moment was as much the charged emotion and uncertain leadership that was vying for a place in the courtyard outside of the temple. Did they think about meals ahead and adequate clothing when they gathered, or were they drawn by the religious anticipation of the moment, and did they then get caught up in something that became even more charged as competing views and understandings of Jesus were bandied about?

My sense is that the trek to the Temple was a religious one, and people for the most part did not get involved in any kind of demonstration against those who celebrated Jesus because their focus was not on demonstrators, but on their own spiritual needs. Riots and violent demonstrations arise from peaceful actions when people lose their sense of individual values and worth, and develop what is seen as an identity with a new group norm.

We still have not got it right when it comes to public displays of support for peaceful actions, people, causes, events, or ethical concerns. Some do remain peaceful, but some too quickly fall into anger and destruction.

We have seen the demonstrations. People marching in opposition to the election of the new American President. People objecting to planned pipelines through aboriginal territory in the Dakotas. Individuals upset by the power of the G20 in downtown Toronto six years ago. Mexicans demonstrating against a 20% increase in gasoline just last year.

Demonstrations often turn into places of violence and anger even when they start in a peaceful way. In part, elements who want to find a reason to fight society, the government, anyone join in for their own reasons; in part it is the reality of the group's development of its own ethos that leads people into doing things they will never do on their own.

The psychology of the crowd certainly helped to drive the events of that first Palm Sunday. So from our perspective, what good can we take from it, and what hope does the whole event offer us?

Ten to twelve years ago, flash mobs were more common than I see them being today. A flash mob is often a scripted, organized event where people take over a public space (park, mall, church, bus station or airport) and share in a musical or theatrical presentation. First it begins with one or two, then a few more, and finally dozens may be involved in the event. I have seen flash mobs where whole orchestras have invaded a space, or a large choir, or even a dance troupe. The first one took place in New York in 2003. You can imagine the planning that goes into such an event.

But what about a spontaneous flash mob? Someone brings along a ghetto blaster, say, and turns up the music on a hillside of people lolling in the summer sun, and starts dancing energetically by himself.

How does that turn into a flash mob, or will it?

Studies have shown that the key to transitioning into a mob activity is the third person. The person with the music box and dancing erratically and enthusiastically is seen as a bit of a fool or a loner. We can dismiss him as a "one off" person. The first person to join him or her, the second in the event, is seen as someone looking for a connection, but that action has nothing to do with the rest of the people. The third person to join, however, has transformed the event from a couple of strange people into a group that has drawn my attention. Now it is something that must be viewed and considered. Now others are tested to see if they can be a part of what is taking place. And the third person gives permission for the rest who might join to do so in the anonymity of the group. Now a mob can be created without much self-reflection.

I wonder if the wisdom of Jesus knew that already, when he declared "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." A critical mass only involves two or three people joining us to make a difference.

The story of Palm Sunday is a story of people with different perspectives about Jesus. Some saw him as a Messiah and teacher-leader. Some saw him as an individual messing up the

traditions of Temple worship. Some saw him (or at least his followers) as people who needed to get a life.

The response was not uniform. But the truth is without the witness of those disciples who were there, and those people who had been transformed by Jesus' teachings and presence, we would not be speaking about the event today. A critical mass followed him, revered him, and upheld him.

As powerful as Jesus was and is in recorded tales of the believers, we need those eye witness accounts and early church observations to give meaning to our own Easter or Holy Week celebrations. Without the witness of others, since Jesus never wrote any books, his message would have been lost to history.

What symbol will I share today for the treasure box? I have a picture that is not very clear, but it is a picture of some young men working in the heat of the sun in Haiti, cleaning up the rubble after the earthquake there in 2010. Who are they? I do not know, except they all lost their jobs due to the earthquake, and they have been hired by the Methodist Church to clean up this church property, one of many destroyed by the earthquake. The attitude of the church is we need to feed these people who have nothing, and getting them to do a bit or work for a few cents and a hot meal every day helps us, and helps them. In the midst of what many would call a God-forsaken disaster, these men are seeking to find meaning and purpose by rebuilding their community, and their church, so that hope may be found again.

Do we need to know their names? It would be wonderful and respectful if we did. But far more important it is to know their purpose in life, and their commitment to others, and their desire to help make God real to those in their community. No one, I expect, will have a ritual celebrating the removing of rubble in Haiti after the earthquake, but it was an incredible effort all across Port-au-Prince and other centres damaged by that disaster. It was needed to rebuild the country and the spirit of the people.

We remember Jesus and the Palm Sunday experience because it was not about building a structure or salvaging a development; it was about finding personal purpose and meaning.

We always are touched by stories that impact us personally, and that transform our lives into a new opportunity and future. The very asking of the question "Who is that person?" means that we have realized that the person is important to the world, important to me, and most importantly, important to God. When we engage people on the starting point of "Who are you?" we engage them in a way that honours their purpose and value.

That was how Jesus treated people, and we can only understand his importance as a leader of the faith if we engage him in the same way.

So for the Treasure Chest I offer this picture – people seeking to rebuild hope and faith in a land destroyed, with an infrastructure crumbling. And that is what Palm Sunday is all about – building hope and faith in a time of great turmoil and oppression. The bread and juice of communion are symbols of that hope, and that need for renewing faith each and every day.