

Zechariah 9: 9-10  
Philippians 2: 5-11  
John 12: 12-19

Spectacle in Hindsight  
April 13, 2014, Palm Sunday  
Mary R. Brownlow

*Hosanna*  
*Hey Sanna Sanna Sanna Hosanna*  
*Hey Sanna Hosanna*  
*Hey JC, JC won't you smile at me?*  
*Sanna Hosanna*  
*Hey Superstar*

Most of you probably recognize that verse from Jesus Christ Superstar, the musical written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice in 1971. It is a Passion play in the style of a rock opera, and it offers what Wikipedia calls “a free interpretation of the psychology of Jesus and the other characters.” A very “free” interpretation. What Scripture offers us, and maybe what that musical offers us, is a spectacle: a spectacular event full of misunderstandings.

In another song from Jesus Christ Superstar, the character of Judas voices our modern consternation with the story of Jesus’ last week:

*Every time I look at you I don't understand*  
*Why you let the things you did get so out of hand*  
*You'd have managed better if you'd had it planned*  
*Now why'd you choose such a backward time*  
*And such a strange land?*  
*If you'd come today you could have reached a whole nation*  
*Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.*

Obviously, all of the Gospel writers are telling a story with 20-20 hindsight, interpreting as they go. How many times have we read, “All this took place to fulfill what was written in the prophets...”? But John is the one who explicitly says of that first Palm Sunday, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.” In other words, at the time, everyone surrounding Jesus was caught up in a spectacle, full of enthusiasm, full of their own hopes and needs and dreams....but also completely clueless.

John’s Gospel is the only one with the story of the raising of Jesus’ friend Lazarus from the dead, which we read last week. For John, this last tremendous “sign,” or miracle, leads directly to two things. It draws a huge following of “believers” – people who are impressed and convinced that Jesus can save them. And it draws attention of another kind – people in power who see this miracle-worker as a threat to the precarious stalemate that exists between the Roman overlords and the Judean aristocracy. Crowds, after all, enthusiastic or not, are dangerous, unpredictable things. In a way, both of these groups were correct, though they did not really understand it at the time. Jesus could save people, and Jesus was dangerous.

Even within the cheering crowd there were different groups. There were the ones who wanted to see more miracles – religious fanatics, if you will. “One more miracle: then I’ll believe *even more*.” Then there were people who saw Jesus as their chance to get rid of the Romans. “Keep riding that donkey right through the gates, Jesus: we’ll show them who is the rightful ruler here.” Both groups were chanting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!” Both groups had had an agenda for the spectacle.

Often we picture those enthusiastic people running to the nearest tree, which happened to be a palm, and cutting branches just to have something to wave around. But for the people of ancient Judea, palms were a symbol of resistance to foreign oppression. During the Maccabee uprising in the second century before Jesus was born, palms were used in the procession when the Temple was rededicated after the Seleucids were kicked out. They were waved around again twenty years later when Judea won full independence. In the century following Christ, Jews revolting against Rome made their own coins, and palm branches appeared there too. The greenery we have here today is pretty, but it was the symbol of resistance and defiance. The revolutionaries thought they had found a new general – this one with miraculous powers.

In the Gospel of John, “the crowd” appears almost as a character in a play, a monolith. “The crowd” moves the plot forward. “The crowd” is usually wrong, on some level. Back in chapter 6, “the crowd” tried to take Jesus by force to make him king after he had fed 5000 of them in Galilee. At that time he slipped through their hands and went off by himself. The crowd is always hungry: hungry for bread, hungry for displays of power, hungry for salvation of some kind. And that hunger drives them to both love and hate Jesus. We, who know the story, know that these same people will not be waving Palm branches or singing when Jesus is led to the cross. Their enthusiasm lasted as long as the circus, the carnival, the spectacle, the joyous revolution seemed to be going well.

Later, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his followers paid attention to some details. Yes, entering Jerusalem was an act of defiance. Yes, there were palm branches. But Jesus was riding on a little donkey, not a warrior’s horse. This was a peaceful statement: divine deliverance would not come through violence, but through humility and love. Hope, faith and love entering into the environment of danger was a spectacle they could only see in hindsight.

All of the names the crowd had for Jesus - Messiah, King of Israel, Son of David, Son of God – were dangerous and open to misunderstanding. Later, the story will tell us that Jesus will be executed as “King of the Jews.” He will be made to wear a crown of thorns, he will be used in a prisoner exchange with another revolutionary. He will be “lifted up,” not on a royal throne, but on a cross. John, the Gospel writer, loves irony: his characters speak the truth without even knowing what they mean. They called Jesus “King” for all the wrong reasons. The disapproving Pharisees say, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” In hindsight, the ears of faith understand the truth of what was said and done.

Here is what Jesus’ disciples came to realize, with time: Jesus, the Messiah, the Light of the World, the Resurrection and the Life, showed his greatness as a broken figure on the cross, not as the center of attention in a parade. The tragic image of compassion and humility, that emptied shell of the Son of man, confronts our spectacles of power and success. This is the irony present in all the Gospels, which we somehow understand as “Good News”: the “failure” of Jesus is his success. How could one know this except by living and reflecting and taking on the very qualities of faith, hope, and love that he displayed?

No wonder it took time – years, probably - for the disciples to grasp this. Then they turned to their sacred texts to understand what had happened, because this was clearly a sacred story. They merged their experiences and their hopes with their poetic memories, and saw that Jesus had suffered like the righteous figures of the past. They saw that old expectations were turned upside down. This was not a royal hero, or a powerful warrior, but one who did not grasp at divinity, as Paul would write a generation later, “but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” This is the subversive, revolutionary message that has, strangely, kept the story alive in the face of violence, oppression and tragedy. Our readings today teach us to be a bit cynical about spectacles, and about the enthusiasm of crowds. The stories tell us that this wonderful parade is followed by betrayal, torture and execution. Jesus lives and breathes compassion through all of this, facing and absorbing human need and fear and violence and pride, modeling love and forgiveness and loyalty. His Passion is compassionate, not sentimental, not flashy, but fierce.

Today we are still subject to all the emotions felt by our ancestors: the need for someone to heal us, the need for someone to entertain us, the need for a really obvious demonstration of power, the need to belong to a crowd. Today, we still find that, in hindsight, some of our enthusiasms were misplaced, or misguided. Today, we still see ways that our human systems are not working, and we long for an alternative. Today, we still have something to learn from our sacred stories.

Jesus never accepted that title of King: he ran away from it more than once. But he talked about the Kingdom of Heaven: a place of grace, compassion, unity, and shared service. A place where power is not exploited or grasped or abused, but continually given to be used for the common good. This was a hard concept to grasp in first-century Jerusalem; it’s a hard concept to grasp now.

When we say that we are followers of that man on a donkey, in some ways we acknowledge that we are followers of a failure. That spectacle was a spectacular failure. The crowd dispersed in fear. The Romans remained in control of Judea. The disciples were all martyred, eventually. But not before they left us their insights, developed through memory in community. We have not been given a formula for success, but a way forward on a winding and dusty path. Many of our reflections on the past leave us with regret and paralysis. The Gospel gives us a holy hindsight that is different. We remember with wonder, we go forward with energy and grace. Amen.