

“Who Is This?
Palm/Passion Sunday
Matthew: 21:9-11

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

When we experience a person's mood swinging from one extreme to another in a short period of time we become alarmed. Unless there is some particular reason for it, we do not quickly swing from great elation to deep sorrow. Today the mood swings from one end of the spectrum to the other. Today the alarm sounds as Jesus faced the crowd, which was shouting “Hosanna,” and in short order faced the crowd, perhaps the same crowd, shouting, “Crucify him.” Today we process from “All glory, laud, and honor,” to “Stricken, smitten, and afflicted,” our final hymn. The only thing that can explain such a change in mood is a change in attitude towards Jesus. On this day the crowds greeted him as son of David. The following Friday the crowd chose freedom for the terrorist Barabbas and death for Jesus. “Who is this?” the people of Jerusalem asked as Jesus came into the city. The answer depends on how we ask the question.

It is hard to read tone of voice in the printed word. That is why email often gets us in trouble. We try to be light hearted about something we write in an email. The recipient of our wit takes it to be deadly serious. I guess that is why people came up with those emoticons, one of which is a colon followed by the closed parenthesis sign, which software magic turns into a smiley face. It says to the reader, “I'm smiling as I write this.” There are no emoticons in Scripture. It is hard to read tone of voice in the printed word. There are no emoticons in Scripture, which is one reason I have always resisted interpretations that rest on tone of voice.

However, I have been having second thoughts with the processional Gospel we heard today. Matthew tells us, “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was alarmed, asking, ‘Who is this?’” I am wondering if some of them at least didn't mean it along the lines of “Who does he think he is?” Some of the things Jesus did were as much a part of the common memory and identity of the people as Washington crossing the Delaware and Lincoln's Gettysburg address are for us. Everyone knew that the national hero, Judas Maccabeus, entered the city riding on a donkey as people waved palm branches and cried out “Hosanna.” He had led the Judean

insurrection, drove the Greeks out of the city, and cleansed the temple of its pagan idols and practices. Secondly, everyone knew that after the deaths of the despised King Ahab and his queen Jezebel, the prophet Elisha anointed Jehu to be king and the people all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, “Jehu is king.”

Jesus entered the city Jerusalem in royal, conquering-hero fashion. At least some of those in the city asked, “Who does he think he is?” The crowds who accompanied him named him a prophet but the city had never welcomed prophets in royal fashion. It was the city that killed the prophets and stoned those God sent to it. We know what fate awaits Jesus. At least one commentator has suggested that instead of calling this the triumphant entry we call it the ironic entry.

Ironically, the temple, which Jesus called his Father’s house, was the center of opposition to him. The irony dissolves when, like Judas Maccabeus before him, he does cleanse the temple. Who does he think he is?

The whole city was alarmed. Actually, Matthew wrote, “The whole city shook in fear.” It is the same shaking that happened when the Magi came to the court of Herod the great to ask about the new born king whose star they followed. “Herod and all Jerusalem with him shook with fear,” Matthew wrote. There was a pretender to the throne. Herod’s subjects knew how ruthless he was even with family members when he feared his rule was threatened. Herod sent his soldiers to catch the child king in their snare by executing all the children in and around Bethlehem two years of age and younger. They missed the one for whom they came.

The city shook with fear again at Jesus’ arrival, and an earthquake shook it yet again at his death. This time the ruling powers did not miss. But the irony is on the principalities and powers. Who is this? This is God come to reclaim what rightfully belongs to God. He does not vanquish Greek invaders but death itself in order to lay claim on us. That is who he is.