Book 10

Sunday April 12, 1981
PALM SUNDAY

"MIS-INTERPRETATION: ALWAYS A PROBLEM" Matthew 21:1-11

Text: Matthew 21:10-11 "And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, 'Who is this?' And the crowds said, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.'"

"All the city was stirred," which is another way of saying that some people were excited, some were worried, and others were angry because Jesus of Nazareth was in the city of Jerusalem. They were stirred up even when they heard the news that he was coming to the city. If there had been daily newspapers in those days, the editorial page in the Jerusalem Times might have said the following:

"Sources which we consider to be unimpeachable, inform us that the Galilean teacher, Jesus, who has gathered some considerable following among the poverty group and the political fringes in the outlying districts is on his way to Jerusalem, ostensibly to observe the Passover. Our sources, however, are openly skeptical that this is the sole intent of his visit, since he has heretofore shown very spotty interest in the temple observance and ritual. He has in fact been openly critical of both the programs and personnel of the temple."

"We consider his visit at this time to be unfortunate at best. These are tense times and feelings are running high both on the left and on the right. The appearance in a tense and crowded city of these self-styled leaders can only result in a further polarization and intensification of feelings and some are likely to get hurt before the week is out. If this Jesus is basically a responsible person, as some sources claim, we hope he will re-think the timing of this Jerusalem visit."

But why were the people of the city so stirred up? What did they have to be afraid of? Different people saw Jesus in different ways. Some individuals were motivated by their patriotism and their hope for national freedom, freedom from domination by Rome, and they saw in Jesus a possible political leader, a potential deliverer. He would be a second King David and restore Israel to its former glory as a nation.

Others, who wanted nothing more than to be left alone to puruse their own ways saw in him only the center of a colorful procession, the object of a popular demonstration that for the moment was disturbing their peace. They hoped more than anything that the excitement would quickly die down and that he would be forgotten so they could go about business as usual.

And there were those who were so stirred up and angry that they would do almost anything to get rid of Jesus. They saw him as a threat to their way of doing things--a threat to their religion, a threat to their vested interests.

All kinds of people mis-interpreted the events of Palm Sunday!

Let's imagine then what the editorial page in Monday's paper might have said:

"We join with other leaders and enforcement personnel in looking with grave concern at the spectacle which we were all forced to witness yesterday when the Galilean teacher, Jesus, entered the city. If he is a stable and responsible man, as some have claimed, then responsibility in this case is certainly made of strange stuff."

"First, he has proceeded to come here, apparently oblivious to the objective fact that this is an exceedingly poor time to bring his cause or message to Jerusalem. The town is on edge and there seems to be an over-reaction to everything."

"Second, and most objectionable, was his apparently cynical parody of our national dream. It was certainly no accident that he chose to enter the city riding upon a donkey in mock fulfillment of the prophecy of our forefather Zechariah. This kind of sarcastic irreverence would seem to come very close to open sacrilege. The temple priests were offering no comment at this time, but sources close to them indicated that they would be working long into the night to formulate some plan for effectively dealing with this implicit attack upon them and what they stand for."

"And third, from the purely human standpoint, it was heartbreaking to see the hopes of so many in the crowd building up and our knowing full well that they would be let down and that there was nothing we could do about it. The poor, the blind, the lame, actually trying to believe that this was the Saviour, behaving like children, vandalizing the palm trees for branches to place under the feet of his donkey, throwing their cloaks, (the only one many of them would ever own) on the road for his animal to trample on. What kind of man would deliberately bring disappointment to people like that who already have so little. Certainly, many of them are having second thoughts about him now that it is over, and perhaps will think twice in the future before being transfixed by a kindly manner and earthly approach. We hope we have heard the last of it."

Why was the city so stirred up about this man Jesus? What actual threat did he bring? He was not the leader of any kind of army. He carried no gun or weapon of any kind. The people who were his closest followers were not revolutionaries in the usual sense. He had not advocated the over-throw of the government. He sought no political power and he had none. He didn't want to be elected to any office. His preaching spoke of a new order, which relied on the power of suffering and servanthood, rather than relying on violence, or domination of others. He said, "My Kingdom is not of this world."

So what were the people and the leaders afraid of? Were they like some of us afraid of outsiders? Were they afraid because he challenged their traditional values? Sometimes our fears are almost irrational. We don't know why we are afraid or upset, we just know we are. In the paper some days ago I read how some citizens were trying to stop Senator Ernie Chambers from speaking in the public school in another community on law day. What were they afraid of? Sometimes our fears are out of all proportion to what's actually happening. We panic too easily! We make big issues out of little issues.

Mis-interpretation, it's always a problem. Earlier in his ministry when Jesus had healed people, those who saw it, mis-interpreted what he was doing. At times, some even said he was doing the work of the devil when he healed or helped people. They saw a good act as something bad.

Even his closest disciples mis-interpreted his actions and teachings at times. And now on Palm Sunday, Jesus is mis-interpreted again.

Jesus warned his disciples to expect mis-interpretation and even persecution. He said, according to Luke's Gospel, "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony. . . You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and kinsmen and friends, and some of you will be put to death; you will be hated by all for my name's sake."

Why do we so easily mis-interpret? Maybe it's because we do not see things as THEY are, but we see things as WE are. Our mood, our education, our training, our expectations, our fears, our world-view, our past experiences, our prejudices, our hates, our likes, our dis-likes, all of these things and more help us to mis-interpret what we hear and see.

But even though we cannot avoid all of our conditioning, we can at the same time work at being open, at being willing to listen to new evidence. We can at least admit that we have pre-conceived notions and try and see things fresh. We can, in other words, cut down on our mis-interpretations. We can be willing to rigorously examine our basic assumptions.

And why are we also so eager to believe the worst about a person or an event or decision? Many people were sure that Jesus was nothing more than a trouble-maker. They were ready to believe the worst about him rather than the best.

Mis-interpretation: always a problem. Once Jesus entered Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday, one of the first things he did and I quote from Matthew's gospel, "Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them,'It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer; but you make it a den of robbers."

Because of this incident, let's imagine one more editorial in the Jerusalem Times:

"It has gone too far. As reported in the news articles on page one, Jesus the Galilean, did his best to start a riot in the very temple court yesterday. Fortunately, though there was some damage and considerable confusion and close to an hour's disruption of business, it went no further than that. He alone was throwing the tantrum. Even his cronies (the dozen or so men who are always with him) seemed shocked at his behavior and took no part in it. The temple personnel showed commendable restraint and order was quickly restored. But this is to be seen as more than simply an incident. . . . We wonder what is happening to the morality and stability of Israel, when people condone this kind of lawlessness and irreverence. We hope that our law enforcement personnel will deal swiftly and totally with this matter immediately."

Mis-interpretation: it's always a problem. What did Jesus do about it, and what are we to do about it this Palm Sunday and always?

1. First of all, even though people will mis-interpret our actions and motives, just as they did with Jesus, we need to be especially careful that we do not succumb to the same temptation. Before you and I jump to an unwarranted conclusion about a decision, an event or a person, or an issue; check the evidence, try to look at the best side, rather than the worst side. Jesus wasn't trying to start a riot or insurrection when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He went there to celebrate the Passover Feast. Don't panic!

2. Secondly, above all the events of Palm Sunday and the days following in addition to the life and teachings of Jesus, remind us that there are good and right actions we must take at times, even though they might be mis-understood or mis-interpreted. Jesus faced this problem all the time. When he forgave the woman caught in adultery--there were those around who said that he thereby condoned or approved of adultery--that wasn't the case. When he ate with sinners and other unacceptable people according to the culture of his time, there were those who mis-interpreted his actions. Jesus, however, did not let possible mis-interpretation deter him from doing what was right in each instance and the same needs to be true of us.

Later in the week, Pontius Pilate gave in to the crowd and let Jesus be crucified because of the pressure of the crowd.

I know that some of you were very upset upon learning that our Board of Trustees and Church Council agreed to rent the building for a concert in June of this year. I can understand your dismay and your disagreement and I espesially appreciate your courtesy to me as you expressed your disagreement.

I also hope that you will continue to do your best to not mis-understand or mis-interpret the decision of the Board of Trustees and Church Council. In our kind of church, we can disagree in good spirit and I'm grateful that we can do that. Let us continue to listen and try our best to understand each other's point of view.

Above all, Palm Sunday calls us to look at Jesus Christ with clear sight and not to mis-interpret his actions and his inclusiveness and his forgiveness. But we also need to remember that when we follow Jesus Christ it sometimes leads us to include people and try to accept people that we otherwise might not. Amen.