Palm Sunday, March 27, 1988
KING FOR A DAY
Mark 11:1-11

Some years ago, a popular daytime radio program, which later became a television program, was called “Queen for a Day.” On that program, as I remember it, three or four women were chosen from the studio audience, and each one was interviewed by the Master of Ceremonies. She would tell what she hoped to get if chosen as “Queen for a Day.”

The stories were inevitably filled with emotion. A mother would tell how she hoped to get needed surgery for her daughter and had not been able to afford it. Or someone else would tell how she wanted to visit a distant relative who was near death but did not have the money for the airline ticket.

The stories were varied, and no doubt, the things wanted were justified. After all the stories had been heard, the audience would vote by applause and choose one of the contestants as “Queen for a Day.” The winner would then receive what she had asked for, along with many more things she had not asked for. She was “Queen for a Day.” I’ve often wondered what happened to those individuals a few days, weeks, or years later. Did being “Queen for a Day” change their lives, or was it only a temporary condition?

On Palm Sunday almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ was made “King for a Day.” He was chosen by the crowd as he was entering Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. However, unlike the “Queen for a Day” program, he was not chosen from among a group of candidates because of the story he told.

And this being made King for a day was different from other coronations as well. There was no crown put on his head, although later in the week, he received a crown of thorns. He did not receive any prizes except the adulation of the crowd. The event was not planned beforehand. It was spontaneous. It was more like a demonstration than a coronation. And I’m sure that some in the crowd joined in simply because it was taking place. Almost any crowd attracts a larger crowd.

The road to Jerusalem was frequently used for demonstrations and processions. The people of that city were connoisseurs of triumphal parades. Many years before, there had been King Solomon’s inaugural, followed by the colorful visit of the Queen of Sheba. There were processionals that featured the return of Jewish military heroes from successful wars, and each year there were the usual processions of people coming to the city for the celebration of high religious festivals. No doubt there were some still living who could remember how Herod the Great had come riding into the city at the head of an army to defy the haughty Sanhedrin that had summoned him to trial.

But today, another kind of leader was entering the holy city. There was no tramp of feet marching in measured cadence, no disciplined ranks, no glittering helmets or flags, no rows of Roman soldiers, no colorful war horses or battle chariots, no martial music, and no mounted trumpeters to herald his coming. It was a royal entry of another kind.

Misunderstood Kingship

Note first that those who were hailing Jesus as the successor to King David for the most part completely misunderstood his kingship. They had remade him into the image of the kind of king they wanted him to be.

Enthusiasm is contagious, and within a short time, religious fervor and patriotic zeal took hold of the crowd. Many of those present expected that this was the beginning of a revolutionary movement that would throw the Romans out of Palestine and re-establish the throne of King David. Israel would once again become a mighty worldly empire.

There must have been some things about this being made King for a day that were distasteful to Jesus. Ordinarily, he avoided the spectacular. The stories of his healing individuals drew crowds, but they were a constant source of embarrassment to him. He didn't want people to follow him because they thought of him as a miracle worker.

Thus, he often told those whom he had healed to keep it a secret. Once Jesus had an unfortunate experience with a crowd when he fed the five thousand, and they were more interested in his power to provide bread than in his message. Jesus knew how fickle crowds could be. He also knew the temptation of having a crowd follow him. He realized how easily he could meet the popular demand and swing the multitude to his banner if he wished.

So, on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus cherished no illusions about either the source or the extent of the crowd's enthusiasm. He knew that for the most part, it was misguided and could be short-lived.

Jesus also knew that sometimes our religious fervor can easily get off track. We, too, try to remake him into the kind of Savior we want or think we need, and in so doing, limit him to that role as far as we are concerned. We like to forget the parts of his teachings and life that make us uncomfortable or that judge our way of life.

But being misunderstood and misinterpreted is nothing new to Jesus Christ. Even those nearest to him misunderstood him, and he spent much of his time trying to make his message clear and understood.

When Jesus spoke of victory, people thought of victory in battle. But he was speaking of triumphant living. When he spoke of liberty, many thought only of political liberty, escape from the yoke of Rome. Jesus went beyond that—"You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

When Jesus spoke of strength and power, people thought primarily of armed forces and physical might, but he was thinking of the strength that comes from within. When Jesus spoke of treasures, people thought of possessions and money. But he was speaking of the riches of the spiritual life. When Jesus spoke of a more abundant life, people thought only of a change of circumstances, but he was speaking of a new vitality of the spirit — a whole new outlook on life.

People were always narrowing his message, and we still do, trying to squeeze it into the pigeonholes of our own making. Yet Jesus understands our misunderstanding. On another day, Jesus might have rebuked the crowds, but not on that first Palm Sunday. He had faced and accepted crowds before. There was no danger in the Palm Sunday crowd's acclaim. Let the crowd have its way.

Saying the Right Words Without Understanding
This leads to the second point in the Palm Sunday story. The crowd that hailed Jesus knew and said the right words, but they didn't know what those words really meant.

Like that Palm Sunday crowd, that's often our problem too. We know and say the right words, but we are not always aware of what those words mean and imply.

It's easy to say to someone, "I love you!" But when the going gets tough and we have to experience the true meaning of the word "love," then it's a different matter. It's easy to say, "I love God," and then forget that the Bible warns us that if we say we love God and hate another human being, we are liars.

When we get married, we say the right words in the marriage ceremony, "I give myself to you to be your husband, and I promise to love and sustain you in the covenant of marriage from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live."

But we do not know the meaning of these words until we have been married for several years or more. To say them and to live them are two different matters. We can never know in advance the demands the future will make on us and on the words we have said.

The crowd on that first Palm Sunday shouted the right words, "Jesus Christ is King," but they did not know or understand the radical nature of his kingship or the extent of his kingdom. They said the right words but did not know the meaning.

Jesus' Gracious Acceptance
And this brings us to the third point about Palm Sunday and being King for a day. And it's good news. Jesus accepted the words of the people, he accepted their love and devotion, even though he knew they did not understand his kingship or the words they were saying. He graciously accepted their enthusiastic acclaim without a sign of cynicism. It was as though he wanted to let them have their high moment.

More importantly, Jesus was the kind of individual who could and did accept a person's love and devotion even though he knew that person might be misunderstanding his ministry. Most of his original disciples misunderstood his mission while he was alive and with them. Only after his death and resurrection did it all begin to come clear.

In the same way, Palm Sunday reminds us that God accepts our worship and our devotion even though our ideas of God are limited. God knows that few of our motives are ever completely pure. Jesus knew that. He also knew that we have to start somewhere, and we always begin with a very immature faith that needs to keep growing and expanding. We can say, "Jesus is Savior," and not have much of an understanding of what that means. God accepts us no matter how stumbling or partial our faith may be.

Jesus also knew on that first Palm Sunday that much of the love and devotion he was receiving would not last long. A few days later, many of the same people who were in that Palm Sunday crowd would be in the crowd shouting "Crucify him, crucify him." But Jesus accepted the enthusiasm and acclaim anyway. It was valid for the moment.

Beware of quenching another person's enthusiasm, love, devotion, or happiness. Even though we may be certain that it will not last very long, or that it is even given for the wrong reasons,

let it be. Too often, we, like the Pharisees in the story, want to tell people to be quiet, to stop rejoicing, to quit being so happy.

I've heard adults say to children who are naturally happy and extraordinarily open, "Just wait, someday you'll find that life is full of sadness and tragedy." And so it is. But why let that spoil the present moment of our happiness and beauty?

Or someone will say to a couple who have recently been married and are still in a state of sublime bliss and joy, "It's not always going to be like this. One day you'll know that there is also much unhappiness in marriage." That may be true, but what's that got to do with their happiness here and now? Or a young person comes home from high school with good grades on his or her report card, full of enthusiasm and joy, and an older person who considers himself wise says, "So what, just wait until you get to college, and you'll find that it's not as easy to make those kinds of grades."

The feelings of joy and hope are not such that they should be immediately suppressed because we do not know for sure the meaning of the words or the extent of our joy. Enthusiasm, love, and devotion are not to be quenched but rather directed and deepened.

That's why Jesus did not repudiate the enthusiasm, joy, and devotion of the crowd on that first Palm Sunday. And Jesus does not repudiate those feelings in us today. Hopefully, those feelings will deepen so that it becomes true loyalty, the kind of loyalty that will stay with us as we follow Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane later this week and to the cross and to the resurrection on Easter.

Then we will know that he is not only King for a day but forever and over all creation. The love of God as revealed in Jesus is everywhere and eternal. Amen.