Palm Sunday, March 24, 1991
A MISUNDERSTOOD PRE-EASTER PARADE
Matthew 21:1-11

What is it in human beings that attracts so many of us to parades? There are those among us who like nothing better than to be one of the marchers or ride on a float and wave to people who are watching. Others prefer to be on the sidelines and take part as spectators. Some parades are highly organized and controlled, such as the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, California, or the Orange Bowl Day Parade in Miami, Florida. Others are not organized and yet very traditional, such as the Easter Parade in New York City. It always begins about noon on Easter Sunday following the conclusion of the 11:00 a.m. Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral on 5th Avenue. People gather and show off their new Easter finery by strutting up and down 5th Avenue.

When soldiers return from a war, there are celebration parades. I remember the large parades following World War II, and we've all seen the celebrations now taking place across the country following the conclusion of the war in the Persian Gulf. And there are demonstration parades, sometimes called "marches," which are carefully planned and held to support a cause — pro-choice or pro-life marches are just two examples.

Then there are those parades that just sort of happen as part of a larger celebration. They are spontaneous. Such was the case on that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. People from all over the country were returning to the Holy City for the celebration of the Passover. Jesus and his closest followers also planned their trip to Jerusalem.

Whether or not Jesus had some idea of the kind of reception he would receive when he arrived near the city gates, we do not know for sure. My study of the gospel accounts leads me to believe that he did. Therefore, he purposely made plans to enter the city riding on a donkey. The Gospel of Matthew indicates that Jesus was fully aware of the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah, which said: "Tell the daughter of Zion, look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Whether or not he knew that a spontaneous demonstration on his behalf would take place, no one knows.

To better understand what happened that first Palm Sunday, it helps to imagine what it might have been like if we had been there in person. I like to speculate, for example, what the local daily newspaper would've reported had there been one. Here's what an editorial in The Jerusalem Times might've said the day before Palm Sunday:

"Sources which we consider unimpeachable inform us that the Galilean teacher, Jesus, who has gathered a 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. We, however, are openly skeptical that this is the sole intent of his visit, since he has heretofore been very critical of some of the temple programs and personnel. We furthermore 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 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 rethink the timing of this Jerusalem visit."

What could the people in authority in Jerusalem be worried about? The Gospel of Matthew says: “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’”

People ever since have been asking, “Who is this Jesus?” And the answers then, as now, are many and varied. 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 liberator, one who would lead them to a military and political victory. 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 pursue 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. However, they had seen other popular leaders come and go, and they were sure Jesus would soon be forgotten. They only hoped that the excitement surrounding him wouldn’t last too long so they could continue life as usual.

And there were still others who were stirred up and angry. They saw Jesus as a serious threat to their way of doing things. If people began to follow him seriously, they would lose their power. As much as they might dislike some parts of the status quo, it was preferable to any alternatives they were aware of. Sure, they disliked the Romans, but still, the Romans let them go about their business pretty much as usual. They saw Jesus as a threat to their vested interests.

Now let’s imagine what the editorial in Monday’s newspaper following Palm Sunday might have said:

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

“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 city is on edge, and there seems to be an overreaction 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 prophet Zechariah. This kind of sarcastic irreverence would seem to come very close to open sacrilege. The Temple priests and other authorities 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 Savior, behaving like children, vandalizing 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 earthy approach. We hope we have heard the last of it."

Why were the people in authority so stirred up by Jesus on Palm Sunday and afterward? What kind of threat did he bring? He had no 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 violent overthrow of the government. He sought no political power, and he had none. He didn't want to be elected or appointed to any office. His preaching spoke of a new order, which relied on the power of suffering and servanthood and non-violence and unconditional love, rather than on violence or domination of others. He said over and over again, "My kingdom is not of this world."

So what were the people and the leaders afraid of? Were they afraid of change of any kind? Were they afraid of seeing God and God's love in a new way? Were they afraid to re-examine some of their basic assumptions about life? Were they afraid because Jesus challenged some of their traditional values and beliefs? Oftentimes, our fears of the new and different are irrational.

Misunderstanding also leads to fear, and there was a lot of misunderstanding about the message and mission of Jesus. One common cause of misunderstanding is our human tendency to jump to a quick conclusion about someone or some issue before we have looked at all sides and considered as much of the evidence as we can uncover. Because of our misunderstanding and jumping to a quick conclusion, oftentimes our fears are out of all proportion to what's actually happening. We make big issues out of little issues.

It was nothing new to Jesus. Earlier in his ministry, when he had healed people, those who saw it misinterpreted and therefore misunderstood what he was doing. 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 misunderstood his actions and teachings at times.

Jesus warned his followers to expect misunderstanding, opposition, and 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 sisters and friends, and some of you will be put to death; you will be hated for my name's sake."

Why is it that we so easily misunderstand? Perhaps it's because we do not always see things as they are, but we see things as we are. Our mood, our education, our upbringing, our expectations, our fears, our worldview, our past experiences, our prejudices, our hates, our likes, our dislikes — all of these things and more help us to misunderstand what we hear and see.

What then can we do about our misunderstandings — not only about Jesus but in other parts of our lives as well?

First of all, even though we cannot avoid all of our conditioning, we can at least be aware of it and work at being open, at being willing to consider new evidence. We can begin by admitting that we have preconceived notions and try to see things afresh. We can, in other words, cut down on our misinterpretations. We can be willing to re-examine our basic assumptions.

Before you and I jump to an unwarranted conclusion about a decision, an event, a person, or an issue, we should check the evidence and try to look at all sides. Jesus wasn't trying to start a riot or an insurrection when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Secondly, in our own lives and with the decisions we have to make, the events of Palm Sunday remind us that there are some actions we need to take at times even though they might be misunderstood. Jesus faced this problem all the time. When he healed a person on the Sabbath, he knew he would be misunderstood and criticized for it. He could've avoided the misunderstanding by not doing anything at all. When he forgave the woman caught in adultery, he knew that some of his enemies would interpret this action as condoning adultery. When he ate with sinners and other unacceptable people according to the culture of his time, there were those who misunderstood that as well. But this didn't keep him from doing what was right in each instance, and the same needs to be true of us.

Thirdly, Palm Sunday and the events which follow during Holy Week remind us that even though we misunderstand, God still accepts us, forgives us, and loves us.

Each of the gospel stories about Palm Sunday has something in it that the others do not. Luke tells us, for example, that when Jesus "drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.'" Why did Jesus weep? He knew the end of his life was near, but more than that, he also knew that many of the same people who on that day were urging him on and shouting "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," would later in the week be in the crowd shouting, "Crucify him!" Jesus wept because he knew how much people misunderstood his ministry and mission. They believed he would restore their national pride, and Jesus knew that too much national pride soon becomes an idol, a false god.

Only God can endow our lives with eternal significance, yet we so frequently want to settle for lesser gods.

Can we still celebrate Palm Sunday knowing how confused the scene was and how we still misunderstand Jesus? Yes, because now with a better understanding we have even more to cheer about. The cross of Christ says something terrible about us, but something wonderful about God. It speaks not only of the triumph and defeat of a good man, but also represents the merciful action of a loving God. "For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Amen.