

Fans or Followers
Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40
April 1, 2007

Spring training is drawing to a close and the Major League Baseball season officially opens tomorrow. Fans have been flocking to Arizona for spring training, eager to catch a preview of their teams. Fans are now gathering at stadiums to cheer their teams on to victory. For the majority of us, major league sports are spectator events. Few have the skill to play on the field and earn the big bucks that pros now receive. Many long to be out on the turf in the midst of the action, but few are chosen for that thrill. Most have to be content sitting in the stands or watching on television. Many fans have great loyalty to their teams, even following them around the country for games or championships. Some fans are fickle, easily changing loyalty depending on a team's record. Some of us jump on near the end of the season if the local team is doing well. While fans experience the highs and lows of games and seasons, they do so at a distance from the team on the field.

Many of us have sat on the curb or stood on the sidewalk as spectators of a parade. We weren't in the parade, but we cheered on the participants. Perhaps we watched for those we knew who were marching. Our role as cheering fans is part of the fun of the parade, but it still differs from that of actually marching to the beat of the drum in the band.

Palm Sunday begins with a parade. The Grand Marshall is Jesus, riding on a donkey. The procession that hails Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is comprised of elements familiar to the bystanders. Kings and conquering generals often parade into their territory with an escort to the hymns and cheers of the crowd proclaiming their authority. Jesus is intentional in following the pattern of this ceremony for welcoming a ruler, but there are elements that set him apart from earthly kings.

The most obvious difference is Jesus' choice of a donkey. Kings and military leaders generally are transported by a horse, symbolic of power and might. A donkey is used by the common folk to carry people and goods. David's son, Solomon, rode a donkey on the way to his anointing as king (I Kings 1:33-37). The prophet Zechariah anticipates how the Messiah will come, saying, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech. 9:9). The Messiah will come not on an animal of war, but on a beast of burden.

Spreading garments on the roadway is a sign of acclamation. When Jehu was anointed king over Israel, the people hurriedly took their cloaks and spread them on the bare steps, recognizing his royal authority and submitting to him as the new king. It is comparable to “rolling out the red carpet” for a dignitary today. The garments spread before Jesus would not be expensive robes, but tattered shawls and dusty, sweat-stained rags. Jesus is hailed by the poor, sinners, and outcasts. By the way, John is the only gospel that mentions palms in connection with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Matthew mentions branches cut from trees and Mark mentions leafy branches.

The song sung by the multitude of disciples comes from Psalm 118. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” It is one of the psalms sung as an entrance hymn in the annual ritual of enthroning a leader.

All of these elements - the parade, the donkey, the cloaks, and the song - point to the entrance of a significant leader. The unique twists on Jesus’ processional hail him as a different type of leader. He comes not with the power of force, but with the power of tenderness. He comes not as a lord of war, but as the Prince of Peace. His reign will bring peace on earth and glory to God.

The question posed to us as we begin this Holy Week is this: what is our role in the Palm Sunday processional? Are we curious onlookers, standing along the sidelines, waving palms for the hero, but evaporating when the hero demands action? Are we sideline Christians, willing to admire while the events are enjoyable, but disappearing when the going gets tough? Are we fans watching the parade or are we followers marching with Jesus, even as far as the cross?

A follower is one who attaches himself to another. A commitment is made to imitate the service of the leader. We step out from the sidelines and march in the processional, daring to walk in the footsteps of one who expresses the depth of love in radical ways. A follower not only says, “I believe,” but goes on to say, “Because I believe, therefore I act in accordance with the teacher whom I follow.” An ethical dimension is vital to following. It’s a matter of lifestyle. Our faith is expressed in our behavior. When others look at our lives, do they see a fan in name only, or do they see a follower who adheres to the heart, mind, and soul of Jesus Christ?

Marcus Borg notes that most people “live lives structured by the conventions of their culture, by taken-for-granted notions of what life is about and how to live, by what ‘everybody knows.’ Every culture has its

conventions, indeed is virtually defined by its conventions. Growing up involves internalizing the conventions of one's culture... Our lives are structured, even driven by the central conventions of our culture. We learn to value what our culture values, pursue what our culture tells us to pursue, and see as our culture sees. In short, we commonly live in a world of conventional wisdom."¹

Jesus calls us to walk the narrow way of discipleship in contrast to the broad way of conventional wisdom. The word "repent" means to return. We are called to return to God. Another meaning of repent is "to go beyond the mind that you have."² It has to do with acquiring a new way of seeing and thinking, a way that goes beyond the conventions of the culture. It requires us to think "outside the box" to which we're accustomed. Paul commissions us to have the mind of Christ.

We're familiar with the typical hallmarks of Jesus' ministry: loving without condition, forgiving seventy-times-seven, offering hospitality to the stranger, and showing compassion to the poor. In addition to these, there are some not so popular dimensions of Jesus' ministry. Jesus became known for opposing the tradition of the elders, upsetting pious expectations of what a child of God should say or do, subverting religious certainty, and making people responsible for their own lives.

People often come to Jesus expecting him to confirm their beliefs, yet he ends up turning their understandings upside down. He often answers questions with parables that keep the people thinking or with questions for which they are to seek the answers. People often go away shaking their heads and staying up all night asking, "What did he mean by that? Did he really mean what I think he did?"

Jesus' visits to the religious institutions of his time are not well received. He often provokes the pillars of the institutions. He refuses to compromise his integrity and his understanding of God in order to comply with the community's sacred standards.

Jesus "engages the sorts of people he should ignore and ignores the sorts of people he should engage. He accepts the wrong dinner invitations. He is rude to respected religious leaders. He scolds his own disciples, while he praises the faith of a Roman soldier."³

Jesus goes beyond the conventions of the culture because he has a new way of seeing things. He dares to be different, to be a nonconformist. Centered in God, he sees things as God sees them and does things as God desires. One of the highest compliments I have been paid is that I don't always do what is popular, but I do what is right. While I'm not sure I always do what is right, Jesus certainly did.

Those who chose to follow Jesus look with a discerning eye at the conventions of the culture. They “look beyond the mind they have” to the mind of Christ. Consequently they may march to a different drummer. They may be out of step with the rest of the procession. They will be careful not to make Jesus into their own image, but to keep the image of Christ before them as the vision toward which they strive. Followers know that the way is narrow and that they will undoubtedly face opposition. They persist regardless, for they know that the new identity found in Christ is the way that leads to life, abundant life. That’s the difference between a fan who remains a spectator and a follower who chooses to participate in the parade.

One day a soldier in the Israeli army was on patrol in an area of occupied Palestine when he felt a rock strike him in the back. Before he had a chance to turn around, another rock had struck him in the shoulder, then another hit his helmet.

He whirled around, his rifle ready to fire. In his sights were several Palestinian children. Children. They were picking up more stones to throw at him. The soldier did not want to fire, but he could not allow them to attack him again.

Suddenly he had an idea. He bent down and picked up three of the rocks. He picked them up and began to juggle. Yes, juggle. The children were mesmerized and forgot about their stones. The soldier did a few tricks, and the children laughed. Then he did a grand finale, and they applauded. He took a bow and walked away.

That soldier did not end the war with his actions. But he took what had been hurled as weapons and transformed them into objects of wonder. He took a broken moment and made it whole with the laughter of children. That moment revealed God’s shalom.

It’s not likely that that soldier was a Christian, but he knew something about the peace of God, the same peace we believe Jesus the Christ came to bring us and to give us in his death and resurrection. Christ took the cross, a tool of torture and death, and transformed it into a symbol of salvation. Christ took death and transformed it into life. Christ took our despair and turned it into hope. He took our sins and juggled them before our eyes that we might forget our hatred and focus on his power and love.⁴

That Israeli soldier took stones hurled by Palestinian children. He chose not to throw them in an expected act of revenge. He transformed them into toys of laughter and rocks of reconciliation. This is the action of an agent of change. This is the model for those who actively follow the way of Jesus Christ. We don’t conform to conventional standards. We transform

even what is hurled at us in hatred and use our energy for goodness and peace.

The cost of following Jesus is revealed this Holy Week as we follow him to the cross, where he gives his life because he refuses to go along with the conventions of the culture. He stands up for what is faithful to God, even when it means his death.

May we be so bold to follow Jesus, to be faithful to God, and to stand for what is right.

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), p. 194.

² Ibid, p. 219.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Something About Jesus," *Christian Century*, April 3, 2007.

⁴ Pastor Joe Hensley, quoted in *Homiletics*, Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 50.

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