

## *Which Jesus do you want?*

**W**e've just heard quite a bit from Matthew's gospel. We read about the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. And we read about the trial of Jesus before Pilate, and his crucifixion. A couple of things popped out at me, as I was getting ready for this morning, that I want to talk about very briefly.

First of all, I was surprised when I remembered that the word "hosanna", which the people shouted at Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, was not a shout of praise. Rather, it was an imperative verb, a hope-filled demand that meant "save us," or better, "save us now!" That crowd that lined the streets leading into Jerusalem, was asking for something. They were asking Jesus to save them from political and religious tyranny. And they were asking Jesus to lead them in an uprising that would bring down the Roman empire, and return Israel to a theocracy. In other words, the crowd was asking – demanding really – that Jesus fix their world, and fix it in the way they thought it needed to be fixed. All in all, it was a crowd with pretty high expectations.

The second thing that popped out at me, takes place during our second gospel reading, at the point when Pilate lets the crowd decide which of the two men he's going to release for them. When we got to that part, I was surprised to be reminded that Barabbas' name was also Jesus. (Barabbas, which means "son of the father," could have been nickname, suggesting that he was a "chip off the old block." You know, like father like son.) The gospels of Mark and Luke tell us that Barabbas had been arrested because he had been involved in a riot in Jerusalem. And Matthew's gospel tells us that Barabbas was well known. All of which tells us that Barabbas was a man of action. He was a man who had taken up arms against the Romans. He was a man to be reckoned with, and the people knew it.

So, given everything we know about Jesus, why did the crowd ask for Barabbas to be released? Well, to answer that question, we need to remember that the crowd was looking for someone to rescue them from their current situation. They were looking for someone who could bring about the changes they wanted, and bring them about fast. Therefore, it was Barabbas, rather than Jesus, that struck a chord within that crowd. Because Barabbas was a man of action, instead of reflection or prayer. Barabbas taught lessons with swords, instead of with parables. And Barabbas was willing to *do* something, while Jesus seemed willing to passively accept whatever was coming his way. And so, when it came time to choose which man to release – "Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah" – the crowd thought the choice was obvious.

And here we are, nearly two thousand years later, and we're still having to make that choice. I suspect that what is really behind the attraction of Barabbas, and his many successors over the years, is what I would call a *false* hope. It seems to be the business of our culture, to

offer us one version of Barabbas or another, for our consumption. And when we shout “hosanna,” save us, there are a lot of Barabbases out there, and in lots of forms, that promise to give us what we want, when we want it. Perhaps we want financial security, or maybe we simply want to find that right, special person for us. Maybe we just want to lose weight, or get that right job. Or, maybe we simply want the revenge, or the satisfaction, or the euphoria, or even the religious experience that *we* want. And, since everything seems to happen faster these days, we want them now. Now, while none of these things are necessarily evil in themselves, however, if we allow them to capture our hearts and our imaginations, any one of them can be the Barabbas we call for. The Barabbas we choose. And all the while, the real thing – that other “Jesus who is called the Messiah” – stands silently before us, pointing us in another direction.

If Palm Sunday can do anything for us it’s this: It can reveal our deepest desires or our fondest hopes, give them a name, and then stand them up beside Jesus of Nazareth, so that our choice is clear. And maybe only then can we begin to see the truly radical alternatives that we are being offered, by this Jesus of Nazareth, and the depth of our own need. Because every time we pray, or cry, “hosanna,” we are reminded that we are incomplete, broken, and missing something from our lives. Like that crowd in Jerusalem, we want salvation, wholeness, restoration. But, Palm Sunday asks us, on whose terms?

When all is said and done, the two readings from the gospel of Matthew are not just about what was said and done two thousand years ago; really, they tell us something about ourselves, and about our lives now. Because, every day we are faced with two figures of hope, two paths we might follow. And sometimes, making a choice can be hard and confusing – and even a little bit ironic – when both choices seem to have the same first name. However, while Jesus of Nazareth may not be showing us the way of quick fixes or instant gratification, he is showing us the way of God. And the way of God is the path of true hope, and not false. However, the choice, now as then, remains ours. And so, Palm Sunday asks us, which Jesus do you choose? Which Jesus do you really want?