

A Sermon for Palm Sunday, Year B
April 9, 2006 – Mark 15:1-39
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Who is Jesus to you?

According to the online site of the Guinness World Records, the biggest one-day temperature variation ever recorded took place at Browning, Montana between January 23rd and 24th, in 1916. The temperature dropped from 44 degrees Fahrenheit to -56 degrees Fahrenheit: That's a difference of 100 degrees!

Now, you may be wondering why I'm mention this to you, since today's gospel readings take place in Jerusalem, not Browning, Montana. However, if the people from Guinness World Records could have been in Jerusalem during Holy Week some two thousand years ago, while they wouldn't have recorded any dramatic, record-breaking temperature changes, they would have been able to observe a record-breaking mood swing.

For when Jesus entered Jerusalem that week, the crowds were cheering him, and shouting "Hosanna!" But just a few days later, that same crowd had dramatically changed its tone, and were now shouting "Crucify him!" And that, my friends, is a mood swing just as dramatic as any temperature drop in Browning. It's hard for me to imagine a crowd going from hot to cold so quickly, but mood swings can be like that: you know, very surprising, and very tough things.

All of which reminds me of the story about the husband who purchased a Mood Ring for his wife, because he hoped to better monitor the shifts in her disposition. (I'm sure you've all heard of mood rings: the stone in the ring supposedly changes color in response to changes in the mood of the ring's wearer.) Well, what this man learned was that, when his wife was in a good mood the ring turned green. And when she was in a bad mood, the ring left an angry, red mark on his forehead.

I have always marveled at the quick change in that Jerusalem-crowd's mood, until I remembered something that had happened to me when I was a teenage. When I was about sixteen, I was part of a small bible study and prayer group that met each week. One day, the group's leader asked each of us the question: "Who is Jesus to you?" I answered first, and said: "Jesus is my ticket to heaven." I thought that was a pretty good answer, and it was an honest response. That is, until the fellow sitting next to me gave his answer, and said simply: "Jesus is my Lord."

Now, both answers were fine, and they both described where the two of us were on our spiritual journeys back then. In my case, the people who were like me would look at Jesus and ask the question: "What will you do for me?" But my friend, and the people who were like him, would look at Jesus and ask, "What can I do for you?"

I think that most of the people in that crowd were like me when I was sixteen. They embraced Jesus because of what they thought he would do for them. Maybe Jesus would bring back the Davidic kingdom to Israel. Maybe he'd raise up an army and toss the Romans out of their country. Maybe Jesus could raise the status of their nation in the eyes of the world, so that being a Jew meant more

than mere being a pawn in the hands of foreigners. Many of the people who were shouting “Hosanna!” were looking to Jesus to be their rescuer: “What are you going to do for me, Jesus?” And when it became clear that Jesus wasn’t going to fulfill their expectations, they turned on him. And their cheers turned to jeers, and their shouts of “Hosanna!” turned into shouts of “Crucify him!”

Even some of the disciples were part of this group. It hadn’t been too many days earlier, when the disciples were arguing amongst themselves as to which of them was the greatest. And on another occasion, the mother of two of the disciples, James and John I think, asked him: “Jesus, when you come into your kingdom, put my sons on either side of you.” In other words, give them power, and authority, and prestige. Surprising as it may seem, even some of the people closest to Jesus saw him as something like their cosmic PowerBall ticket.

But not everyone was like that. There were a lot of folk who were more like my friend in that bible study group. To these folks, Jesus was simply their Lord, their example, their mentor. Like the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. Like the women who greeted Jesus, when he was carrying his cross towards Golgotha. Or like his mother and the beloved disciple, who stood nearby while Jesus was on the cross; not wanting to let him die alone. To them, Jesus was their Lord, and to him they would ask, “Jesus, what can I do for you. Or for him? Or for her?” And to these people, Jesus gave a sense of their ultimate value in God’s eyes, and the knowledge that they were loved unconditionally, even as they were.

Most Christians today still fit into one of these two groups: Those who look to faith and religion for what they can get; And those who look to their faith for what they can give. And not just their religion, but almost anything you can think of.

For example, not too long ago, I was watching the 1997 movie entitled *The Saint*. (Some of you can probably remembering, many years ago, watching the television series by the same name.) One of the story-lines in the film involved a woman, Dr. Emma Russell, a scientist who had developed the means by which nuclear fusion could be achieved at room temperature. The process is called cold fusion, and fueled by only a few gallons of heavy water, the cold fusion reactor is supposed to be able to produce enough energy to meet the needs of a nation. Not surprisingly, in the film, some really bad guys want to get their hands on the cold fusion technology, in order to become rich and powerful. But all that Dr. Russell wanted to do, when she had perfected the formula, was to give the technology to the world, so that everyone could benefit from it equally.

This morning we stand at the threshold of Holy Week. When we gather in seven days, we’ll be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But a lot needs to transpire between now and then, not the least of which is each of us asking ourselves the question “Who is Jesus to me?” Is he my Get Out of Hell Free ticket? Or is he simply my Lord? Do I turn to Jesus for what I can get from him, or for guidance on how to give to others. Is my faith about getting, or giving. About receiving, or sharing.

Regardless of how we answer those questions, God still loves us. But how we answer those questions will determine how we can share that love with others.