

Matthew 21:1-11

“Who is this?”

“Who is this?” That was the question from a whole city in turmoil as crowds gathered at the spectacle of a man entering the city on a donkey. Think of it. A donkey. The opposite of majestic. Picture it. Have you ever wondered what it looks like to have someone riding on a donkey? The round belly of a donkey does not lead to a graceful or dignified ride. Either one's knees are bent so that legs rest atop the belly or, legs are sticking straight out, as there is no just letting one's legs hang neatly as if riding a horse. And donkeys are small and when they run it is not the long graceful strides of the horse but jerky up and down motions, with the one on top bobbing just the same – up and down.

This story is set in the week of the Jewish festival of Passover. People were coming into the city of Jerusalem to celebrate, to visit the temple, and remember the story of their nation's liberation from slavery in Egypt. The passage is overflowing with connections between the story of Jesus and the story of the captivity and liberation of the people of Israel. We have to be told of the connections and layers, but the people in that day and time would have understood clearly what was going on. They would have noted the religious overtones and messages, which is why Jesus was a threat to the religious authorities who were all for status quo.

Not only that, stories, words, and rumors that Jesus was the Messiah set everyone on edge, as those who wanted to overthrow the establishment were ready to crown Jesus as a king, and those who felt threatened by the thought of another kingdom taking power led to a political response.

When the question was asked, “Who is this?” “The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’” Now there is a lot riding on this response. It has been three years. It was the response of people who were vulnerable, sick, dead or dying, hungry and thirsty, the broken in heart, mind, and body who had witnessed Jesus heal the sick, bring to life the dead, feed thousands at a time, and teach about what it meant to be loved and forgiven by God.

This was a climatic moment. Who is this? This is Jesus the healer, the teacher, the Son of God, and soon to be written on a board above his head on the cross, King of the Jews. For some the answer to “Who is this?” was, he is a threat, a person to be dealt with, a problem, a trouble maker. For others the answer was Lord and Saviour.

On this particular day in this town, he appeared to be the answer to all that was wrong. Though, how quickly the chants of Hosanna, which translates to save or help, I pray... how quickly the chants went from Hosanna to crucify him.

We can read what the response of those who lived at that time was to the question "Who is this?" But what about now? Who is this Jesus?

In the big picture, Jesus is the reason for the Christian church. Jesus was not Christian. Jesus was through and through Jewish. The Christian church came out of the continuing work of the disciples, and centuries of witness to the life changing, life giving, and life transforming experience of those who have followed in the way of Jesus. Those who have believed in the forgiveness, grace, hope, and love that is offered in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and provided a new way to be in relationship with God.

Still, the church does not seem to have the relevance that it once had. Yet, could it be that the way of Jesus, living as a Christian is still a cause for concern for those who would prefer the way of power over others rather than the message that all people matter, all are worthy of dignity, help, kindness, and consideration. That is the message of the gospel. Every life has value. Everyone should be given the opportunity for an abundant life especially those who are struggling. Especially those that society might deem unworthy of special attention, the poor, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, the addicted.

We tend to think people get what they deserve. If they are in a bad place, well they did it to themselves. Except that is only seeing one layer. Peel away the layers and we see how society has made other choices difficult. Pain, injustice, and inequity has caused some to not have the opportunities that others are given without question.

Who is this?

Who is this Jesus for you? Have you considered his life, this story of death, of love, of compassion, and new life? Have you considered its meaning for your own life?

Today you will hear some of the story of what took place after this triumphal entry into the city. Think of where you are in the story. Which characters do you identify with? How does this story of death and resurrection really intersect with your daily living? Consider too, what this means for our church. If we are truly the people of God, what does that mean for the present and future church?

Who is this? Who is this Jesus for you, for the church, and for the world? Not in some bygone area but today, right now, as we look around at each other, at our community, our country and the world. Who is this that has impacted the lives of generations of people and who now for us seems to have a dwindling impact on the lives of our children and grandchildren?

Does Jesus still matter? Can Jesus still transform lives and communities? Can Jesus transform us? Who is this that comes to take away the sins of the world and offers new life? Who is this?