

Isaiah 50:4-11
John 12:12-19

Would We Recognize Him?
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A few years ago people began wearing bracelets with the letters WWJD on them: What would Jesus do? This, of course, produced other questions along the same line: What would Jesus drive? (a Honda because the disciples were all in “one accord!)... Although the question was asked in a variety of ways it always asked basically the same question: What would Jesus do in various situations? The answers or the questions usually reflected the theological position of the person asking or answering. We have a unique ability to mold Jesus into our image rather than letting him mold us into his.

In many ways the Palm Sunday spectacle in Jerusalem was one of the crowd trying to mold Jesus into their image of what they expected the Messiah to be. The recent events in Jesus’ ministry have only increased their anticipation of Messiah—Lazarus has been raised from the dead after having been in the tomb for four days. People would hang around the tomb for three days, believing that the spirit stayed nearby in case there was a “mistake”—but after four days there would be no hope. Lazarus was raised after four days – what will Jesus do for an encore? Can they set him up as King?

Of course this has also produced negative reactions from the religious leaders. They are concerned about the impact of this rabbi on their lives, their positions of authority. They are not sure what to do with his increasing popularity among the people. Their peace with Rome is fragile and they do not need another uprising. He is bringing attention to their faith and the Temple. So far Rome has tolerated Judaism but what if this rabbi gets too popular? *“Look, the whole world has gone after him” (12:19)*. How will they deal with his increasing popularity?

Now as far as parades go this one in Jerusalem is about as simple as they can get. A rabbi rides into the city on a donkey and people throw down their coats and cut branches from the trees to make a carpet for him. The real concern though is what they are shouting” *Hosannas, Hallelujah’s and Praise the Lord – here is one who comes in the name of the Lord – Blessed is the king of Israel*. Israel already has a king, one who has been approved by Rome. No kingdom can have two kings.

They do not understand or comprehend what Jesus’ role of king is (nor do we, really). They are concerned the situation could quickly get out of hand. Their power and authority are at risk. Attention is being focused where it should not be. But his message is one of love and forgiveness. He comes on a donkey, the animal of peace. He does not seek to take over the government, control the forces of the day – he comes in the name of the Lord – in peace to his city. And he is not recognized.

Would we recognize him today? The answer may be harder than we think. He would not be dressed as he was then. Yes, he wore sandals – so did everyone else. It was the foot dress of the day. Yes, he wore a robe – so did almost everyone else – it was the normal dress of the day. His robe only identified him as one from Nazareth. He did not stand out like John the Baptist. He fitted in. He may have had long hair, so did most of the men. He may have had a beard, so did most of the men.

I remember back a few years ago when some in the “Jesus movement” decided they needed to dress like Jesus... for some it was jeans and sandals. A few donned a robe. Even then I was critical – it is not what we wear that makes us like Jesus, it is how we act. How we live out our lives. Today Jesus would be a generic us.

I imagine someone coming to see Jesus who did not know who he was. They see a crowd of people and lean over and ask someone, “Which one is Jesus?” He would not have stood out. We like to think he would have, but I imagine he was very much “one of the crowd. They might have responded, “Oh, he is the one with the child on his lap.” Or, “He is the one talking to that woman!” He blended in. It was his actions, not his dress that made him stand out from the rest of his disciples.

Would we recognize him? Or would we too be upset by his actions? Would we honor his concern for the poor, the widows and the orphans? Would we heed his call for justice for all peoples? Would we be upset because he hung around some of the fringes of society or that he ate with the rich and powerful? Would we be upset because he did not hang around with the “church” crowd, the right crowd? How would we respond to his teachings? His challenges on our lives?

Where are we in the crowd? Are we rushing to cut down the palm branches, shouting the Hallelujah’s and Hosannas? Are we looking forward to the coming of the King or are we hoping the crowds will keep silent and go away? Are we shaking our heads at this spectacle in disgust?

Jesus is far more radical than we may be comfortable with. He may be more controversial than we are ready for. He comes to his city “in the name of Lord.” He comes to a city torn by cultural and religious strife. He comes to a city filled with violence and under the rule of a foreign government. In the 2000 years since his entry into his world/his city have we really changed? Would we recognize him if he came today?

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989