

The five faces of Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

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Were you to have been in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, you would have seen 5 different faces.

First, you would have seen the faces of the men and women, thousands who would have come to Jerusalem for the great feast of Passover. On their faces, you would have seen hope. Why? Because they were not just there for the feast, which they could have celebrated in their homes, as the first Israelites did who were saved from the Pass-over of the angel of death in Egypt. They were there because maybe, just maybe, this might be the Passover at which God would finally free His people from their hated Gentile oppressors, the Romans. These Jews who had come there were filled with even greater hope as they welcomed this Jesus, riding on a donkey just as the prophets had predicted. Jesus who had already fulfilled so many prophecies. Hope lit up their faces as they now awaited God's vengeance to be carried out by Jesus and his followers.

Second, you would have seen the faces of those followers themselves. 12 young men, and a few women, who had followed Jesus from Galilee. While they had been with Jesus in Galilee, they were confused about Jesus. But, once he started out toward Jerusalem, once he started talking about the coming days, his students thought that they finally understood: this is indeed the anointed one, the coming King, the Son of David. Their faces reflected more than hope; they were radiantly expectant. Not like a woman who only hopes to get pregnant, but like a woman, full with child, now just waiting for the day. So, expectant are they that just before that entry of Jesus into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday these students started to argue among themselves: 'Who is the greatest among us? Which of us will be Jesus' minister of state when he sits on the throne of David? Which of us will be his minister of war? Which of us will kill the first Roman in this army of occupation?' These students – the Arabic word for students is *taliban* -- these *taliban* can taste victory, they can taste blood.

Third, you would have seen the faces of the priests and their legal experts, watching, wary, as Jesus approached. These masters of the Temple had heard about Jesus and they knew what Jesus thought of them. They knew that Jesus thought that because of them the Temple of God had been emptied of all its power and had become a mere spectacle. These Temple authorities could not explain where Jesus got his power. And so, on their faces, you can see how threatened they felt. And you can see that they are threatened because they love power and they love to receive the people's acclaim. You know that they will not give up power easily. In fact, you can see in their faces that they won't give up power at all.

Fourth, you would have seen the faces of the Roman soldiers, young men conscripted from nations all around the Empire, speaking many different languages, but no Hebrew or Aramaic, watching the events of that Palm Sunday, not understanding a word. They were just hoping it wouldn't be a problem. They couldn't wait to finish their tour of duty and get back to their families. After all, they were only there in the Middle East to keep the peace, to bring civilization to this unruly, barbarian people. It's true: they could see the hatred in the eyes of the Jews but that was just part of the job. Their own king, the divine Tiberius, had assured all of the Empire that their cause was just and that all the resources of the Empire would be put at their disposal to keep the peace. As they look out on the events of this Palm Sunday, these young faces are bemused and curious: they have no idea what the fuss is and no idea of what the people want to happen to them, which is their very public defeat and death at the hands of God.

Finally, you would have seen the face of Jesus. You would have seen firmness in his face. That firmness was misunderstood by his own people as the signs of one who was bent on murderous vengeance, like some early Osama bin Laden, waiting for just the right moment to seize power. You would also have seen determination in his face, a face that was, as Isaiah wrote, as hard as a rock of flint. That determination was also misunderstood by his own followers as the character of who had his eyes fixed on the earthly throne of his forefather King David and on the bloody struggle that it would take. You would also have seen anger in his face. This anger was not misunderstood by the Temple priests. They saw in it a righteous anger, directed against them, for having turned the people into a flock without a shepherd. But, if you looked closely, you would also have seen compassion in Jesus' face, especially in his eyes, a compassion reserved for all those who had no idea what they were doing,

like those Roman soldiers who would eventually crucify him. Even from the cross, he will ask that they be forgiven, because they had no idea what they were doing. At the start of this, his last week, the face of Jesus showed firmness, determination, righteous anger, and compassion as he kept his eyes fixed on that cross. Like a marathon runner who is near the finish, his face is fixed on the goal, on which He alone, through His death on that cross, will reconcile the whole world to God.

And when it happens, only one of all of those other faces will see it and get it.

It will not be one of those in the crowds who on Palm Sunday welcomed him and cried out for Roman blood, but who on Friday will call out for his blood.

It will not be one of his disciples, who on Palm Sunday entered Jerusalem ready to take their places in the new Empire of God, but who on Friday will scatter in fear for their own precious lives.

It will not be one of the Temple priests, who on Palm Sunday were afraid that they would lose power, but who on Friday will mock and jeer at the Jesus who cannot even save himself.

No, it will be one, lone Roman centurion, who on Palm Sunday watched with bemusement the 'parade' that passed in front of him, but who on Friday at the foot of the cross will see through the corpse of the one who was lifted up to die for us all and will get it exactly right: "Truly, this is the Son of God".