

I Need to Know



My name is Pontius Pilate, and I am confused. Why did the cheering stop? *I need to know!* When Jesus emerged on the public scene he was an overnight sensation. He would try to go off to be alone and the people would still follow him. The masses lined the streets as he came into town. On Palm Sunday leafy palm branches were spread before him and there were shouts of Hosanna. Great crowds came to hear him preach. A wave of religious expectation swept the country.

But the cheering did not last for long. There came a point when the tide began to turn against him. Oh, you didn't notice it so much at first. People still came to see him, but the old excitement was missing, and the crowds were not as large as they had been. His critics now began to publicly attack him. That was something new. Earlier they had been afraid to speak out for fear of the masses, but they began to perceive that the fickle public was turning on him. Soon the opposition began to snowball. When they discovered that they could not discredit his moral character, they began to take more desperate measures. Before it was all over a tidal wave welled up that brought Jesus to his knees under the weight of a cross.

Why did the masses so radically turn against him? How did the shouts of Hosanna on Sunday transform into the shouts of crucify him on Friday? I am not just talking about the immediate events that may have brought it about, but the deeper root causes. What were the underlying issues? In five days it all fell apart. Why? That is the issue that I would like for us to concentrate on this morning because it's something *I need to know*.

I believe that one reason the cheering stopped is that Jesus began to talk more and more about commitment. During the last week of Jesus' life a very interesting scene occurred, and even more significantly, it occurred in full view of the people. Now, remember Jesus was a borrower. He borrowed a cradle when he was a baby. He borrowed a small boy's lunch to feed a crowd. He borrowed a boat to use as a pulpit. He borrowed a room to eat the Passover meal with his disciples. He borrowed a donkey to enter Jerusalem. He even borrowed a tomb. Jesus owned nothing!

A rich young ruler came enthusiastically running to Jesus. You are all familiar with the dialogue that took place. Jesus says: Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me. The masses were stunned. What did they expect? Theologically, they had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich men. Yet, here is Jesus turning the big money away. I wonder how many churches would do that today. We think that people who are wealthy and prominent are individuals who need to be recruited and cultivated. We think their success in the world will lead to our success in the church. It bothered them first of all to see Jesus turn away a rich man.

They were bothered for a second reason. Prior to this Jesus' message had largely been one of grace. When the 5,000 were hungry he fed them. When they brought their sick, he healed them. When a woman is about to be stoned, Jesus comes to her rescue and saves her. The message of his ministry is one of grace upon grace.

But now he seems to be saying, "The time for miracles is over. The time for commitment is now." It is interesting to note that in all four Gospels after Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and palm branches there is not another miracle recorded. There are some events we might count as miracles but no miracles are done for the people. On the face of it this may not seem significant but when you consider that nearly one half of the Gospels are devoted to the last seven days of Jesus life, you then understand significance of this

Hungry one morning Jesus stops by a fig tree and finds no figs. He withers the tree because it is producing no fruit. Jesus demands fruitful committed lives.

A Parable is told: Who is more committed? The son who says, "I will work" and then does not or the son who says, "I will not work," repents, and gets the work done? It is the son who does the work.

The greatest commandment is given: Love God and love your neighbor; a call to commitment.

A preacher talking to a group of students who had expressed an interest in the ministry. When asked how many of them were definitely committed to going into the parish ministry, only one raised their hand. "I have a problem with your use of the word commitment. That sounds very binding and restricting."

Our concept of consumerism has crept into the church. To recruit persons and to be marketable we think that we need to be able to say: "Look what our church can offer you." In this atmosphere of a sorority rush party, talk of discipleship is muted. Discipleship means knowing who Jesus Christ is and following the revelation made known to us in his teaching, death, resurrection, and presence. Commitment means after the shouts of Hosanna we walk to Golgotha carrying his cross of suffering.

I would suggest to you that when that rich young ruler walked away sorrowfully that day, he was not the only one. I think that it is safe to assume that a host of uncommitted people also walked away. Jesus was no longer talking only grace. He was now speaking about the other side of religion--obligation. He began to talk about the obligation that rests with a person who has accepted God's grace. The cheering began to stop when Jesus began to speak of commitment.

Jesus dared to suggest that all people are worth loving. Now look what happens on Palm Sunday. Jesus goes to the temple and drives the moneychangers out. After the temple has been emptied, however, he then invites in the lame, the poor, the sick, the outcasts of society (in Matthew). He dares to bring into the church those whom we would refer to today as street people. Why Jesus, that is not the way to win friends and influence people. Don't you know that? The ones who are constantly making reference to Jesus' Messiahship are the disenfranchised of society. On the way to the capital city a poor blind beggar cries out: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." And what was the response of the crowd? They rebuked him and told him to shut up.

Then Jesus makes his triumphant entry into the city and there are shouts of Hosanna, blessed be the son of David. But look who it is in the temple court that is yelling out this proclamation: We are told that it is none other than the children (Mathew 21). It is the children who are getting under the skin of the Pharisees. They ask Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying? Are you going to allow this Jesus? Do you not deny this?" Jesus says: If I tried to quiet them the very stones would still scream it out.

The children - a wonderful story of an incident that occurred during the Special Olympics. Nine children lined up for the 100-yard dash. The gun sounded and the race was off. But only a few yards into the race, one of the children fell and began to cry. For some reason these challenged

children did not understand the world's concept of competition and getting ahead and taking advantage when a competitor was down. The other eight children stopped running and came back to their fallen comrade. A young girl with Down's syndrome kissed him and brushed him off. The children lifted him up together, arm in arm; they ran over the finish line. For a fleeting moment these children showed us what the Kingdom of God is like. They challenged the world's concept that first place is everything. In the race that we're in everyone matters particularly those who have fallen and are on the outside. Why did the cheering stop? Because on Palm Sunday, Jesus opened the doors of the church to everyone. It angered some people then, and it angers some people today.

I would suggest to you that the cheering stopped because Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross. In the early part of his ministry Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God. This they wanted to hear about, but increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice-even giving up your life.

Playing baseball, a little boy stood at the plate and saw his coach give the signal to sacrifice bunt. The boy promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach said: Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice? Yes, the boy replied. But I didn't really think that you meant it. Isn't that what we say to God? Yes, Lord, I heard that talk about sacrifice and commitment but I didn't think you meant it. Let those who have ears, hear!

