

## **What the Palms Are All About**

**A Sermon by Rich Holmes**

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One Sunday morning when I was a kid, I remember my brother King and I woke up, came downstairs to eat breakfast, and as we cleaned our plates my mother, I recall said to us as she did every Sunday, “Hurry up now and get dressed. We don’t want to be late for church.” And as usual, I remember this command met with some protest as the two of us said in unison, “Can’t we just go back to bed and skip church this morning?”

“Oh no. We can’t possibly skip church today boys. Today, after all, is Palm Sunday.”

“What is Palm Sunday?” we said.

We had heard of Christmas, we had heard of Easter, but what on earth was Palm Sunday? Today, the title of my sermon is *What the Palms All About*. What are the palms all about?

Well, before I answer that question, I have to confess something to you. Most of the time when I am preaching I write a sermon and then come up with a title. But every now and then I do what I’m not supposed to do and that is I come up with a title for a sermon before I have a sermon at all—and that is what I did this week. I had the title *What the Palms Are All About* before I had any idea how I would answer that question. But as the week went by and I thought about what Palm Sunday has meant to me for most of my life, (or at least for my life ever since that first Palm Sunday when I didn’t know why I had to go to church), it occurred to me that for most of my life, Palm Sunday has been all about indecision and fickleness. For most of my life, you see, on Palm Sunday someone would stand behind a pulpit, someone wearing a long robe like mine and they would tell the story about how on the Sunday before Easter as Jesus was entering Jerusalem, the crowds lined the road and waved palm branches in the air to

welcome Jesus as a conquering king a triumphant king—welcoming him with shouts of “Hosanna! Hosanna!” And then as the story went on, I was told that five short days later those same crowds who shouted “Hosanna! Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday were now shouting “Crucify him! Crucify him!” on Good Friday. I was told that these fickle, indecisive crowds who loved Jesus so much on Palm Sunday quickly changed their minds, and the sermon usually ended with the guy in the robe wagging his finger at me and saying, “Don’t you be fickle like them. Don’t be indecisive like them. Commit your life to Jesus.”

Well, I think being fickle and indecisive are things that we should certainly watch out for. Changing your mind all the time at least when it comes to things that are important shows shallowness. It shows that you are a shallow person. When I was beginning my ministry, I can remember I was counseling a couple who wanted me to officiate their wedding, and they had both had a track record of several marriages none of which lasted for more than a year. I said to them “Now are you serious about each other, are you committed to each other, when you say those vows ‘For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer’ do you know what these vows mean?”

“Oh yes, preacher, oh yes. This time we mean it.” Yeah, right. Six months later they were divorced. That’s shallow. If you constantly change your mind about things that matter in life, you are shallow. If you constantly change your mind about your commitment to our Lord you are shallow.

But while that is bad, I’ll let you in on a little secret. This fickle changing of minds has nothing to do with Palm Sunday. In the first place, I think I have told you before that I don’t know that the crowd who was praising Jesus on Sunday was really the same exact crowd as those people who were cursing him on Friday. I have my doubts about that. But let’s just say

that they were. For the sake of argument, let's just say that they were. Why would those who shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday shout "Crucify him!" five days later? It is not because they were fickle. It is not because they changed their minds.

But before I tell you why I think that, I want to ask you something. I wonder if this has ever happened to you. You are at a party somewhere and someone tells a joke, and everyone laughs everyone that is except for you. Things then get a bit uncomfortable because everyone turns and looks at you and they wonder why you aren't laughing, and you rather sheepishly say, "I'm sorry, but I don't get it. I don't get the joke."

Well, then someone in that crowd is kind enough to explain the joke to you. But there's a problem. Even now that they've explained the joke to you, you still don't laugh. Well, the crowd of people who all laughed heartily at the joke is sure that you are not laughing because you still don't get it, so someone else tries explaining it to you because they think you still don't understand, and then you say, "No I understand the joke, I just don't think it's funny." But of course you don't think it's funny. If you explain a joke, as everyone should know, it isn't funny anymore. If you didn't laugh the first time you heard it, it's too late. Explaining the joke is not going to help you laugh.

Now, lest what I am about to say be misunderstood, let me assure you that I do not think there is anything funny about the gospel and there is certainly nothing funny about Jesus' journey to the cross that began this Sunday. There is nothing funny about it at all. But I will also tell you that in my mind the gospel is *like* a joke in that you either get it or you don't. You either get it or you don't and if it was indeed the same people who shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday who shouted "Crucify Him!" on Friday, it was not because by Friday they had changed their

minds, it is because on Sunday they didn't get it. They didn't get it. They did not get that the kind of triumph and conquest that our Lord was all about was not the triumph and conquest of ordinary kings and ordinary emperors. They did not get that crown that he would wear would not be a crown of diamonds and rubies and sapphires, but a crown of thorns that dug deep into his flesh. They did not get that his coronation would involve people clothing him in purple and bowing down to him not to honor him and to glorify him but to mock him, to humiliate him. They didn't even get it when it was right before their eyes as he rode into town not on a warhorse, but on a sad, pathetic little colt and a borrowed colt at that.

They didn't change their minds. Yes, I know people can change their minds all the time and I know that people can be fickle. But changing your mind has nothing to do with Palm Sunday. They didn't change their minds because they didn't understand what they were shouting "Hosanna!" for in the first place. They didn't get it.

And when you don't get it, explaining it will not help. Jesus had tried to tell even his own disciples again and again but to no end. He said "The Son of Man will be rejected by the chief priests and elders and be crucified and after three days rise again," but they too did not get it. They too would abandon him, deny him, betray him.

Well, I don't know what you think, but I think that on this Palm Sunday, 2000 years later, there are still plenty of people in this world who don't get it. And I don't just mean that there are plenty of people in this world who don't believe the gospel, although that is certainly true, but what I mean is that there are still plenty of people in the world whom you could ask "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" And they will say "Yes". And you can ask them "Are you a Christian?" "Yes." But they still don't get it.

Now, you may say to me, “Rich, just who are these people who you think don’t get it? Are you going to name names, are you going to say where they are or what exactly they believe or what exactly they do. Who do you have in mind?” Well, you know what, I don’t know that I have anyone in particular in mind, really. I don’t think it is my place to judge anyone. Maybe the people who don’t get in, as a matter of fact are us. But ask yourself this. Take a minute to imagine this, if you would.

Imagine that someone, some alien were to come to this planet from some other world and they were to land in your backyard in their flying saucer. Remarkably they also speak English but they hadn’t heard of anything that we believed and they didn’t know anything about what people in our society believe, and so they say to you, “My friend, what do you believe?”

You say to the alien, “Well, I am a Christian.” After all, you can’t imagine trying to explain to an alien what a Presbyterian is, so you say “I am a Christian.” He says, “What is that?” And you say “Well, we worship someone named Jesus Christ.” And he says, “Oh, well, who is this Jesus Christ?” And so you say to this alien visitor, “Well, my friend let me just whip out a bible that I have in my back pocket and I will show you all the stories about Jesus and all the things the bible says about Jesus.” But the alien is not interested in any of that. You see, although this alien can speak English he can’t read our alphabet and neither did you have a translation of the bible for his alphabet. Well, you find this a little bit frustrating, of course. After all here was someone asking you about Jesus Christ, not someone for whom you had to go through the uncomfortable work of sharing your faith with out of the blue and if you could just show him a bible maybe he could go back home and share the message of the gospel with everyone back on his own planet, but alas, you don’t have a bible that he can understand. But the alien

suddenly has an idea. He says, “I’ll tell you what you can do for me, my friend. Why don’t you take me to your church and I’ll meet all the people there, and you can take me to all the churches in your community and you can take me to churches all across this country and I will see how you Christians treat each other? You can take me to your session meetings, and you can show me your church budgets and how you spend your money, and you can take me to all your Christian homes and I can see how they live, and from doing all this, I will find out who this Jesus is. From all this, I will know who this Jesus is.

If the alien did this, what impression would he form of this Jesus? Who would Jesus be to him? Would he be the kind of person who comes riding through the gates of Jerusalem riding on a colt or a warhorse? Would he be the kind of person who comes to claim a crown of diamonds rubies and sapphires or a crown of thorns? Would he be the kind of king who claims a throne of velvet and gold or the throne of a cross?

“What a silly little story, Pastor Rich,” you might say. “Who cares about aliens?” Yes, indeed, who cares about aliens? But aren’t we the only bible most people will ever read? Aren’t we the only statement of faith that most people will ever read? And so my question is do we get it? Do we get it?