

## “Time To Decide”

It's Palm Sunday. Jesus rides into Jerusalem. People spontaneously spread their outer garments and leafy branches in His path. All of this is a sign of honor on their part. They shout, "Hosanna," which means "save now"! "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" What they are shouting indicates that they see Jesus as a *King* – the “Messiah” or anointed one God was sending to deliver the Jews from their enemies.

Palm Sunday is one of great days of the Christian Church. But, in spite of that, frankly often I have found it difficult to know what to preach about on Palm Sunday! There have been years when I hoped the choir might have a special musical program that day so I would not have to preach!

What's the message here, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, only to be crucified 5 days later? One of my Christian heroes was Bishop Gerald Kennedy, a bishop in the Methodist Church. I take some comfort in that he began a Palm Sunday sermon by confessing that Palm Sunday was always somewhat of a puzzle to him! What's the day supposed to signify, he asks? Is it simply a reminder that people who shout hosanna on one day will be shouting crucify him a few days later? Is it to celebrate the instability of people and the unreliability of the crowd? Bishop Kennedy goes on to say it came to him that this is a day reminding us of the necessity for decision. It was the day Jesus made clear who He was and proclaimed it publicly. People had to accept Him or deny Him now – and on their decision rested the issues of life and death. I think Bishop Kennedy was right.

Up to this point Jesus kept very *quiet* about His being the Messiah. But now Jesus rides openly into Jerusalem as a *King* – accepting the praise and adulation of the crowd. *Don't let the fact that He rode in on a donkey fool you!* We tend to laugh at donkeys as funny looking, dumb animals. One Palm Sunday in the church I pastored we borrowed a live donkey for the morning, and after the worship service a number of congregants walked through the streets of our little town, along with the donkey. It was a cool event! The donkey made funny noises every once in a while (donkey talk, no doubt). At times he got a bit testy, a bit frisky! But it was a special morning for us in that congregation.

*Remember that kings rode donkeys.* Jesus planned it that He would ride a donkey into Jerusalem as a King, a King who was coming in *lowliness, and peace* – representing a different kind of kingdom. This act would fulfill a prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble, and riding on a donkey.” Rather than *walking* into Jerusalem, or standing up on a platform and saying, "I have a speech I'd like to deliver", Jesus chose this very visible, public *action* to announce who He was. And people had to *decide*: to say yes to Him and His claims, or to say no.

***There is a certain peril in indecisiveness.*** There are some people who develop *symptoms of physical illness*...a lump somewhere on their body, or numbness, or shortness of breath...but they can't decide whether or not to see a doctor (often in spite of the urging of family or friends).

We all probably know of people who just couldn't make up their mind whether or not to get their symptoms checked out, and then wound up checking out of this world because of it.

Some people *hate their jobs*. They talk about looking for a job more satisfying, or perhaps going back to school to train for a new career. But somehow they can't quite decide – until their opportunities are lost, and they never do get out of their vocational rut. When I was thirty years old, I was a pastor, and I was miserable. I wasn't sure this is what God wanted me to do with my life. I thought about getting a “normal job”. It was a huge decision - I wasn't trained for any other career, I had only been married several years and we had a young child. But I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life not being sure, and hating what I was doing. So I left that church, got a job in the trust department of a bank, and within six months I got new perspective on things. I came back into pastoral ministry with a new enthusiasm for the work. And I have never regretted making that decision to leave and test the waters elsewhere.

The President of the Carnegie Foundation, talking about how *businesses* need to make tough choices when faced with problems, once remarked how it easy for large businesses to come out with an *enlarged edition of the rulebook* whenever there was a problem, instead of making the sometimes painful decisions that had to be made!

*Churches* can major in indecisiveness. I think back to numerous church meetings where we would talk about an issue for two or three or four meetings in a row, and never make a decision on it. I remember in one church where an important decision had to be made. The leaders of the church were forever discussing what to do, but wavered back and forth and couldn't decide to act. One of the leaders came to me and said, “Harry, I wish we'd do *something*. Even if it's the *wrong thing* to do, let's do *something!*”

Bishop Kennedy (in his Palm Sunday sermon) told of following a pastor who was easily the most popular pastor he ever knew. Nowhere did he find anyone with a harsh word against their former pastor. He was beloved by everyone. Once in a while someone would say apologetically that he had a hard time making up his mind, but their comments were made lovingly and with no hint of criticism. Yet Bishop Kennedy says he never followed a man in a church who had made more of a mess of things. Decisions that should have been made years ago had been pushed into a corner. Issues that needed to be settled for the good of the church had been ignored. Now everything fell into his lap!

Perhaps my favorite image of indecision is that of one or two of the dogs we've had. Our dog is eating at its dish. You know how some dogs can be totally focused on their food dish as they eat. Then, the door rings. Fido wants to bark at whoever's at the door, so he starts to bark then remembers his food. Back to the food, but then his mind flits back to the doorbell, and maybe he'll start to run towards the door, but he can't leave his food. So back he goes to the food dish, and his desires are tied up in knots. Food or doorbell, back and forth.

***Life is full of choices. Sometimes we are pressed to make decisions.*** A man was filling out an application for a job in a factory. He struggled for some time over this question, “Person to

notify in case of accident”. Finally, he wrote down, “Anybody in sight!” When there is a crisis, never mind the fine points - go right to the heart of the problem!

There are many major decisions in life that kind of prod us into settling on a choice. Shall I get married or stay single? Whom shall I marry? What kind of career should I choose? Where will I live? ***But there’s one decision we make which is more important than any of these, and that is: What will I decide about Jesus the Christ?***

Isn’t that what Jesus was trying to get across on Palm Sunday? “This is who I am; you’ve got to decide about Me.” *Many of us would like to do away with this part of the gospel message if we could.* We hate to be put into a corner where we have to say yes or no. We prefer a faith that just encourages us and quiets our fears. But the gospel will have nothing to do with this soft religion. It confronts us with the unavoidable choice of either accepting Jesus as King and Master of our lives, or denying Jesus and going our own way. Do you sense the urgency here? Have you made your decision to say “yes” to Christ?

***Now on the surface, it might seem as though this sermon is unnecessary.*** You may be thinking, “Harry, you’re talking to *Christians* here. We come to church. All of us have said “yes” to Jesus, or we wouldn’t be here. You need to preach this sermon to the people out there who aren’t Christians.” Well, maybe I do. But I learned a long time ago that just because people come to church doesn’t mean they’ve gotten really serious about Jesus and said yes to Him!

When I was a teenager, I had a Sunday School teacher who was a nice man, active in the church, he sang in the choir, taught us kids in Sunday School. One evening, when we had special evangelistic services at the church, he went to the altar and gave his life to Christ. I was surprised! I had thought he already *was* a follower of Jesus. But he had never really said “Yes” to Christ! Afterwards, I talked to him about it. I told him how glad I was that he had made that decision. His response was, "It's about time!"

Maybe there is someone here today...you’ve taken the vows of church membership...perhaps you are serving in the church in one way or other...but you have never taken that definitive step to turn your life and will over to the Lord, to make Jesus your Savior and Master.

***Each of us has to decide what we will do with Christ and His claims.*** Jesus said some outlandish things about Himself! He said, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). He claimed oneness with God. He said that He is the only way to a relationship with God: “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The Bible says of Jesus, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12). Either Jesus is telling the truth, and is all He said He is, or He was a liar, or a fraud, or a kook, or mentally ill!

We’ve got to decide! And what we decide determines whether we have God in our life now, and whether or not we live with God forever.

*If never surrendered life and will to Christ, would you decide to do that now?*

I know that many of you here have at some point in your life, made a decision to be a follower of Jesus, and I thank God for your commitment to Him. ***But, I think there is a sense in which we have to decide for Christ again and again.***

Every day we are faced with things that can pull us away from Christ. It can be the evil things that can get into our lives and get a grip on us. It can be the demands and stresses of daily living - our work, family obligations, commitments - that can squeeze Christ out. It can be the disappointments or hardships that cause us to doubt God. So, being a real Christian is a matter of saying "yes" to Christ so that we can *begin* the Christian life – but saying "yes" to Him over and over again.

***I would guess there are some here who have drifted away from Christ.*** Oh, you come to church. You say the right things. You still believe. But you know in your heart your desire for Christ is at a low ebb - and even though you say you're a Christian, your life is no different from others who do not profess Christ. Truthfully, there have been periods in my life when I have drifted away - grown cold in my faith and commitment - *and had to decide again* to be devoted follower of Christ. Many times I've prayed from the heart these words of a George Matheson hymn:

"O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe, that in thin ocean depths its flow may richer,  
fuller be."

My wife Nancy sometimes gets frustrated with me when we go shopping together. I have a hard time making up my mind. I can look at a \$60 sweater on sale for \$8, and I'll go back and forth in my mind - should I buy it, or not? Do I need it? Will it come down in price? Often I will say no - then get home, and kick myself for not getting it - and maybe drive back to the store and buy it. I think I'm a smart, deliberate shopper. Nancy just thinks I'm crazy and a pain in the neck. But even though I have trouble making up my mind when I go shopping, I am thankful that when it comes to the most important decision of life, I was not indecisive! When I was a teenager, I made a decision to surrender my life and will to Christ, and I've never once regretted that decision.

Now some people - maybe some of us - don't say no to Jesus. We never consciously reject Him. But neither do we say a heartfelt Yes! We never do get around to a decision. Life somehow slips by, and many people never even think much about the Lord and His claims. But avoiding the choice is the same as saying "no"! It's kind of like the old story of the mule who, placed between two bales of hay, couldn't decide which one to eat from. So he starved to death.

So there you have it. Palm Sunday. Jesus rides openly into Jerusalem as a King, as the Messiah. He was saying to people back then, and saying to us here today, "Here I am! Now what are you going to do with Me and my claims?"

