

Mathew 21:1-11

WHO CAN THIS BE?

A sad, but probably unavoidable, thing about what happens when a group of people act with a mob mentality, is that they pretty much always get it wrong. I don't know about you, but when I think about it, it's hard to think of a time when a group of people who are stirred up over a particular event or issue, and who come together to stir one another on, pushing one another to higher degrees of celebration or indignation, depending on what they have gathered around, it's hard to think of a time when a group like this ended up making a right decision. Mobs tend to appoint people to leadership who end up being good at stirring up a mob, but not so good at ongoing leadership. A mob that gathers to act against racism can act in a more racist manner than the people they are protesting against. And as for a vigilante mob that gathers to mete out justice, we know sadly that they can commit injustices as bad or worse than those they are claiming to act against. Sadly, it seems that, more often than not, when people gather together around issues which raise emotions, and mob mentality takes over as we egg each other on, we don't see the full picture and so we pretty much always get it wrong.

On this day when we think of the mob mentality at work we think of the crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It seems like it was a real festival event. So many people came to see this happening, in fact Matthew tells us here that everyone in the city was excited. While some people who were there on that day would have known who Jesus is, many others would have only heard of Him a bit, and some probably not at all, so as the crowd gathers and builds they excitedly ask, 'Who can this be?' In other words, 'yes, we are waving palm branches and singing with rest of them, but we don't really know why!'

So, who was in the crowd that day? First of all, we know the disciples were there, those who were closest to Jesus. This group of 12 had been with Jesus for the past three years; hearing His teachings, seeing His miracles, knowing who He is a person. And, even though Jesus had spoken about having to suffer and die, as He now enters Jerusalem cheered on and welcomed by the mob, albeit He comes on humble donkey, at least some if not all of them probably thought; 'this is it! No way will He have to die now, but instead He can lead the revolution

to overthrow the Romans and bring in God's kingdom.' They were seeing the situation they were in right now, but not the full picture.

There also would have been others who knew Jesus, to varying degrees. Palm Sunday occurs not long after and not far away from the miracle Jesus performed in raising Lazarus. Undoubtedly there would have been people welcoming Him into Jerusalem who were following Him around waiting to see another miracle performed. Add to this others He had spoken to, ate with, or who had seen or heard of His teachings and miracles. A lot of people who knew enough to know that Jesus was special, out of the ordinary, but again were not seeing the full picture.

And then, without doubt, as with any mob, there would have been those who had no idea what was going on, but saw they saw a crowd forming so they joined in the for the fun of it all, shouting and singing what they were hearing around them. All they knew was that the man riding the donkey must be someone, so let's join in the fun and later we can tell people we were there. These are the people who really weren't seeing very much of the picture at all.

There was also a group there who probably knew as much or more as any of the others, but instead of that turning them towards the man on the donkey, it turned their hearts away from Him. They would have been watching in silent anger on this day, but a few days later they would be stirring up a different mob, one that probably contained many of the same people, to have this man put to death. This group is of course the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. While they knew a lot about Jesus, they chose to look at what they did know as being a threat to them, rather than a blessing, and they too, sadly, still didn't see the full picture.

'Who can this be?' is the question the people of the city asked the crowd who was welcoming Jesus. And the answer which came? "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (v.11) As an answer, it's not wrong, but it's far from complete. Jesus was a prophet, a messenger from God, and looking at Him entering Jerusalem on a humble donkey it's easy to see why people would accept this description as fitting Him well. But merely seeing Jesus as a prophet, or as a good, or even great, man, is to not see the full picture. To see the full picture, to really know who Jesus is, we need to look up to see the cross which He came to die on for our sins, and the empty tomb beyond that which guarantees us the new life God offers us through Him. There we see the

One who came to be the King, the Saviour, the friend, for all people. And then, to be able to really answer our question properly, we can also look back to the promises God made to send a Messiah, a Saviour, for all His people, and see how in the One who now humbly enters the city on a donkey these promises will now all come true. To see the full picture of not just how on this day Jesus entered Jerusalem, but what He would go through over the next week, enables us to not just answer the question of ‘Who can this be?’, but also, ‘Who is He for me?’

It’s a question which is still there for all people, including us, to answer today. Who is Jesus for us? What are some of the answers which people give, which we might sometimes give? In many ways the answer given here, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee”, is one that a lot of people would probably be comfortable with. It makes Jesus very human, but a good and influential person. That’s easy enough to accept. I am currently rereading the book *The Robe*. It’s written by Lloyd Douglas (there is a movie also), and tells the fictional story of the Roman officer who was in charge of Jesus’ crucifixion, and who supposedly won Jesus’ robe in the game of dice the Roman soldiers played for it at the foot of His cross. The experience of being in charge of the crucifixion of someone who was not only obviously innocent, but also a very good person, profoundly affected this Roman officer. After a time of going through what we would today call mental illness, He returned to Israel about a year after Jesus’ death to talk with people who had seen and known Him well, to try and discover what sort of man He was. The accounts of Jesus being a good man, someone who made everyone feel better about themselves, etc, this officer had no problems accepting. But when they started talking about water being turned into wine, people being healed, then He started to look for logical explanations. And finally, when people told Him Jesus had risen from the dead He found that really hard to accept, ‘I was there’, he said, ‘I saw Him die’. To talk about someone being a good person gives us someone to admire. To talk about someone performing miracles makes us sceptical, and causes us to question how much the mob mentality has come into play. To talk about someone coming back to life can be confronting because it not only affects events which happened back then, but also has a bearing on my life today.

Who can this be? We find our answer to this question in the cross of Good Friday, and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday; that is our complete picture. This shows us that Jesus is the King who came to die for His people, but then to rise again so that all who believe in Him will also have new life. Who can this be? The One who

forgives my sins, fully, completely, whenever I come to Him knowing my need for His forgiveness. Who can this be? The One who gives me strength, gives me guidance, gives me comfort in the things I go through in life, both those which He helps me fix up, and also those I have to live and grow through. Who can this be? God's Son, our Saviour, who promises us that in death we have life; that we do have the promise of new life with Him forever, but that we also have new life now, the life lived in His love, His peace, knowing His joy and hope. The One who doesn't take from our life, but who gives us more than we can hope for.

Is there anything stopping you from answering this question in full, any part of the picture you have problems seeing, even sometimes? Are there things about this you find it hard to accept? Don't be too hard on yourself about that, it's not unusual. Things you think or know you will have to let go of but are finding it too hard to do so? Consider what they will be replaced with. Struggles or doubts you feel you have to deal with before you can really answer this question? Instead of dealing with them yourself, bring them to Him. Look at the humble man, the King, on the donkey, but look up also to the cross where God's love for each one of us is shown.

Who can this be? In the next seven days, as we go through again the events of Holy week, we will again be answering this question for ourselves, often probably without even thinking of it. Knowing the full picture of God's love for us in Jesus, rather than be pulled along by ill-informed mob mentality we can make the confession with both our words and our lives: This is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Our Saviour. Our King. Our Lord. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Think of large groups of people which you have been a part of which have gathered together in either celebration or indignation, or perhaps ones you have seen on the news? What kinds of decisions do these groups normally make in deciding their actions: accurate and well-informed? Or emotional and missing the truth?
- How do you go with seeing the full picture of who Jesus is for us? Are there any parts you struggle to see fully? Any aspects of God's love for us, and perhaps how it relates to you, which you struggle with? Bring these to God, asking for His help and guidance in seeing the full picture of His love for us in Jesus.
- As we approach the Easter story over the next seven days, take time to reflect on the events which are coming up. Maybe read an account of these events in one of the four Gospels. What do we learn about God's love for us, all that Jesus did and accomplished for us, and what these all mean in our lives from these events?

Pray: thank God that in Jesus He shows us the full picture of His love for us. As we celebrate all the events of Easter ask Him to help us to see who Jesus is for us today.

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