

“Palms and Plague?”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 4/05/2020

Text: Mark 11:7-11 and Romans 11:25-32 at FBC of Newport, NH

//7 And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. 8 And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. 9 And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”

11 And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.//

—Mark 11:7-11 (ESV)

So, we’re going from Psalms to Palms today. Today is Palm Sunday. It marks the beginning of Holy Week, which is the main focus of each of the four Gospels. One could even say it’s the focus of the entire New Testament as it culminates in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This day is festive. It’s marked by the waving of palm branches and the picture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey as a sign of his coming in peace to the capital city of Israel as her King. But the day is also ominous. Most people don’t know what’s coming. Nevertheless there’s a terrible storm on the horizon. You get a hint of this by seeing Jesus go immediately to check out the temple. Because the very next day he returns in anger. He upturns the tables and drives out the animals in a kind of “lower-case” judgment day against the wickedness there. And that is just the start. By the end of that holy week, the Jewish world is going to go dark with one of the worst possible events in the history of Israel. They will put to death their own Messiah, the Son of God, their Savior!

How, in God’s precious name, can such a week as that be called “Holy”?

And though Jesus will rise on the third day, the nation of Israel itself will go from bad to worse. She will not find peace, not with God nor with the world. She will go to war with Rome and lose badly. Then she will go into exile for two thousand years. Israel will find herself at odds against her own God.

So, don’t be fooled by Palm Sunday’s outward appearance of festivity and welcome. There was a virus in the air of that day just as there’s one going around in our day. It’s a beautiful spring day. The grass is even starting to turn green. But there’s an invisible threat in the midst of it all. And we need to see it for what it is.

Isn’t that one of the most frustrating things about the Coronavirus right now? Not knowing who has that virus. Not being able to see it. For a while people didn’t even really believe in it. Even experts were saying it would never be much of a problem much beyond China itself. And now it’s knocking at our doors.

But I have a strange question for you: Would Jesus be more like the cure?

(Assuming a cure comes along.) Or would he be like the COVID-19 virus itself? The biblical answer is *both*. Listen to this from Romans 11.

22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. —Romans 11:22-23

I can't do this passage justice. I encourage you to read the context. But let me use it for background at least, for what comes next.

Of course, Jesus is kind. He is like the cure. He is the Healer. He is the great Physician, the Savior. We could go into great lengths comparing the power of his shed blood to that of a vaccine. It is he alone who would have the 'antibodies' that overcome the troubles of the world. Now he offers a vaccine to anyone who would believe and receive it. But in this case it is a vaccine against sin and even death itself. Can you imagine that? What a cure!

But there's more to the picture than that. There is also severity.

I don't want to say Jesus is like the virus itself, for I believe the virus is like leprosy, a symbol, or close relative, of sin itself. But here are some things about this modern day plague which strikes me as also being like the Son of God in so far as he *is* after all: God. And God is holy. And there can be deadly consequences for those who ignore him or approach him foolishly.

First of all, this is no respecter of persons. This virus doesn't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat, a good person or bad. It doesn't care whether you believe in it or not. If you fail to follow the rules of clothing and washings and separations, not to mention the common sense rule of "don't lick the toilet seat," you will become sick. Even deathly sick.

This is pretty much what is meant in Romans 2:11 when Paul says God is no respecter of persons. God is just. God is good. He is righteous and holy. And no one can come into his presence and live unless they themselves have the proper clothing and purity of heart fitting for an audience with God. We forget this truth about God. We skip right over it and think God will skip over our sins on the basis of *our* personality and character. But it's the quality of Christ that we need. And if we don't have it, then it will be the condemnation of Christ that we will receive. Regardless of who we are.

The good news is this: though God is no respecter of persons and his holiness can separate us like a virus plague, God does respect his Son uniquely, as any father does. And instead of a thousand rules for hand washings, food washings and social distancing, Jesus brings us just one rule: Respect Him in your heart of hearts. Approach him in humility and call upon him as the Lord of lords. And he will hear you. He will not infect you like a virus. He will love you and cure you of all your ills. Those who refuse, will indeed see God as severe, like a plague. But those who respect him, receiving him for who he is, will see kindness that's contagious.