

PALM SUNDAY

As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen. Luke 19: 37, 38

A banner day in Jerusalem - the crowd all celebratory and happy, cheering and singing and praying. Everybody loves a parade! Especially as they are believing, at least for one bright shining moment, that they are all on the road to glory. Believing that their hopes and grandiose dreams are about to be fulfilled. Believing that Jesus is going to usher in a victory, and age of triumph and splendor for the sons and daughters of Abraham.

But what about Jesus? How's he feeling? What does he know, that everyone else doesn't know?

One of the great debates in New Testament scholarship is this: what does Jesus know, and when does he know it? Does he know that he is the Son of God, whatever that may mean? Does he ever say so, or do the gospelists put that claim into his mouth because that's what they believe, that's what *they* need him to know? Does he foresee in "what way he is to die"?

One thing he knows for sure: things are not going to turn out the way this crowd is vainly, crazily hoping they will. How could they, possibly? He has no army, no money, no worldly power or privilege. And he knows, certainly, that he is courting mortal danger by his increasingly provocative challenges to the ruling authorities, both religious and civil. His very visibility and celebrity at this moment increase his vulnerability exponentially.

This ebullient crowd is shortly to see their hopes dashed. Nothing they now envision will come to pass. And so Jesus knows that this parade is, in fact, a charade.

How many of us have ever felt that we were operating under false pretenses? Indeed, who among us has not, at one time or another? Many of you have told me about your feelings of fraudulence –that people believe you are something you are not.

And that's a deep-rooted fear in many of us, I believe: that we are fakes, that we are phonies, that we are going to be exposed, that everyone who has placed faith in us will be disappointed and disillusioned, while those who have not wished us well will delight in and mock the stripping of our pretenses.

And it's a lonely, lonely fear, regardless of how much people may reassure us. We know ourselves better than they do! We know how inadequate we are, and how bogus.

And Jesus has no one to reassure him. No one with whom to share his dark and certain knowledge that the victory everyone's celebrating here – celebrating prematurely and fatally – is about to fail catastrophically and grotesquely. Could anyone be lonelier?

And there's something else, too. Jesus may or may not be able to see the future in absolute terms. But he's been around long enough, in public long enough, to understand the fickleness of crowds, and the potential ugliness of mob mentality.

It is this same throng, I imagine, who in a few short days will be shouting: *Give us Barabbas!* Will be yelling *Crucify him, Crucify him!* How quickly, how devastatingly, their mood turns.

We don't read the Passion Narrative on Palm Sunday here. I stopped the practice a few years ago; it was too much, it seemed to me, for one liturgy, and it allows us to hear the Passion for the first time on Good Friday. And I also thought that the roller-coaster emotions were overwhelming – going right from the exhilaration of the majestic entrance into Jerusalem to the grisly sorrow of the crucifixion.

But I begin to understand the wisdom of the combination. Because, as I've just said– it's the same crowd. Or might as well be. And to go reeling from the triumph of the procession of the Palms to the dark night of betrayal and death is a stark reenactment of Jesus' own experience, and a reminder, as well, of how mortally capricious crowds can be.

And the lesson of these two mob scenes is this: we are they. It may be tempting to think, *not so*. We have heard, in the final days and hours of the battle in Congress over health care insurance reform, appalling stories of hateful misbehavior from members of the crowds gathered in D.C.: racial and homophobic epithets hurled at lawmakers, one Congressman shouting "baby killer" at another on the House floor.

We think: *but that's not us*. We would *never do that, never act that way*. But can we be so sure? Are we confident in our righteousness, certain that we would always take the high road?

For myself, not so much. To believe that I could never, under any circumstances, descend to such depths of hateful name-calling is to deceive myself. I know how often my tongue smarts from being bitten, hard.

So here are two take-aways for me, this Palm Sunday, as we enter together into the holiest week of the year.

The fickleness of the crowd, and the harsh reminder that I am, or easily could be, one of them.

And the loneliness, the unimaginable loneliness, of Jesus.

Amen