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April 13, 2019

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Palm Sunday

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Luke 19:28-40 (procession)

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalms 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Luke 22:14-23:56

The celebration of Palm Sunday summarizes the drama we will memorialize for the next seven days. The week we call holy invites us to enter into the heart of our faith with our heads and hearts and feet. We will listen to the stories, feel the mix of emotions and walk the stations that recall the final week of Jesus' life on Earth.

One way we might approach this week is through the vantage point of the three crowds Luke describes. Their diverse responses to Jesus have been repeated through the ages and probably in our own lives.

Pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem (the Holy City) for the feast of Passover were the majority of the first crowd. They were a diverse group: some more pious than others, some experts in the traditions and others who had barely heard the stories. Then Jesus, the popular prophet, appeared among them, not on pilgrim's feet, but riding a foal and thus fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah: "Behold: your king is coming to you, a just savior is he, humble, and riding on a donkey."

As soon as somebody caught on to the symbolism, the excitement spread like wildfire, and suddenly there was a triumphant procession with wildly enthusiastic singing and escalating expressions of homage. The multitude, already in a holiday mood, began to chant a song that echoed the hymn angels sang at Jesus' birth. But this crowd's commitment was about as deep as the individual footprints they left. Although Jesus told the Pharisees that even the stones would join in the blessings, the excitement would fade as soon as the winds of danger blew onto the scene.

The second crowd, the one gathered during Jesus' trial, included the assembly of the religious leaders and an amorphous group called "the people." Some of them may have witnessed Jesus' arrest in the garden. Pilate assembled this group and told them that he had found Jesus innocent of any capital crime, saying he deserved nothing worse than a flogging. But this throng, stoked up to shouting, raucously denounced Jesus and demanded that Pilate release a convicted criminal in his place. Pilate thus handed Jesus over to them.

The third crowd, mentioned only by Luke, followed behind the condemned Jesus. Luke explains that this crowd included many women who wept and performed rituals of mourning. Responding to them, the only group to whom he spoke during the time of his passion, Jesus told them to weep instead for their people and the time to come when only the barren would give thanks.

The people in the first group seemed to consider Jesus a superstar. Like many who can quote much of the Bible and still assiduously avoid its potential to implicate them, they sang their hosannas and marched with exuberance. But when night came, and the star fell, their enthusiasm waned more quickly than the moonlight. Whether or not they eventually joined either of the next two crowds, they quickly quieted their proclamations of faith and retreated into silence about the king who had come in the name of the Lord.



(Mark Bartholomew)

The second crowd might be characterized as complicit bystanders and vociferous collaborators. If they only watched the show at Jesus' arrest, they turned into co-agitators with their hierarchy when facing Pilate. Following the leaders, they demanded the release of a criminal ironically called Barabbas (son of the father). Like Peter who denied Jesus, they repeated their demand three times over. With a primal and inviolable commitment to their own well-being, their affiliations sailed the winds of change as they sang the tune most suited to their purpose.

The third group was the only one to register any sort of protest or grief over what was happening to Jesus. Luke makes it a point to mention three times that these women *followed* Jesus. They followed him on the road at a distance from the cross and when his body was placed in the tomb. They could do little, but he knew they were there. Sometimes presence is the only, and most important, thing someone has to offer.

If we wonder with which crowd we might be identified, we should look at where we find ourselves today. How do we publicly express our "Hosannas" when we are not in a crowd of happy, singing Christians? How often do we end up as complicit bystanders because we avoid speaking an unpopular opinion? Are we willing to appear as weak as the women who could do no more than walk and weep but allowed their presence to speak a potent message of solidarity?

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[Mary M. McGlone is a Sister of St. Joseph currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

Editor's note: *This Sunday Scripture commentary was originally published in [Celebration](#), a comprehensive pastoral resource. To read the full version of the commentary, click [here](#). Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).*

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