

Theme: Ironies of the Passion: “Do You Hear What These Children Are Saying?”

In our Gospel reading for today we read Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. While Matthew’s account doesn’t make it clear, Mark’s Gospel account tells us that the events of our sermon text took place on the next day, Monday of Holy Week:

Matthew 21:12-17 (EHV)

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all those who were selling and buying in the temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. ¹³ He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of robbers!” ¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the experts in the law saw the wonders he performed and heard the children calling out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant. ¹⁶ They said to him, “Do you hear what they are saying?” “Yes,” Jesus told them, “Have you never read, From the lips of little children and nursing babies you have prepared praise?” ¹⁷ He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

A number of years ago when I was a young pastor in the Houston area my family all gathered together at my place for Christmas break. During that vacation we all went out for a hike in a nearby forest. During the hike I accidentally cut my finger on some thorns. It wasn’t a bad cut, but it was bleeding and I’m sure I said, “Ouch!” and quickly pulled my hand back. Well, my oldest niece, who was only about 4 years old at the time asked me what had happened. When I told her that I had cut my finger without hesitation she folded her hands and said with absolute certainty and conviction, “I will pray to Jesus that he helps make your finger better!”

At this point I had been a pastor for almost as long as she had been alive. If you want to stack up the amount of Bible knowledge and religious instruction I had received compared to my little niece it wasn’t even close. And yet, when I hurt my finger who was the first one to think of praying to Jesus for healing? Honestly, the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind until she said it.

Ironic, isn’t it? Irony is an outcome that is the opposite of what you might expect. We wouldn’t expect a little child to teach a preacher of God’s Word a lesson about such a basic matter of faith, and yet that’s exactly what happened! My niece was a good example of what Jesus means when He spoke about us having absolute trust in Jesus and receiving the kingdom of God **“like a little child” (Luke 18:17)**. In fact, incidents like this have happened many other times in the lives of pastors, teachers, and parents. It even happened in the incident we are looking at in our sermon text for this Palm Sunday. Today we will be considering the irony in the question Jesus’ enemies asked: **Do you hear what these children are saying?**

What were these children saying? They were **“calling out in the temple”** the very thing that they heard the crowd say when Jesus entered Jerusalem the day before, on Palm Sunday, words which, no doubt many of them were crying out the day before as they waved their palm branches and spread out their cloaks welcoming Jesus, **“Hosanna to the Son of David!” (v. 15)**.

“Hosanna” is a word that means “save now, we pray.” It came to be used as a word of praise and a welcoming cry for the promised Savior—just like it is today (especially on Palm Sunday. Try counting the number of times we either say or sing, “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday!). The title **“Son of David”** was a name for the promised Messiah who was coming to set God’s people free. The Holy Spirit had moved the hearts of these children to shout these declarations of their faith to Jesus. Wonderful, miraculous words of praise even from children. That’s not ironic. We expect God to work through his Word to change hearts and open

mouths—from the youngest to the oldest of His children. The irony lay in the words and unbelief of the enemies of Jesus. Men who definitely should have known better. Matthew writes, **But when the chief priests and the experts in the law saw the wonders he performed and heard the children calling out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant.** ¹⁶ They said to him, **“Do you hear what they are saying?”** (v. 15-16).

Notice, Matthew writes that these men **“saw the wonders he [Jesus] performed”** (v. 15). What wonders had Jesus performed? Well, obviously the events of Palm Sunday and Jesus’ unusual entry into Jerusalem on a little donkey, while being hailed as King and Savior by the people would qualify as a **“wonder.”** Jesus **“[driving] out all those who were selling and buying in the temple”** (v. 12) with the authority of the Son of God because they were turning God’s temple—**“a house of prayer”**—into **“a den of robbers”** (v. 13). That would certainly qualify as a **“wonder.”** But look at what v. 14 says. It’s a verse that we almost just skip right over in this account, but we shouldn’t! Matthew tells us, **“The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them”** (v. 14). That would definitely qualify as a **“wonder!”** That alone should have made the chief priests and experts of the law join in **“wonder”** with the children and shout their own **“Hosanna to the Son of David!”**

The priests and the teachers of the law were the experts. They spent their days reading the Bible. However, when these things happened just like God promised they would in the Old Testament—when the Savior came—they didn’t recognize Him. They were angry—**“indignant”**—that these children and the crowds who had gathered in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday were claiming Jesus was the Messiah. Children knew their Savior while the theologians didn’t. How ironic, and how sad.

Sadly, this is often the case still today. Some of the most intelligent and well-educated people—even people who claim to be Bible scholars, and religious “experts”—don’t really know who Jesus is or believe that He is the Savior sent to save us from our sins and give us eternal life in heaven with Him through His sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. They scoff at simple, child-like faith in Jesus and reject it as being foolish, simple-minded, and a crutch for those who are too weak to think for themselves. Who are we going to listen to? The so-called “experts,” or Jesus?

Whose example would you like to follow from our text: The “experts,” or the children? **“Do you hear what these children are saying?”** I pray that we do! Jesus’ enemies actually seem to have imagined that Jesus would be embarrassed enough to silence the children. But they failed to understand who Jesus really was and what He had come to do. Jesus replied, **“Yes,” Jesus told them, “Have you never read, From the lips of little children and nursing babies you have prepared praise?”** (v. 16). Jesus not only heard what the children were saying, but He approved of it! This was exactly what God wanted to happen.

Jesus was quoting **Psalm 8:2**. Most Jewish people in Jesus’ day recognized that Psalm 8 is a prophecy about the coming Savior. So when Jesus quoted it, he left his enemies sputtering. That psalm is all about how God the Son would leave his throne of glory and visit us. In this psalm, God taught his people that he treasured the praise of children because it comes from faith in that Savior He would send.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had taught them that only those who have the faith of a child would see the kingdom of heaven. Now he reminded them that it is the faith of a child that brings forth the praise God is looking for. Children take God at his word. When parents, Sunday school teachers, Christian Day school teachers, and pastors teach children that God answers all our prayers and that we should go to Him when we need help, those children take our words to mean exactly what they say. They teach every one of us a lesson about our own faith and trust in Jesus.

So, where can we adults get faith like little children? Only in one place—the Gospel. The Gospel comes to us in the Word and in the Sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper). The message that our Savior died and rose for us and that we are forgiven is the Gospel. From that Gospel comes first a change in our hearts. God gives us faith. Then every time we hear that Gospel message, God renews and strengthens that faith. And through that Gospel comes a change in our lives. God calls forth our praise.

We praise God when we trust Him. We praise God in all the times we turn to Him and ask Him to help us—even when it's as small as a little cut on our finger! We praise God when we lift up our voices and sing to our Savior who has loved us and changed us and made us His own. We praise God in every way we serve Him with our lives. So, let us, praise Him! Praise Him because we are His! The beauty of this lesson is that Jesus reminds us that He Himself is the source of our praise. He ordains praise from our children—and even from us adults. **“Do you hear what these children are saying?”** Yes! Let's join them in their **“Hosannas”** and their songs of praise! Amen.