

DOES SAME DIRECTION MEAN SAME DESTINATION?

Today's Text: Matthew 21: 1- 17

Extracts:

They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee" [Matt. 21: 7-11]

*The 17th FIFA Under-20 World Cup tournament is currently going on [24 September- 16 October 2009] in Egypt, North Africa. Twenty-four nations, ranging from tentative Tahiti to dazzling Brazil, are taking part each apparently with the hope of taking home the World Cup. One of the countries represented is Trinidad & Tobago, a Caribbean twin-island state that I am currently visiting. In its first attempt in 1991, it lost its three preliminary (1st Round) matches and scored no goal. At the same stage in the current tournament, it lost its first two matches but scored two goals. Then came its last game on Thursday, October 1, 2009 against Paraguay. It was a goalless draw, which earned the country one point. When the final whistle blew, the players celebrated as if they had won the Cup! A commentator on a local TV station that aired the match live called it "a turning point!" The following day, the **Daily Express** (the country's mass circulation newspaper) called it a "historic point!"*

Did T & T go to Egypt to merely participate or to attempt to win the tournament? The national celebratory mood for doing better now than in 1991 suggests that T & T, like the other 23 teams, headed in the same direction (Egypt) but was not aiming for or expecting to win the trophy (destination). We do find ourselves in similar situations in life. For example, it is not everyone in the huge congregation in your place of worship that is there for salvation. Look at your school. Is every student who is there for education? Look at your office. Is everyone there for productive work?

In this week's study, multitudes followed Jesus into Jerusalem. Were they there for Him or for themselves? Do you know where the people you are following are going? This study may provoke you to rethink the matter.

1. Background: The ‘Jerusalem Parade’

In the Church calendar, Palm Sunday (the last Sunday before Easter) commemorates the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to usher in His Passion week. Each year, many churches organize parades where worshippers carry palm branches, dancing and singing “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Therefore, you may already be familiar with this week’s Bible story. However, I want to draw your attention to some interesting aspects of what can be called the “Jerusalem Parade.”

Jesus was on the way to His passion (suffering and death) in Jerusalem. At Bethphage on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, He sent two disciples to go into the village opposite them where they would find a donkey and a colt tied. They should loose them and bring them to Him. If anyone tried to stop them, they should let them know that the Lord had need of them. They did as they had been instructed and brought the animals to Him to ride on into the city of Jerusalem [**Matt. 21: 1-3, 6**]. Why did Jesus not simply walk or slip into Jerusalem as He had done before that time? It had to do with the fulfillment of prophecy.

While the children of Israel were still in exile in Persia, during the reign of Darius [**Zech. 1: 1**], the Lord had spoken through the prophet Zechariah many things concerning the coming Messiah, some of which were as follows:

- A Man whose name is the BRANCH would come “to build the temple of the Lord. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall be a priest on the throne” [**Zech. 6: 12-13**];
- The daughters of Zion should rejoice greatly and the daughters of Jerusalem should shout because their “King is coming to [them] ... just and having salvation, lowly and *riding on a donkey, a colt*, the foal of a donkey” [**Zech. 9: 9**]. This is the prophecy fulfilled in this week’s story and referred to in Matthew’s Gospel [**Matt. 21: 4-5**];
- He would be betrayed and sold for “thirty pieces of silver” which they would later use to buy a potter’s field [**Zech. 11: 12-13**];
- They would strike the Shepherd and the sheep would be scattered [**Zech. 13: 7**]; and
- The Lord shall be King over all the earth [**Zech. 14: 9**].

Jesus knew where He was going (destination). As He had already told His disciples, “Behold, *we are going up to Jerusalem*, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles (i.e., the Romans) to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And on the third day, He will rise again” [**Matt. 20: 18-19**]. Nothing can be clearer. Jesus was heading in the direction of Jerusalem but His destination was death in your and my place, for “the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” and “by His stripes we are healed” [**Is. 53: 1-6**].

The *disciples* of Jesus and “the *multitudes* who went before and those who followed” [Matt. 21: 9] as well as *children* were all going up to Jerusalem, but were they all going there for the same purpose? What of the *city-dwellers*, the *chief priests* and *scribes* and the unnamed *Roman soldiers* monitoring the security implications of the parade? Let us dissect such groups going with Jesus to Jerusalem for a deeper understanding of their motives: They can be classified as follows:

a) *The power seekers*

These were the *followers of Jesus* that had been with Him during the three years of His earthly ministry. Among them were the twelve apostles whom He had called and to whom He gave power over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to heal all kinds of sicknesses and diseases [Matt. 10: 1-4], and seventy others that He had appointed and sent out two by two to be labourers in the vineyard [Lk 10: 1-2]. There was a group of women whom Jesus had healed of demonic spirits and infirmities and in appreciation had followed Him and provided for Him “from their substance.” They included Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chiza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others [Lk 8: 2-3]. It was some of those disciples that laid “their clothes” on the donkey and the colt and set Jesus on them [Matt. 21: 7]. Were they just doing their duty towards their Master?

With the expectation that the kingdom of God would soon be manifested, on earth, some of the disciples began to jostle for prominent positions. For example, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, wanted to be seated right and left of Jesus in that kingdom [v. 21], a request that brought great dissension among the twelve apostles [v. 24].

In many places today, whether in a church or political party or club, orderly succession is a big challenge. Power seekers will kill or steal or destroy (with the tongue or a weapon) to win. For example, such people will exploit racial, ethnic or class differences for their gain. Such people are hardly interested in the vision or mission of the organization they are fighting to take over. That is why many churches are today in factions and camps.

The *chief priests and scribes* were in the temple when Jesus arrived there. They had never been comfortable with the teachings of Jesus because He unveiled their hypocrisy, that is, religious leaders who did not practise what they preached [Mk 7: 1-13]. Look at the state of the temple when Jesus arrived there. The place was a market where people bought and sold (worship items and animals, apparently) and money changers thrived [Matt. 21: 12]. The religious leaders did not see anything wrong there (it is possible they were the owners of the enterprises or took taxes from the

operators!). Instead, they were outraged that Jesus had cleansed the “den of thieves” out of the “house of prayer” and received messianic greetings from the children [vv. 13, 15, 16].

. Some of us resist change because of the adverse effects we think it will have on our current status or privileges, not the improvement of the organization or system. In like manner, the religious leaders were in Jerusalem, up in arms to deal with Jesus who represented a mortal threat to their religious and social standing among the Jews. They became more determined to get rid of Him. They showed up in the ‘Jerusalem parade’ to obtain evidence with which to try Jesus.

Not mentioned in the story were *Roman soldiers* who had recently put down the murderous insurrection of Barabbas and were not about to entertain another one [Lk 23: 19]. You can be sure that they were placed at high alert along the route of the parade, on the ground and roof tops. You can be sure that nearby garrisons had been told to prepare for battle in Jerusalem, if necessary! Nevertheless, there were among them soldiers who (from listening to the sermons of Jesus as they did their work) had come to believe He was the Messiah. A prominent example was the centurion who after the death of Jesus on the cross, glorified God and said, “Certainly, this was a righteous Man!” [Lk 23: 47].

b) *The bread seekers*

We are told that “a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road (and) others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road ... and cried out, saying: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the highest!’” [Matt. 21: 8-9]. Great adulation in deed! But what could they have in mind?

The *multitudes* were largely the poor (hungry and disease-ridden) folks that had borne the brunt of religious and political corruption. They included the “*blind and the lame*” who came to Him to be healed [v. 14]. So, when Jesus came with healing and the miraculous feeding of thousands, the King of the multitudes had arrived. They went wherever He went because they knew that He would never leave them nor forsake them [Jn 6: 5]. Now that His kingdom was about to be established, for so they saw His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, they had better “impress” the King who would provide for their every need, the King who would set them free from Roman colonial bondage. Hosanna to the Son of David!

But when His entry moved the city dwellers to ask who the dignitary was that had so shaken up the place, the multitudes said, “This is Jesus, *the prophet from Nazareth* of Galilee” [Matt. 21: 10-11]. Oh yeah? Why not the Son of David, His Messianic name that they had been chanting earlier?

They dared not say that because they feared the Jewish leaders who had warned that any one who confessed the divinity of Christ would be “put out of the synagogue” [Jn 9: 22].

So, a plausible conclusion is that the multitudes were following their bread winner! On an earlier occasion, when multitudes came looking for Jesus, He said, “You seek Me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled” [vv. 24-26]. Therefore, they were looking for the miracle worker, the provider of a credit card without a spending limit; a credit card that is never paid for [Is. 55: 1]!

There are many bread seekers today in the body of Christ and that may be their sole reason for being there. They throng crusades by pastors and ministers that preach prosperity, not repentance. If you are following Jesus simply because of material or earthly blessings, you are in that multitude. You may pay the highest tithes, play the best music or have the best attendance record at church events. You are merely spreading your clothes on the way and cutting down and spreading tree branches on the road that Jesus has taken. You are playing to the gallery to impress onlookers. You are not carrying the cross with Him!

c) *The fun seekers*

Children also cried out in the temple, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” [Matt. 21: 15]. Do you think they understood what they were saying? They were mouthing what they had heard the multitudes say. You can be sure that children love fun. The Triumphal Entry was not a common event and the children were going to relish it to its fullest. It is not surprising that the chief priests and scribes “were indignant” and said to Jesus, “Do You hear what these are saying?” In response, Jesus quoted the book of Psalms where it is said that God had perfected praise out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants [Ps. 8: 2]. The children’s action fulfilled a prophecy but for the children themselves, they came to have fun.

In your congregation, you may come across so many fun seekers. For example, some sing or play musical instruments just to show off their talents, not to glorify God. Some pastors preach as if they are presenting a doctoral thesis! Some people come to church to parade their latest wardrobes. Some young people come simply to look for boyfriends or girlfriends. Some parents simply come to dump their wayward children for others to look after. The church is not an amusement park. It is a house of prayer, a place to remind us of the road to our heavenly Jerusalem.

2. When the Passion came, the parade disappeared!

By the end of that week, the differing motives of all those that had joined the triumphal train of Jesus into Jerusalem became exposed as follows:

- Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve apostles collected 30 pieces of silver from the chief priests [**Matt. 26: 14-15**] and led them to Jesus' hideout where He was arrested [**vv. 47-48**];
- All the disciples forsook Him and fled [**v. 56**], including James who asked to sit on His right and left in His kingdom! Even Peter who was bold enough to watch the trial proceedings denied Him thrice [**vv. 69- 75**];
- The same multitudes that sang His praises a few days earlier were the ones who preferred the murderer, Barabbas, to Jesus when the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate wanted to set Him free [**Matt. 27: 15-21**];
- The only people who stayed with Christ, to share in His passion were His beloved disciple, John [**Jn 18: 15; Jn 19: 26-27**], His mother, Mary, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene [**v.20**].
- But for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, both secret disciples of Jesus that obtained the permission of Pontius Pilate to take away the body of Jesus for burial [**vv. 38-39**] and Mary Magdalene who witnessed the burial and knew where the tomb was [**Matt. 27: 61**], Jesus could have been buried in an unmarked grave like the two thieves crucified with Him, and the resurrection story would have been more difficult to prove to skeptics then, not to talk of today.

3. Conclusion: It is the destination that matters

The word of God says, “A good name is better than precious ointment, *and the day of death than the day of one's birth*” [**Ecl. 7: 1**]. Interestingly, we wish people, “Happy birthday!” but not “Happy death-day!” We are getting it wrong! It is the end that matters more than the beginning. That is why Paul in his old age wrote to young Timothy, his son-in-Christ, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, *I have kept the faith*” [**2 Tim. 4: 7**].

It is not too late to retrace your wrong steps. You may have thought that those you are following are leading you to Christ. You may have misled yourself through pride or worldly wisdom to believe that there are many roads to God. No. There is only one way to God, that is, Jesus [**Jn 14: 6**]. But it is not everyone on that route that gets to destination for it is not everyone who calls Jesus Lord that shall enter the kingdom except those who do the will of His Father [**Matt. 7: 21**].

It is your destination that counts. The blood of Jesus is too precious to waste on hypocrites!