

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* But he turned and said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Then Jesus told his disciples, ***“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.”***

How much do you know about Jesus? Most of us know at least a little bit. Some of us started learning about Jesus when we were young children – we can recall some facts and perhaps some parables or stories. As we grow up the number of people who give Jesus serious consideration, or thought, or study tends to diminish. In **Matthew 12:5**, Jesus asks his critics, ***‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?’*** The truth is many people haven’t read much about Jesus in the Bible for themselves. People hit their teenage years, or their twenties and Jesus drops off their radar screen. Perhaps you have trouble believing some of the things the Bible says about Jesus; maybe you didn’t think Jesus mattered much to your life.

Yet what you do with Jesus is arguably the most important decision with the most significant and far-reaching consequences that you make in your entire life. No single individual has had a greater impact on the history of the world than Jesus. 2000 years ago, he began a spiritual movement that has influenced and shaped the lives of billions of people. Your image of Jesus, how you think about him, shapes how you think about and understand living your life.

Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew. He was probably born around the year 6 or 5 BC. His parents fled with him as refugees from Judah to Egypt to escape the murderous scheme of King Herod the Great. When he was still a toddler his family returned to Nazareth. Judea was a Roman province, so Jesus grew up a member of a conquered people coping with a difficult life under an occupying foreign power. When he was a boy of 11 or 12, according to Luke, Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem. Not much is known about the years he spent growing into young adulthood. Pontius Pilate was appointed as the Roman Governor in the year 26 and within a year, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and began his public ministry.

During his ministry he preached about the Kingdom of God, healed people who were sick, taught how people were to live as children of God with love, compassion, courage, kindness, and generosity. He was put to death on a cross like a common criminal.

Jesus is many things to many people. Some people think of Jesus as the divine savior – the Son of God whose death on the cross enables the forgiveness of all who believe in him and the gift of eternal, abundant, joyful life. Others relate to Jesus as a teacher whose parables, stories, and vivid images describe a life of purpose and significance. Others see Jesus as a prophet of justice who condemned the spiritual emptiness, moral corruption, violence, and grasping for power of those in leadership while giving hope to the poor, the needy, and those who were looked down upon by society. All these things are true of Jesus Christ.

The Jesus we meet in the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the importance of *doing* God's will rather than merely *claiming* to do so. **The Gospel of Matthew uses “fruit(s)” as a metaphor for good works 17 times, more than any other writer in the New Testament.** Matthew's Gospel is set apart from the other three gospels by its **fusion of what we say and what we do**. For Matthew, it's not enough to merely say Jesus is your Lord and Savior. The theme that reverberates throughout Matthew is heard in **7:21**, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.***” This same thought closes the gospel when

Jesus says the church is to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20), *“teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you.”* Jesus calls everyone who will accept his invitation into a personal relationship with God that leads you on a journey of transformation that shapes your entire life.

In Matthew chapter one, the gospel writer traces Jesus’ family tree back through the kings of Israel. In chapter two we read, **“In the time of Herod the king** wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, *‘Where is the child who has been born **king of the Jews?**’* We’re told King Herod and all Jerusalem were frightened by this news. Herod was frightened because the Jewish people were hoping a political and military leader, like King David, would deliver them from the Romans. The whole city and nation might erupt into violence if the patriots and zealots had a true son of David to rally behind. Herod ordered the murder of children to prevent Jesus from growing up and leading such a revolt. Herod’s dreadful plan failed to stop God’s redemptive plan. On Palm Sunday, the child Herod sought to eliminate comes to Jerusalem as a mature man. Jesus rides into Jerusalem - a city torn by divisions and power struggles frequently erupting in violence and bloodshed – acting out a parable about what God is offering to those who will not only believe in him but who will do God’s will.

Jesus doesn’t ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse at the head of troops armed for battle. He comes humbly on a donkey or colt. His followers are grasping tree branches, not spears; they shout *“Hosanna!”* not, *“Attack!”* This is a strange sort of gathering. The crowds were saying, *“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”* People wondered who is this? Is he a prophet? A troublemaker? A rebel? A teacher? Is he going to overthrow our oppressors?

Some of those who first followed Jesus did so in the hope that he would be the one to rally the people to overthrow the Romans. One of the disciples was known as Simon the zealot, referring to his political views not his passion for following Jesus. James and John were nicknamed Sons of Thunder, a title just as fitting for revolutionaries as fishermen. Jesus has to deal with the fact that people don’t understand who he is or what he is doing. **John 6:15** says, *“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him*

king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” In **Acts 1:6**, even after the crucifixion and resurrection when the risen Christ is with the disciples they ask, “Lord, is this the time when **you will restore the kingdom to Israel?**” They’re still thinking about Jesus’ purpose first and foremost from a political point of view.

Jesus’ leadership is transforming in many ways, but as Leighton Ford says, “**Jesus saw the heart of the human problem as the problem of the human heart. A radical change from the inside out was at the core of his strategy.**”¹ Jesus’ strategy was not a political one in which transformed earthly governments subsequently changed individual lives. Overthrowing the Romans and putting the Jewish people back in charge of their nation would provide some freedom, but it wouldn’t bring the change Jesus is after.

Jesus’ approach is a radical change in the hearts and lives of people altered by following him under the power of the Spirit of God. Jesus’ message is aimed at the transformation of the heart. **Living out the gospel Jesus preached impacts every aspect of your life including your relationships, your economics, and your politics.** Anything less falls short of the faith of Jesus.

The Son of David enters David’s city, but the only throne this king finds is a cross. The only crown he receives is made of thorns. The city that should have welcomed him with fullest worship and obedience – refuses to accept him or is too busy to care about this humble leader or prophet or whoever he is.

It’s easy for us to think by celebrating Palm Sunday, coming to worship, and taking a palm home, that we’re acknowledging Jesus as king in a way that many in Jerusalem failed to do so. Yet Matthew says it’s not those who call Jesus Lord on Sunday who shall enter the kingdom of heaven but those who do God’s will throughout the week. It’s not enough to shout, “*Hosanna, Hallelujah*” on Sunday. You’re to live out your faith in Jesus on Monday. You’re to live as if Christ entering into your life and your heart makes a difference.

Who is this strong yet gentle man riding humbly and peacefully into the political and religious powder keg that is Jerusalem? **At the beginning of the week that changed the history of the world, Matthew is asking you to**

¹ Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership*, (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1991), p. 62

decide who Jesus is. A few are praising him; fewer truly understand who he is and what this journey represents. Later this week, some will cry, “Crucify him!” when he disappoints their political and religious aspirations. Others will be afraid of everything that unfolds and wonder if they can find the courage to speak. Many people have some vague idea about the events of Holy Week, but **you must make up your own mind about what those events mean for you.**

Is Jesus the Son of God who died on the cross that you might be reconciled with God; the prophet who reveals God’s priorities, and the teacher who shows you the path of life? Is he the Messiah, the leader who would change your heart, your life, your destiny, your eternity? What do you think?

A photographer for a national magazine was assigned to shoot a large forest fire in the western United States. He was told that a small plane would be waiting to take him over the fire. He arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough a Cessna was waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, “*Let’s go!*” The pilot swung the plane into the wind and soon they were in the air. “*Fly over the north side of the fire,*” said the photographer, “*and make several low-level passes.*” “*Why?*” asked the nervous pilot. “*Because I’m going to take pictures. I’m a photographer and photographers take pictures.*” After a long pause, the pilot replied, “*You mean, you’re not the instructor?*”²

In life, it’s helpful to have an instructor and to recognize who our instructor is and there is none better than Jesus. As we begin Holy Week, I hope you’ll take a few moments in these days to ponder what Jesus endured in remaining faithful and true to God for your sake. **By presenting Jesus as the long-awaited fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures** and the true son of David, Matthew hopes that by next Sunday we will answer the question, “*Who is this?*” by saying what the centurion who witnessed the crucifixion said, “*Truly this man was God’s Son!*”

No matter what heartache or challenges you’re facing today, I pray the Holy Spirit will give you the courage, faith, and strength to live as if you believe Jesus is God’s Son and may you follow him faithfully wherever He leads.

² Steve Farrar, *Point Man*.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How much do you know about Jesus? If you were going to tell the story of Jesus with a few scenes or stories from his life, which ones would you choose?
2. Who would you say Jesus is? How would you describe him to someone? What terms or images might you use that would be understandable to someone who has never read the Bible or been to worship in a church?
3. Why would you say an individual's response to Jesus is so important?
4. The Gospel of Matthew uses "fruit(s)" as a metaphor for good works 17 times, more than any other writer in the New Testament. Why is integrity in what we say we believe and what we do so important in revealing the validity of our faith?
5. Why did Jesus focus on the human heart, rather than government, for example, as the key to his strategy?
6. Jesus calls you into a personal relationship with God that leads you on a journey of transformation that shapes your entire life. What's one way that accepting and following Christ has impacted your life? If you have not yet taken this step of faith, what do you need to help you make that choice?

Palm Sunday, April 10

Call to Worship The Gospel of Matthew 21:1-11

Voice One: “When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,

Voice Two: *“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs.’ And he will send them immediately.”*

Voice One: This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

All: *“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

Voice One: The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, & others cut branches from the trees & spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him & that followed were shouting,

All: *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

Voice One: When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken, asking,

All: *“Who is this?”*

Voice One: The crowds were saying,

All: *“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

Middle scripture with Prayer The Gospel of Matthew 20.20-28

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” 22 But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” 23 He said to them, “You will

indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

24 When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”