

## ***Admirers or Followers?***

Luke 19:28-40

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

March 28, 2010 Palm Sunday

*It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression 'follower.' He never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for. His whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible.*

*To want to admire instead of to follow Christ is not necessarily an invention by bad people. No, it is more an invention by those who spinelessly keep themselves detached, who keep themselves at a safe distance. Admirers are only too willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest one personally come in contact with danger. As such, they refuse to accept that Christ's life is a demand. In actual fact, they are offended at him. His radical, bizarre character so offends them that when they honestly see Christ for who he is, they are no longer able to experience the tranquility they so much seek after. They know full well that to associate with him too closely amounts to being up for examination. Even though he "says nothing" against them personally, they know that his life tacitly judges theirs.*

*Now suppose that there is no longer any special danger, as it no doubt is in so many of our Christian countries, bound up with publicly confessing Christ. The difference between following and admiring still remains. Does not the Way – Christ's requirement to die to the world and deny the self – does this not contain enough danger?*

*The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in word he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. No, no. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires. And because of the follower's life, it will become evident who the admirers are, for the admirers will become agitated with him. Even these words will disturb many – but then they must likewise belong to the admirers.*

*Soren Kierkegaard*

[from *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong, Vol. 20 of *The Collected Writings*]

There was once a time when Palm Sunday was celebrated with full-throated praise, with no hint of irony or guilt when the congregation sang "Hosanna" to Jesus as the coming King. Those were days when clergy could count on worshipers to be present on Thursday and Friday to go through the irony of the supper and the agony of the cross. But at some point in the last few decades clergy realized that most people were skipping Holy Week services, going from the high of Palm Sunday to the high of Easter, short-circuiting the intent of the Christian calendar by avoiding the negative pole altogether. Clearly they were cheating, and being cheated.

The somewhat unfortunate solution has been to combine Palm Sunday with Passion Sunday, sometimes reading through the whole story traditionally reserved for Friday. And the sermons on Palm Sunday look forward not to the ultimate coming of Jesus' kingdom but to the betrayal and denial coming on Thursday night. Often the liturgy is designed so that the congregation says "Hosanna" at the beginning of the service and "Crucify him" in the middle—a heavy-handed way to point out that we are fickle creatures. It is a commonplace to say that the same crowd that praised Jesus on Sunday called for his death on Friday. So we are not merely

fickle; we are murderers. I remember talking to a Princeton undergrad who grew up as a Texas Baptist about the meaning of the cross, and he told me that to him the whole meaning of Good Friday was “I killed a man.” I don’t think it’s fair to imply that you killed Jesus or that you would have. The issue lies elsewhere.

Personally, I doubt that it was the same individuals that welcomed Jesus as the Messiah with palms who wanted him crucified. Even a small city has many crowds. Even on the island we have more than one crowd among our thousand residents. You could easily get Hooray on Sunday and Boo on Friday. I probably do, from time to time. Or vice versa: Hooray at Soup and Song but Boo at worship.

So I don’t think the story in the gospels can be read to say that we who worship Jesus would kill him if he ever opposed us. But I think it *could* be read to say that those who admired Jesus were not willing to follow him to prison or to a cross. Even Peter, who initially drew his sword, later thought better of it and decided to remain silent. When Jesus was being sentenced to death, his followers said nothing. No one stood up for him.

Once years ago I got into a conflict with several deacons about whether to remain loyal to the Southern Baptist Convention after they fired all the centrists and took a stand against women pastors. Several deacons decided it was time to remove me, and at a business meeting began laying out a list of personal accusations against me such as “He is not a good example as a husband or his wife would not suffer from depression. We deacons in confidence agreed to give him a consolidation loan five years ago to help him out but now we want you to know that he can’t manage his money. In spite of the fact that we’ve given him glowing performance reviews every year and our attendance has doubled, we now think he is not fit to be our pastor.” That kind of crap went on for over an hour. One of my friends came to me and said “Your children shouldn’t be here. Nathan turned white. I’m taking him out of the room.”

Nathan was 11. After the ambush was over, we went home and changed clothes and I asked Nathan if he wanted to go out for a walk. We often went on hiking trails together—and still do—and he was more likely to talk while walking than if we were sitting in the living room. When we got out on the trail the first words out of Nathan’s mouth were “No one stood up for you, Dad.” And I knew he was right. Later I heard their excuses: “We were in shock. We weren’t prepared for that.” But my 11-year-old was right: no one stood up for me. Later, when I went to a retreat for pastors in conflict I discovered that this was a universal story. Every pastor said that the deepest hurt was not what the enemies did but the fact that their friends did not stand up for them.

In the story of Jesus, it is understandable that his friends do not stand up for him. There are two powerful forces united against Jesus: the religious professionals and the politicians. When you get those two working together it is almost always a bad thing, but the combination of military-police power and the authority of God is hard for people in all countries to resist. Few people are willing to say no to God and country in order to be loyal to Jesus.

But I think what the story of Palm Sunday teaches is that praise is not enough. Praise is good, even if based on incomplete knowledge of Jesus. Praise is inevitable—the rocks themselves will cry out—and praise is the goal of creation. But to stop with praise is to miss the life Jesus is calling us to. Jesus is calling us first of all to love God and love our neighbors. But that is not all warm fuzzies or making nice. To follow Jesus in the path of love requires two things more: courage based on trust in God, and the willingness to sacrifice and endure pain.

Jesus is very clear in the synoptic gospels that it is not enough to say “Lord, Lord.” It is not enough to offer praise or even to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. The demons do that.

Jesus says that if you want to follow me—that is, to be my student, my disciple—then you must (what? you know) deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. You must be willing to put your own self-interest aside and be willing to suffer with him in order to be his follower.

We've been doing a discussion group on Wednesday nights on the subject of how Jesus worship began. We often read the New Testament backwards, historically, because we act as if the gospels came first. So the model is: Jesus as a teacher and healer who died and (some say) rose—and that this eventually led to worshipping him as Lord.

For a liberal, that model makes the worship of Jesus suspect. People like Marcus Borg want to get back to seeing Jesus as a teacher rather than as God.

For a conservative, that model suggests that the worship of Jesus is the *goal*, that the highest point of Christian theology is found in the hymns and Christological statements of Paul. So the most important thing in the world is getting people to believe in Jesus, not to follow him. If you can get someone to worship Jesus as God, then you've gotten that person to heaven. Mission accomplished.

That's the message I absorbed—most of the time—as a Southern Baptist kid. And I still believe that worshipping Jesus is an essential part of the Christian life. But I no longer believe that it is the *goal* of the Christian life or the reason I've been left on earth.

The correct reading of history—as we've been learning on Wednesday nights—is that the *first* response of the disciples and early Christians was to *worship* Jesus—to sing his praises, to adore him as God, to give thanks for salvation and for his presence through the Spirit. That impulse is reflected in the earliest part of the New Testament, the letters of Paul. To be sure, Paul has ethical teaching too, drawn mostly from Jewish and Greek commonplaces as well as the example of Jesus. But the center of Paul's message is that the Jesus who died for our sins is the Lord and has made us right with God.

But what you have when the *gospels* are written, one to three decades after Paul's letters, is an attempt to put into writing both the *story* of Jesus and what Jesus taught about being a disciple. It is often said that the reason the gospels got written was that the original eyewitnesses were passing from the scene and not only their memories of Jesus but their understanding of what Jesus wanted from us was at risk of being lost. No doubt there is some truth to that.

But what strikes me is that the gospel writers wanted to take the *worship* of Jesus—which was at risk of floating off into something ethereal and mystical, all about my feelings and my experience of him—taking that worship and nailing it down to the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. We are not just worshipping the *idea* of Jesus, or the idea of a God-man combo, or a sweet, sweet spirit in this place. We are worshipping the Jesus who died at a particular time and that Jesus calls us to be his disciples in very particular ways.

The gospels, it seems to me, are written to churches that are in danger of becoming Jesus admiration societies, and the gospels say to them that it's not just about *adoring* Jesus, it's about *following* him. There can be no genuine worship that does not involve submitting to the authority of the historical Jesus who commanded us not only to love him but to love neighbor, and church member, and enemy.

Worship is not enough. The praise that is easy with palms in our hands, affirming his identity as a king, is not enough. What Jesus asks us is to affirm *our* identity as his subjects by *obeying* him. And his call is not to a life of comfort and self-interest, the American dream. His call is to a life of courage and sacrifice based on the absolute trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

On Palm Sunday we remember that if we are just enjoying the parade, if Jesus is not getting us in trouble, then we are not following him. Jesus is very clear that we are to stand against the power of money and the rule-oriented religion of the privileged, we are to stand against hypocrisy and exclusion, we are to stand with the poor, the uninsured, the undocumented, the victims of empire, the prisoners, the sick, the sinners and the demon-possessed. If we do that, we will have enemies, but we must never respond with hatred or violence—but love our enemies as well: the sold-out tools of empire and the rich, the oppressors and the bigots, insurance company presidents and terrorists. Love them and treat them kindly. Be willing to give your life for them as well.

So the question from Kierkegaard haunts me: are we admirers or followers? If Jesus is not getting us in trouble, then we are not following him.