

## "THAT MAN ON THE DONKEY"

### INTRODUCTION

For the last three Sundays, we have been asking questions about God, and for the most part they have not been easy questions to answer. Questions like these: Why bother about God? And how do we even know that there is a God? And if there is a God, does He hear us when we pray? These questions led us out into deep waters. For the most part, we came up with no final, indisputable answers - no answers, at least, like the mathematicians can produce. Rather we came up with suggestions, and intimations, and convictions of the heart, and glimpses into the nature of things. Now this is not to say that we have no certainties about God. But rather it's to say that looking at God is like looking at the sun. It's so bright that it blinds you. You cannot look straight at it with the naked eye.

But today we come out into a clearing. Our attention is focussed upon a man very much like ourselves. To be sure he lived in a different part of the world at a different time in history, and therefore the circumstances surrounding his living are different from those circumstances that surround our own living. But by and large, as far as his personality and his human nature are concerned, he's very much like ourselves. This is to say that he's the same strange mixture of body, mind and spirit that we are. He had a home, he had a mother and a father, he had his friends, and he had his enemies, he had brothers and he had sisters. He had a conscience, and he had a dream. This, I suppose, is the principal stuff of every human life.

### DEVELOPMENT

One of the really notable things about this man is that he walked straight into the face of danger and death. To me this is part of the significance of Palm Sunday. He walked straight into the face of danger and death. In one sense of the word, he didn't have to go to Jerusalem. He didn't have to do what he did. He could have stayed in Galilee, slipping into the background and eventually he would have been forgotten. But in a deeper sense, he had to do what he did. By this I mean to say that the word "must" probably occurred in his vocabulary more often than it does in ours. Remember how as a boy he once remarked to his parents, "I Must be about my Father's business" And then remember how as a young man when he was first starting out on his mission, he remarked, "I MUST preach this kingdom of God." And then remember what he said to his disciples at the end of his mission, "The Son of Man must suffer many things." I think it was this MUST quality of his life that drove him up to Jerusalem and made him do what he did. Perhaps in the lowest sense of the word you'll say it was nothing more than a compulsion, but I think in the highest sense of the word it was a calling!

But at any rate, you'll remember that Jesus was on a dangerous mission. He had chosen this mission because he felt that God had chosen him for it. He felt that God somehow mysteriously had lifted him up out of the crowds for a particular task, and you'll remember that that particular task was to set his people free. Generally speaking there were three things that had taken hold of his people threatening to crush and destroy them. First of all there was slavery. They were in bondage to the Romans. All of you know what slavery is so I won't take time to go into it. It's the same whether it's in Palestine two thousand years ago, or whether it's in Hungary

in 1958. Slavery was the first thing that had taken hold of them. The second thing was suffering. There was a great deal of suffering in this part of the world at the time of Jesus. Some of you know what real suffering is and what poverty and disease can do to cripple human personality. You've seen it, and perhaps you've even experienced it. Suffering was the second thing that threatened to crush his people. Slavery and suffering. The third thing was Sin. All of you know what sin is. It's anything that tends to cut you off from the great source of life. It's anything that tends to alienate you from God. Things like selfishness, anxiety, lust, pride, and anger. The things of the spirit. Slavery, suffering and sin. Jesus understood all three. He was concerned with the fact of slavery. He was concerned with the suffering of his people. In fact he spent a great deal of his time trying to relieve the suffering of his people. But I think he felt that the supreme task was to set his people free from sin. This he felt was at the bottom of it all. If this could be removed, then they'd be in a good position to handle the other two. Just to sum it up in a few words then: Jesus was on a mission to save his people from sin, or from whatever it was that was cutting them off from the great source of life. In other words, he was on a mission to save his people from whatever it was that was alienating them from God.

In order to accomplish his mission, he knew that he would first of all have to bring his people back into a right relationship with God. He saw that the religion of his time was little more than a set of meaningless rules. Some of the rules were good and great. "Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, soul, and mind" Nothing wrong with a rule like that, but so many of the rules were little and meaningless. For instance, there were rules about washing pots and pans, rules about how far a person could walk on the Sabbath, rules about the proper preparation of food. The religion of that time was little more than a strict adherence to the rules.

And Jesus saw through it all. He went to the very heart of the matter. He knew that religion was more than a set of meaningless rules. He looked upon it as a relationship. He saw it as a kind of binding together of the creator and the creature. It was to be the kind of relationship that exists between a parent and a child. Love and care on the part of the parent. A love and a care that exists and continues to exist even though the child may not be fully worthy. This is about the most unselfish thing, I suppose, that we have in our own human experiences, and it was this kind of thing Jesus felt that ought to exist between a person and God if a person is going to be saved from the consequences of sin. The parent loves the child, and on the other hand the child responds to that love with trust, obedience, affection, and faithfulness.

And so Jesus went out on a limb. He said some things that went straight to the heart of people. For instance, he said that a sinner with love in his heart is more acceptable to God than a saint with hardness and anger in his soul. And he startled people with some of the things he did. For instance, he healed people on the Sabbath even though it was against the law. He associated with people who were off-limits and out of bounds. He went out of his way to meet them. He ate with them, and stayed in their homes.

And then finally, of course, he forced the hands of the authorities. He rode into the city on that first Palm Sunday on a donkey, unarmed, as

the King of a kingdom not of this world. A few of his friends were there with him. But I think that right from the start his chances were not at all good. I think he knew what was going to happen. The conservative forces of tradition were strong. The odds were stacked against him. There was a great deal of money involved in the Temple, and a great many people depended upon it for a living. And the people who supported him on that Palm Sunday soon became weak and indifferent. Of course they rallied around him when he cured them of their diseases, but when he really needed them they weren't around. When he asked them to take up the cross and follow him, they soon began to drop away. Their emotion soon evaporated...

But he kept riding on. That man on the donkey, sensitive, imaginative, a man with a high purpose riding into a hostile and indifferent and hard hearted city. He had no ulterior motives. He never exploited the situation for his own good. He never wavered. He never cut corners. He never compromised. He rode right through the lines of opposition that were there staring, glaring at him. And with the cross in the distance, he rode quietly and steadily on to the end!

WHAT DOES ALL OF  
THIS MEAN FOR US?

Now briefly what does all this mean for us? I hesitate to make any comment on the story because the meaning is so obvious. And yet at the same time it's difficult to put into words. If we were to put it into words, it might be something like this. When Jesus offered the people new life, they refused it. When he offered them new mental, moral, spiritual and physical life, they rejected it. They turned him down. It was as though Jesus were pleading with them.

"If only you'll submit to the rule of God, you'll have new life and new health of body, mind and spirit. But the rule of God is the rule of love, and you cannot have the life, unless you are willing to accept the rule of love."

Now those people in Jerusalem were smart enough to know what all of this would mean. They knew that if they followed Jesus and accepted his teaching that they would have to change their religion from top to bottom. And they weren't prepared to do this. They knew that the law would have to be rewritten. That the temple would have to become a temple once again, and not a banking house. They knew that their routine religious observances would have to be replaced by a real dedication to the spirit and the will of God. And moreover, they knew this, and perhaps this was the most difficult thing for them to accept, they knew that if they followed Jesus that they would have to give up all hope of a military revolt against Rome. And this was the most bitter pill for them to swallow. They knew that this rule of love included enemies as well as friends. And they knew that if they accepted him that their own lives would have to change. They would have to begin to put God's will before their own little selfish wills and desires. They would have to begin to trust him more than they trusted themselves. They would have to be like little children placing themselves in the care and love of a parent. It was too much for them. The price was too high. The risks involved were too great. They had too much to give up, too much to lose. And so they refused him and they rejected him.

And so you begin to see that there's an element of sadness connected with the celebration of this day. It's a strange kind of day in which sadness is mingled with joy. It's the sadness of something good, something beautiful, something pure and fine being rejected and refused. Those people of Jerusalem were on the very threshold of life and yet they didn't go in. So near and yet so far. So wise and yet so foolish. And to add to the sadness, person after person and nation after nation down through the centuries of time have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God. And one hesitates to wonder what the people of our nation would do if they were in the same position.

And yet mingled with the sadness of that day, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday because that man on the donkey still goes on before us. In spite of rejection after rejection, he still rides on, haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, and stimulating our spirits. After all of these years of rejection, he still makes the same offer and the same promises and I only wish that somehow through me, he might make that offer and that promise to you. If only you'll submit to the rule of God, you shall have new life and new health of mind, body and spirit. But the rule of God is the rule of love, and you cannot have that life unless you are willing to accept the rule of love. Are you willing to accept that offer? Are you willing to take the chance. That's the promise, and that's the offer, and it's up to you to decide. No one can make these decisions for you. You have to make them for yourself.

Lloyd Douglas in his book THE ROSE describes the scene where Demetrius catches a glimpse of Jesus riding into the city on that first Palm Sunday. A crowd has gathered. And for one brief, fleeting moment, the eyes of Jesus catch the eyes of Demetrius. And Demetrius is stirred and moved by the depth of calm authority in the eyes of the Master. Travelling with Demetrius is a rough and uncouth Athenian who asks excitedly, "Can you see him, Demetrius? Is he crazy?" "No...not crazy" "Is he a king?" "No...he's not a king" "Well what is he....who is he?" And Demetrius replies quietly, "I don't really know, but I think he's far more important than a king"

Far more important than a king! That man on the donkey rode into the city that day, and a few days later he carried his cross to Calvary and there he entered into history as the greatest revelation of God in human terms that mankind has ever seen. To some he was just a king. To others, he's far more important than just a king. There's something very special about this man on the donkey. He reaches down into all of us, and he confronts us with something that's good, and beautiful, and altogether fine and wonderful. And when we come to welcome him as the King of all Kings, and the Lord of all Lords, then and only then will life become triumphant for us, and then and only then, will his kingdom of righteousness and peace and love and brotherhood and goodwill be established in all corners of our world. For that man on the donkey is the key to all life!

LET US PRAY: Our Father and our God, we know that we have lagged in our loyalty to him. We know that we cannot ignore him. Help us this day and always to welcome him - willingly, publicly and triumphantly as the great lord of our lives. Amen