

Jesus Trends

Mark 11:1-11 | 4/5/2009

It's Palm Sunday, and on Palm Sunday Jesus was a huge hit with the crowds. Compare his popularity on that day with that of other prominent leaders, and Jesus wins hands down.

Jesus as a popular person somehow doesn't seem to be what the gospel is all about. A generation ago, John Lennon of the Beatles thought Jesus was a popular fellow. But then in 1966, he infamously proclaimed that he and his band mates were even "more popular than Jesus."

That claim, of course, set off a storm of protest in the United States. Problem was that whether you were looking at things from Lennon's perspective or from that of, say, the average churchgoer, there really wasn't a way to check the facts of the claim. Lennon was looking at packs of screaming fans every day, while churches were not exactly being overrun by hordes of teenagers rabidly wanting to be close to Jesus.

These days, no rocker could make such a statement without Gallup and a host of bloggers and pundits running the actual numbers. In fact, Internet search-engine giant Google offers a quick way for anyone to compare the relative popularity between two celebrities or entities, called Google Trends. Type in "Jesus" and the "Beatles" in the Trends search engine and out comes a graph. I tried it. While we don't know what the graph might have looked like in pre-Internet 1966, as of this past year, Jesus definitely out-trends The Beatles. At their closest, Jesus wins by almost 5 to 1. Around Christmas it's 7 to 1, and around Easter, 10 to 1! Just speculating here, but it could be the result of the fact that the Beatles haven't cut an album in decades and half its members have passed on, while Jesus is still the main subject of the world's number one best-selling book and, according to Christians, is still alive and at work.

On the original Palm Sunday, however, there was no doubt about where Jesus was trending, at least among his followers. Coming up to Jerusalem from Jericho, Jesus and his disciples would have likely fallen in with hundreds of other pilgrims who would swell the population of the Holy City from about 40,000 to more than 200,000 for the celebration of the Passover feast. Passover was a time of celebration, but it was also a time of high tension in Jerusalem. While the festival celebrated liberation from the tyranny of Egypt generations before, first-century Israel was under foreign domination. The Roman occupation of their homeland was hated by many Jews. Riots and uprisings were fairly common during the Passover, so Rome made sure that there was a military presence during that week, garrisoning more troops at the Antonia Fortress, which overlooked the temple complex.

If residents and visitors to Jerusalem had been online in those days they may have run some comparisons of their own. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, say that on that particular Sunday people in Jerusalem would have witnessed two processions, not one — the Pilate Procession and the Jesus Procession.

The procession of Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his accompanying military force coming into the city from the west provided a military deterrent during the festival. Googling Pilate would have yielded some disturbing results. According to the contemporary historian Josephus, when Pilate first brought Roman troops to Jerusalem from Caesarea some time earlier, he committed an unprecedented violation of Jewish sensibilities by allowing the troops to bring their military standards and busts of the emperor into Jerusalem by night and set them up in the temple. A massive protest demonstration forced the removal of the standards. Josephus also speaks of protests that broke out on another occasion when Pilate appropriated temple funds to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem. On this occasion, Pilate had Roman soldiers, dressed as Jewish civilians and armed with hidden clubs, mingle with the shouting crowd and attack the people at a prearranged signal. Many were killed or hurt. Pilate would certainly have had a lot of search hits, but he was not at all popular.

On the east side of the city, though, another parade was being planned. It involved the arrival of one who would hopefully be a different kind of ruler. Jesus sent his disciples to get a donkey's colt. Jesus rides it down the steep road from the Mount of Olives to the Golden Gate of the city, with a crowd of his supporters shouting

“Hosanna!” — a Hebrew word that praises God and prays that God will save his people and do it soon. They spread their cloaks on the colt and cut branches from the surrounding fields — actions that were done only in the presence of royalty. Trust me: They weren’t laying down cloaks and branches for that other guy. On that day and for those who were with him, Jesus was maxing out on the trend chart.

When we’re waving those palm branches around on Sunday morning, one of the things we have to be careful not to miss is that Jesus was *intentionally setting up a comparison between the violent and powerful trend of the empire and the peaceful and grace-filled trend of the kingdom of God*. Borg and Crossan see the Palm Sunday parade as a kind of pre-planned political protest, and a look at the context seems to back that up. The symbolism of a ruler riding on a donkey would not have been lost on those putting their cloaks in the road, for they would have remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah: an image of a king coming into Jerusalem with shouts of joy from the people. He is “triumphant” and “victorious” — words that Romans and other imperial leaders would have embraced — but he is “humble” and rides on a donkey instead of a war horse (Zechariah 9:9). In fact, continues the prophet, “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem.” This king is not a conquering hero who uses weapons of mass destruction, but one who will break the power of military might with humility, justice and peace for all the nations (Zechariah 9:10).

Jesus’ parade is thus an intentional parable and statement of contrast. If Pilate’s procession embodied power, violence and the glory of the empire that ruled the Mediterranean world, Jesus’ procession embodied the kind of kingdom that God was ushering in through Jesus’ ministry of healing, his message of good news and, ultimately, his sacrificial death on a Roman cross.

Pilate and the empire he represented were the most powerful force in the region on that Sunday, but Google “Jesus” and “Roman Empire” today and it’s not even close. Jesus wins in a landslide. I tried that too. The average is 50 to 1!

The rest of Holy Week really comes down to a continued struggle for popularity. Jesus has it on Sunday but, in Mark’s time line, on Monday he turns over the tables in the temple and takes a serious dip, at least among the religious elite. His verbal sparring with the Pharisees and temple officials had him charting well with the people and led the religious leaders to look for a covert way to bring him down (Mark 11:18; 12:12). “Jesus” vs. “Pharisees” is, again, no contest when it comes to trends. It’s no wonder they were bent on getting rid of him.

The bigger contrast, though, and the one that we should be addressing on Palm Sunday is the clash of worldviews represented in the text — worldviews that are still at odds. The empire’s worldview of status, power, military might and coercion is as present and dominant in today’s world as it was then. So is the desire for comfort, security, self-interest and wealth, particularly in American culture. Trend out “Kingdom of God” vs. “American Dream” and the kingdom loses big time. We may admire Jesus, but we’re not necessarily ready to follow him down that road of suffering, sacrifice and servanthood that ultimately leads to the redemption of the world. As if to underscore the point, the traditional route Jesus took down the Mount of Olives went through an ancient cemetery, as it still does today — a stark reminder of where this particular parade will lead.

Many of those folks who were waving branches on Sunday were gone by Friday, having abandoned Jesus to the powers of the temple and the empire. They read the trends and chose self-preservation over the way of Jesus. The question we have to ask on Palm Sunday is whether we do the same thing when following Christ becomes inconvenient at best or, at worst, seemingly impossible. Following Jesus often means sharing his unpopularity, be it at school, in the workplace or even at home.

What we have to remember, though, is that Jesus was looking to trend the whole world upward, bringing hope and wholeness through his obedience and submission to God. After all, as Paul tells us, in the end everyone will acknowledge Jesus as the ultimate chart-topper (Philippians 2:10-11).

So what’s the take-away for us? Better join the right parade!

Pastor Keith