

UNDERSTANDING LATER

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: John 12:16a These things understood not his disciples at the first.

Today we commemorate one of the most colorful holidays in all of our Christian tradition, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Except for the Resurrection morning this is the happiest day that Jesus and his followers were to know. Less than a week was to pass before the shadows of the cross darkened His way, bringing sorrow, heartache, and remorse to all the joyful throngs now surrounding Him, but this was a day of rejoicing unmarred by sorrow and fears. For today the thronging and joyful crowds expected fully that Jesus would immediately establish the Kingdom of God about which He had talked so freely and frequently. Jesus sensed this expectancy and tried to explain to the people his purpose by a parable. Luke tells us: "He spake a parable because he was nigh to Jerusalem and because they supposed that the Kingdom of God was immediately to appear."

After sharing with the multitudes the parable which they did not understand Jesus sent two of his disciples into the village of Bethphage telling them that there they would find a colt tied, and to release it and bring it to him. And he said that if the owners of the colt objected, to tell them that "The Lord hath need of it". The colt was brought, and the disciples threw their coats over the colt and Jesus sat upon him, and the procession started to Jerusalem. As they drew near to the descent from the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem, the whole multitude began to rejoice and to praise God for all the mighty works which they had seen saying, "Blessed is the King that cometh in the name of the Lord". It was a joyous and exultant crowd that followed Jesus into Jerusalem. The disciples and followers with palm branches in their hands waving high in the air, sang with joy the praises of their Messiah on his way to establish the Kingdom of God. We can imagine the gay and happy scene. It is the spring of the year. Little children dancing along in front of the procession strewing freshly gathered flowers in the path of their Friend, mothers casting down their precious rugs before him, people crowding around to catch a glimpse of the great Messiah whose fame had traveled far and wide. At last the Master of Men was gaining the recognition which he deserved, as the multitudes shouted his praises and proclaimed him Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

The gospels describe in great detail this triumphal entry of Jesus, and the great acclaim of the people. But in the gospel of John is one penetrating insight which is my text for this morning. The writer after describing the triumphal entry makes this statement: these things understood not his disciples at the first. The disciples and the multitudes acclaimed Jesus' entry but they did not understand it until later. In spite of the parable that Jesus had just told, in spite of his constant teaching that his Kingdom was not of this world, the people fully expected him to institute the Kingdom in Jerusalem according to the Jewish Messianic ideal of a great national leader. He was entering into Jerusalem to claim his Kingship over the Jewish people and to lead them to freedom and glory, thought the crowds who followed him with joy. Little did they dream that within a short week sorrow and suffering would come to the Son of Man they were honoring as the King above all. Even as the triumphal procession was entering Jerusalem the Jewish and

political leaders were planning to do away with this man who was potentially so dangerous to the political order. Jesus instead of becoming the political leader suffered at the hands of those in authority. The great hopes of a Jewish Messiah were soon to be completely crushed, and Jesus was to show his sovereignty in a manner that no one could anticipate. That is why the writer of John said, all these things understood not his disciples at first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things to him. They did not understand his ride to triumph until later. The glory that they had expected ended in failure and tragic disappointment; Jesus failed to live up to their expectation of a Jewish Messiah, but proved himself King of a different sort. But all this the disciples did not understand until later. When Jesus was arrested and crucified, they fled Jerusalem in fear and disappointment until his reappearance showed them the true meaning of his triumphal entry.

[They hailed him King as He passed by

They strewed their garments in the road

But they were set on earthly things

And He on God

They sang His praise for what He did

But gave His message little thought

They could not see that their soul's good

Was all He sought.

They could not understand why He

With powers so vast as His command

Should hesitate to claim their rights

And free the land.

Their own concerns and this world's hopes

Shut out the wonder of His news;

And we, with larger knowledge, still

His way refuse.

He walks among us still, unseen,

And still points out the only way,

But we still follow other gods

And Him betray.

John Oxenhaus??]

We often like to think that those who knew Jesus enjoyed a great advantage in that they would be sure to fathom and understand his significance and his teachings. If only we were among the chosen few who traveled with him and lived intimately with him, we say, then we would surely appreciate his message. But the truth of the matter is that even his disciples did not understand his mission until later. They were full of the inspiration that fired everyone who knew him; they were convinced that here was the Son of Man; but they did not understand his real purpose until later.

This is hard for us to realize. How could those who knew Jesus have mistaken His purpose? How could they have spent so much time with him and not understand him? It's puzzling until we realize that this is the way with life - we understand the significance of people and events only later. Only after an event has occurred and we see the results of it do we appreciate it's meaning; only after the people we have known are gone do we fully appreciate what they meant to us. We see this illustrated clearly in the events of history. It is a truism that history repeats itself, and yet it is just as true that peoples and nations do not seem to be able to learn from the experiences of history, just as the experience of a parent seems to be useless in helping his child to learn. This is because there is always so much in the world which is never understood - until later.

It needs time and life to interpret experiences and events. Even an insignificant appearing event may have results which are far reaching, results that can be appraised and understood only after the event has occurred. We discover the full meanings only in retrospect. What we ourselves bear and share become meaningful in what they have done to us and in what we have done with them. Thus we give meaning to the past, and make victory or conquest out of sorrow or defeat, perfect a happiness or transform a pain.

It was the great work of the early Christians to reinterpret the events in the life of Jesus into a new meaning which gradually evolved after they began to understand his true meaning in the days following his crucifixion. They began to see that their idea of a Jewish Messiah had failed miserably, and yet they were convinced that Jesus was a unique and divine personage. Gradually therefore his teachings began to acquire new meanings, and by the time the gospel of John was written, the original Messianic ideal is supplanted by a new interpretation of the Kingdom as a spiritual kingdom. And so they turned defeat into victory by properly understanding the mission of Christ; the cross which had been a symbol of defeat and shame was transformed into a glorious symbol of triumph. But this was not understood even by the disciples - until later.

We today can derive comfort and inspiration from this one fact, that we do not fully understand events until later. There is a purpose working in the world which we cannot always fathom, but

as we look back over events, so often even the unpleasant and harsher ones we see were for the best. Even a failure can be a blessing in disguise, for it directs us to a different effort and line of endeavor which will mean success. Phillips Brooks, one of the greatest preachers America has ever known started his career as a failure. Immediately upon finishing his studies at Harvard he was engaged to teach at the famous Boston Latin school. But in the middle of the year he was forced to resign, because he was completely incapable of enforcing discipline among his students, and they literally drove him from the classroom. He felt this failure keenly and spent a year in trying to decide how he might make something of his life. He finally decided to enter the ministry and became an outstanding success. His failure served to show him that it is better to be a great preacher than a poor school teacher. So the events of our lives take on new meanings as we look back on them. Just as pain tells us that something is wrong and needs to be remedied, so the unpleasant failures in life serve to direct our energies in new channels.

[Events affect us but we affect events remaking them]

We often think that if we had our lives to live over again, we should lead them much differently. J. M. Barrie once wrote a play on this theme. In it he showed that if we did have the chance to lead our lives over again, we should do the very same things that we had already done and not changed the course of our lives at all. This is because even if we did have the chance to do over again what we have done, we would not have the necessary knowledge of experience to change our actions.

The massive events of history can only be understood in retrospect. The decisive battles of the world assume significance only as we see their implications in the later developments of history.

We acclaim or condemn things often without understanding what they mean. While, the multitudes were proclaiming Jesus, they were calling out "Who is this man?" There are some things we cannot understand until later, and yet we should in all cases attempt to fathom the importance and meaning of events; examine the values involved before we pass judgment. Reading newspapers 6 mo. late.

[Political and international events should be judged intelligently.]

Misunderstanding makes us condemn friends

Is this the only way we can learn? By looking backwards?

Is there no standard?

Our ultimate task is to understand Jesus?

What did the Palm Sunday mean?

The answer is up to us.

(No agreement as to His interpretation

Jesus as a negro?

Second return?

Was it a product? Of the passing hour or a new epoch of history?

A promise never to be fulfilled or a commission empowered to change the world

We understand later that we should follow Jesus

The Lord rides to triumph as we follow in His train]