

“THE WHOLE WORLD AFTER HIM”

John 12:19

“The whole world is going after Him.” Jesus is described that way in John’s Gospel on Palm Sunday. A great crowd followed Him into Jerusalem. But is that true? Is the whole world following Him? Statistically more people on planet earth are Christian than any other religion. But still the majority of people are not—they do not follow Him. Let’s say that in a more direct way. Each week less than 30% of the population in the US goes to church. The percentage is far less at 4% for college students. Even if we include people who meet for Bible studies or other church functions throughout the week, the vast majority of people around our daily lives do not meet regularly in Jesus’ name. If you follow Jesus, you want to be with Him. If you want to follow Him, you need to be with His people. So the whole world certainly isn’t after Him today.

T. J. Otzelburger took an ISU basketball team that had a disastrous 2020-21 season and had them undefeated before the Big 12 season. Then they began to lose games. This year they were up and down. They beat Baylor three times, but lost in the first round of the NCAA with 20% shooting. When Matt Campbell took over the football team, they did better and took the Big 12 regular season. But since then they too have been up and down. The only thing that seems to be sure, as they continue to develop the facilities, is that more money needs to be spent to be competitive. That will mean raising ticket prices next year. But they won’t have any problem selling them.

How many of us would spend that much to go to worship service? Think of all the news on TV, Twitters, Facebook, You-tubes and newspaper articles on sports. Compare that to what is dedicated to Jesus. “Man does not live by bread alone.” No, he seems to live by games that are played by a handful of people which have nothing to do with putting food on the table, building our houses, teaching our children, or comforting us in pain. We seem to follow sports, the latest craze on Facebook, pop stars. We seem to go after anything—except Jesus.

But on the first Palm Sunday it seems to the leaders of the Jewish religious community that everyone is following Jesus. Passover is going on in Jerusalem. Jews from all over the world come to the temple to make a sacrifice for their most important religious festival. You are considered a good Jew if you can do this each year. Jesus did this Himself as a young man with Mary and Joseph. In fact before that, Jesus, as a baby, was dedicated in the temple by Joseph and Mary. In the Gospels we

see how He regularly went each year to Jerusalem for Passover. Now as He is in Jerusalem for Passover many of the people there are from Jesus' home area of Galilee. After three years of ministry Jesus is well known in Galilee, and many of the people know about His miracles. Also, as we heard last Sunday, right before this Jesus has brought Lazarus back from the dead. This is well known to many people. So when Jesus comes to Jerusalem for the Passover, entering from the east gate to the temple area, riding on a donkey—the symbol of a king coming in peace—this is what was expected of God's promised Savior, the Messiah. That is why many of the people think He is starting to assert Himself as the new King David.

Several days later that changed. Jesus goes back into Jerusalem early Friday morning, not with a crowd of followers, but with a force of guards who seize Him outside the city at Gethsemane. They sneak him into the city on the west side and take Him to the palace of the high priest. There He is condemned and sent in the early morning light to face the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate is manipulated by Jesus' enemies into having Jesus sentenced to death by crucifixion. Where are the crowds then?

Many people weep as Jesus is sent through the streets to a hill outside the city called Golgotha, which means "the place of the skull." But these people don't do anything else because Jesus has disappointed them. He had them at a fever pitch on Sunday as He rode into Jerusalem. They were ready to revolt. But all He did then was spend a few days teaching in the temple. There was no call to revolt, no spectacular miracle, no great sign of restoring the Kingdom of David. Jesus seems to have let them down. He has allowed Himself to be arrested, condemned, and then hung on a cross.

So it seems that Jesus lets us down today. How can a loving God allow people to suffer? Jesus healed people who were blind. Why didn't He just eliminate blindness altogether? Jesus fed the 5,000. Why doesn't He feed the millions who starve all over the world? He talked about peace. Why doesn't He just put an end to all wars?

We also see today how people who follow Jesus can seem like the welcoming crowd on Palm Sunday and the disappointed one on Good Friday. In contrast to many nations in the Far East, Korea has a very high proportion of Christians. However a lot of the seeming growth of the Church there involves the advantage of business connections between Christians. People join churches like you'd join a civic group to make business contacts. In Africa the Church is growing leaps and bounds, but they also face great problems with corruption. We often associate corruption and

dishonesty with tele-evangelists and their megachurches always asking for donations. That is an even greater problem in Africa. As we know power and popularity can corrupt, and absolute power and popularity can corrupt absolutely. So “when the whole world seems to be after Jesus,” we can rightly be suspicious.

Jesus didn't let the whole world follow Him. It wasn't that He foolishly blew the popularity He had on Palm Sunday. No, Jesus knew He had to go to the cross alone. Far from going with Him, the whole world would abandon Him—the crowds, the people who followed Him from Galilee, and even His disciples. And on that cross even His Father would abandon Him. We heard in our Gospel lesson the words, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” The world didn't follow Jesus. Instead He took the sin of the world-- yours, mine, and everyone's-- and died with it on the cross.

And now He may call on the whole world to follow Him, but it won't. He doesn't call us to something entertaining, sensual, or easy. His symbol and message is the cross. It is not a good way to attract a crowd. But Jesus didn't come for a crowd. He came for you and me—for each one of us.

Bill Hyland, a retired newspaper reporter from Boone, wrote about what he looked forward to for Easter as a child. His family would go to his grandparents' farm north of Stafford. One of the things he and his cousins loved to do was play with two piglets they called “Pete” and “Re-Pete.” The piglets were like dogs to them. Then his grandmother would have the best food prepared for them. But one Easter “Pete” and “Re-Pete” were not there. What happened to them? They were the ham for Easter dinner. The food, even grandmother's cooking, was not appetizing to him that year.

When we realize that our celebration of Easter is all based on the cross, on Jesus' death, we see that it is not about being popular or famous or rich or successful. It is not following the crowd. It is about going the other way, a way that may lead to having less, being not so successful, being even in trouble because we go with Jesus, not the crowd.

That is why this week we follow Jesus into Jerusalem, not to stay with the crowds, but to participate in His last supper, to see His arrest in Gethsemane, His false trial, beatings, and sentencing, to go to the cross, and to have Him nail our sins with Him there. We go to be buried with Him into a tomb, so that with Him on Easter we can rise to a new life, not with the whole world, but with Him.