*.JESUS TRENDS*

Mistitled:

*JERUSALEM MARCH MADNESS*

Mark 11:1-11

March 24, 2024

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 populist or popular person 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 Beatle mates were even “more popular than Jesus.”

That claim, of course, set off a storm of protest in a then more conservative post-war 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 pop off with 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 (or at least the number of Internet searches and news stories) between two celebrities or entities, called Google Trends. Type in “Jesus” and the “Beatles” in the Trends search engine and out comes a graph that compares the Google search history of both in the form of a graph. While we don’t know what the graph might have looked like in pre-Internet 1966, as of this writing in 2024, the Beatles garner only half as many Internet searches as Jesus does. 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 still under foreign domination. The Roman occupation of their homeland chafed at many Jews, tempering the joy that was supposed to be part of the festival. 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.

PILATE: The procession of Roman governor Pontius Pilate and his accompanying military force coming into the city from the west provided that military deterrent during the festival. Googling up 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 in Caesarea’s stadium forced the removal of the standards, but only after the Jews used tactics of nonviolent mass resistance, lying down and baring their necks when Pilate’s soldiers, swords in hand, surrounded and attempted to disperse them.

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.

JESUS: On the east side of the city, though, another parade was being planned and the Bethany bloggers would have no doubt been burning up the bandwidth in reporting the arrival of one who would hopefully be a different kind of ruler. Jesus sent his disciples to get a colt, which we assume was a small donkey (Mark isn’t specific but the other Synoptic Gospels are). When the colt has been secured, 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 mixes praise to God with prayer that God will save his people and do it soon. the word Hosanna actually means “save now!”

They spread their cloaks on the road and cut branches from the surrounding fields—actions that were done only in the presence of royalty. Trust us: 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.

I discovered some interesting things about those palms this past week. Palms were associated with Israelite royalty. And they were signs of victory; a competitor in an athletic contest would be honored with waving palm branches. Also palms were known in nearby Egypt. The Egyptians made what they knew as a Tree of Life with palms, signifying everlasting life. So here comes Jesus honored as a victorious king, one who would bring eternal life to his people.

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 make no mistake Jesus coming into Jerusalem is a king: a king of peace, a king of victory, a king who will break the power of military might with humility, and justice, and a 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 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 but effective death on a Roman Cross.

Pilate and the empire he represented were the most powerful force in the known world on that Sunday, but Google up “Jesus” and “Roman empire” today and it’s not even close. Jesus wins in a landslide.

The rest of Holy Week really comes down to a continued struggle for popularity. Jesus has it on Sunday, but in Mark’s timeline, on Monday he turns over the tables in the temple and takes a serious dip, at least among the religious place holders. His verbal sparring with the Pharisees and temple officials had him charging well with the people and led the religious leaders to look for a covert way to bring him down. “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.

Some of those same 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 in the community, in the workplace, or even at home.

What you and I 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 Philippians, in the end everyone will acknowledge him as the ultimate chart topper. Says that right at Phil. 2:10, 11.

So we’d better join the right parade! Amen.