

## PALM SUNDAY

Today we are celebrating Palm Sunday (image of a palm branch) and this year I wanted to look specifically at the children *and their role in Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.*

I thought that emphasis would fit well with the lovely skit our kids just put on for you.

But before I share with you some very brief thoughts about the Biblical children on the first Palm Sunday, I want to invite up one of our long time Sunday School teachers – Edith Pinhoe.

And Edith you told me that you have been teaching Sunday School since the mid 1960's – and you are still going strong – now that deserves applause!

Edith told me a story recently that I wanted her to share about asking her Sunday School class a very important question...and I thought that it would fit in well with today...so Edith I am going to turn it over to you.

## EDITH SHARES

EDITHS QUESTION: **WHY DO YOU COME TO SUNDAY SCHOOL?**

Thanks for sharing Edith. The thing about this story is that I have asked adults that same question in other churches that I have served over the years– what is the most important reason you come to church?

And the responses have been very different than what the kids told Edith

To the question, “what is the most important reason you come to church” – the most common response in one church “to see my friends”. Or, because *there is no one else to put out the coffee pot; or because my wife makes me* – I got all of those answers and just a couple said, “to worship God”.

So given my experience before, I was touched by the simple honest response of our kids. When Edith gave them a way out and said, “*Don’t say what I want to hear, simply say exactly how you feel and why you come*” – and don’t forget you can’t lie cause you are in Gods house – their answers were right on target. They said...

***We come because we want to learn more about God and Jesus and the Bible.***

Not...my parents make me. Not because I have to.

So on the first Palm Sunday...

Upon his initial entry into Jerusalem, there are thousands who have gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Someone asked me once why everyone was there a week before the Passover actually started.

And I didn't know the answer so I had to look it up...but the reason is because you had to get to Jerusalem early in order to ritually cleanse yourself and become purified so that you could enter the temple, and present your sacrifice..

There were baths you had to take and whole series of cleansing rituals were involved, so if you wanted to go into the temple you had to get there a week or so early to purify yourself.

So as Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey there are thousands of people already there – children and adults crying out “**hosanna**” together, which means “**SAVE NOW**”, and they waved palm branches and also put their cloaks in the road for Jesus to walk on. (take off coat and put it down) and by doing that they were saying that they believed that he was their deliverer – their Messiah – the deliverer from the Romans.

Although there were many people calling Hosanna initially...the children are mentioned a little bit later as having followed Jesus all the way to the temple, and they were now shouting out in the temple courts, Hosanna to the son of David! They just wouldn't quit!

You know how kids keep on keeping on?

I was playing hopscotch with the Santa Marta kids this past time, and after about half an hour I was ready to stop. Not them. They played for two hours!

Kids are not intimidated by the things that intimidate us. Here they are in this elaborate courtyard of the temple.

The temple itself at the time was not a very big building. It could fit inside a football field. But Herod had poured a great deal of money into the outer courts and the plazas surrounding the temple because he really wanted to show off his great construction abilities and all of his wealth.

He wanted to draw people to Jerusalem. During the time of Jesus the temple was in the process of being constructed on the outside on Herod's dime so it was very elaborate and the whole thing – including the courtyards surrounding the temple – was about the size of 10 football fields. (IMAGE OF ELABORATE COURTYARD TEMPLE)

So you have this huge monstrosity of a structure, – rather intimidating...and then you have these religious leaders standing around, who are quite stuffy and rigid and intimidating as well. And two groups predominate....and you read about them in scripture and they are

**The Saducees and the Pharisees.** The Sadducees were an old group – part of this old priestly aristocracy. They're the land holding group ... the descendants of the people who came back from the Babylonian exile. They were the old Jerusalem upper crust.

And they were in charge of most of the political life of Jerusalem proper. They dominated the city council of Jerusalem, or what is called the Sanhedrin.

The Pharisees were a Johnny-come-lately group that had joined the political ranks of Jerusalem life, just before the Romans came on the scene. The Pharisees were kind of a faction against the old guard aristocracy called the Sadducees.

And there are tensions between these two groups in terms of how Passover lambs should be sacrificed, how to do rituals of purification, and on and on.

**The Sadducees are conservative. They only read the Torah, the five books of Moses.** They don't read other things among the Scriptures as authoritative. And so as a result, they don't believe in certain ideas.

For example, it's typically suggested that they do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Why? Because it's not in the Torah. **The Pharisees**, on the other hand, are, if anything, **were the religious liberals ... the progressives of their day.**

They want to reinterpret the Scriptures. They want to read more texts, all of which are the expression of this vibrant Judaism of the time. And as a result, **they're willing to entertain new ideas, new beliefs, such as that of the resurrection of the dead.**

OK. So into all this rides Jesus humble and lowly on a donkey. Into all of this political, religious, stuff, and into Herod's gaudy demonstration of wealth and opulence, he comes, and

following Jesus, shouting at the top of their lungs, running all around the temple courts, still waving palm branches, come the little children.

They have not stopped praising Jesus from the time he entered the gate.

The children have followed Jesus with their palm branches – in the middle of this beautiful temple area with columns and courtyards, mosaics and sculptures, unaware of the formalities and religious proprieties – and what are they doing?

They are focusing on exactly the right thing...they are focusing on Jesus and shouting praises to him.

And the Saducees and the Pharisees look askance!

I don't know how many of you know that one way I worked my way through college in the 80's was to be Cookie Monster to a bunch of preschoolers who came to do gymnastics with a TV celebrity – Susy Prudden who had her own TV exercise show.

And these little wealthy East Side of Manhattan kids would come, and I would perform for them as Cookie Monster and sing the people in the bus go up and down...and one of the verses she had me singing was, “The people in the bus...they look askance!” None of those little kids really knew what that meant, but they loved to say “askance” and then look down their noses at one another.

Well the Pharisees and the Saducees looked askance at the children. It was not proper to praise Jesus in the temple – to

call him the Son of David, which meant he was their deliverer/Messiah

But the kids had it right.

All the religious formality in the world, all the discussions on doctrine and proper religion, ended up missing Jesus – God himself in their midst.

All this religious stuff paled in comparison to the innocent heart that praises God eagerly and well, with energy and enthusiasm.

It says Jesus did wonderful things...Mark says he healed the blind and the lame... “*When the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ they were indignant.*”

“Do you hear what these children are saying?” demanded the religious rulers.

Jesus tells them, “Yes” and then he quotes scripture to them, that both the Pharisees and Sadducees knew quite well...but he says ...

*Have you not heard? (you should know what’s going on now but you don’t) From the lips of children and infants you have ordained perfect praise.*

Why perfect praise?

Because the children cut through all of the religious formality and ritual that was so part of the culture. They could care less about propriety, organizational expectations, and doctrinal tensions.

Children love simply and well.

They are invested in relationships that matter.

They are innocent of evil, and they laugh and play easily.

They sing and they shout, and usually when someone is authentic and loves them they know it.

Perfect praise comes from that kind of freedom, that kind of a heart.

**Robert Coles**

**is Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Medical Humanities at Harvard Medical School. He's the author of a book called *The Spiritual Life of Children* and he has spent his career studying kids spiritual sensitivities. He states: children are ....keenly attuned to the darkness as well as the light of life; and they can teach us about living honestly, searchingly and courageously if we let them.**

Yes...the children shouted Hosanna that day, and were the first ones ever to praise Jesus in the temple. Long before the disciples or the apostles taught about Jesus in the temple, the children praised him there.



And Jesus tells the religious leaders who stood there stuffy, and looking askance at the children, telling Jesus to quiet them down...Jesus says..."If they were quiet the very stones would cry out!

Why? Because God himself stood in their midst, and the religious leaders didn't recognize him

But the children knew

Because salvation was at the doorstep – the ultimate Passover Lamb had come – and the religious ones stood in judgment

But the children knew Jesus was wonderful

Hosannah! Or salvation...was about to happen for all of humanity...for all generations...for all time and all people

Yet it was the children who praised him that day – the religious people – in all their fervor...missed him!

I know from my survey that sometimes people in the church miss him too in all of their preoccupation with the duties at hand...

Yet, just as he entered the gates of Jerusalem long ago he wants to enter the gates of your heart right now...

So I want to offer you a challenge in honor of those children who didn't stop praising, who knew that when they were with Jesus they were with someone wonderful...

The challenge is the **PALMS UP CHALLENGE** because its Palm Sunday. (close eyes)

Someone wonderful is with you today too...Jesus himself is here

So to do the **PALMS UP CHALLENGE** put your palms up in your lap in an attitude of surrender and receptivity.

Surrender religious obligation and duty, and instead receive Jesus who is so real and so close...receive him again

Surrender all that you do for church, and receive instead all that Jesus has done for you

Surrender focusing on what's wrong, and instead focus on what is right, which is God with you filled with joy and all his promises

Surrender criticizing another Christian brother or sister today, and receive instead the power of the Holy Spirit who will enable you to see Jesus in them.

Surrender worrying about pleasing God and receive instead the joy of his presence with you now and simply praise his name...

Dear Lord...

The children had it right that day in the temple. They knew that they were with you and you were so wonderful that nothing could stop their praise...

Let us not miss you in all of our religious distraction, but may we find you in the simple awareness that you are real, that you

are with us, and that you eagerly came to die for us to give us our salvation. Hosanna to you wonderful Lord! AMEN