

WHAT DID JESUS DO?

John 12:12-16; Philippians 2:5-11

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PROLOGUE

It was Palm Sunday but because of a sore throat, five-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with a sitter. When the family returned, they were carrying several palm fronds. Johnny asked them what they were for. "People held them over Jesus' head as he went by," his father told him. "Wouldn't you know it," Johnny fumed, "the one Sunday I don't go and he shows up!"

SCRIPTURE

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. {13} So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-- the King of Israel!" {14} Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: {15} "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" {16} His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him (John 12:12-16 NRSV).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, {6} who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, {7} but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, {8} he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. {9} Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "What would Jesus do?" became popular in the United States in the 1890s after the publication of Charles Sheldon's phenomenal best-seller, *In His Steps*, which was subtitled "What Would Jesus Do?" It re-emerged in the 1990s under the acronym WWJD and you probably have seen it on a great variety of goods - coffee mugs, bracelets, T-shirts and the like. WWJD is an abbreviation of "What Would Jesus Do?" The idea being to let this question guide you in what you say or do so that it is done in a Christ-like manner. But it is difficult to know what Jesus WOULD do if you do not know what Jesus DID do.

So what did Jesus do? The short answer is Jesus died. But there is nothing unusual in that. Sooner or later we all experience the same thing. But Jesus' death had profound meaning and it is the meaning of that death which will have the greatest affect on how we live life. And so we will be in a better situation to consider WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) If we know WDJD (What Did Jesus Do?).

1. HUMBLE IN LIFE

The church calls today "Palm" Sunday. But if you were to ask many Americans what "Palm" refers to, they are more likely think of a hand-held electronic organizer than an event in the life of Jesus. But Palm Sunday is not a day for Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), rather it is day to remember when Jesus entered Jerusalem in a manner described as "humble and riding on a donkey" (Zech 9:9 NRSV). Jesus' riding into the city on a young donkey was a sign of peace. He did not ride a war horse or carry a sword or wear a crown. Nor did he ride in on a wheeled vehicle, as was customary for ancient royalty. He deliberately rode a donkey. But I am afraid the gesture was lost on the crowd bent on a Messiah who would be the rival of the Emperor in Rome.

Knowing what is ahead, we can appreciate all too fully the irony of Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem. "Hosanna!" the crowds cried. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" becomes, in a few short days, "Crucify him!" The king they were hoping for was not the king they got.

This humility of Jesus is the theme of the great hymn of the early church, which the Apostle Paul either wrote or quoted in his letter to the Philippians. God-in-Christ came to us, not in earthly pomp or with blasts of heavenly trumpets, but humbly, as one of us.

Paul was writing to a church that needed an attitude check. In effect Paul says, "Forget yourselves, think about your neighbors." Specifically he says:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . ." (Phil 2:3-5).

The Greek culture, which formed the cultural backdrop for Paul's churches, took a dim view of humility. They would have agreed with Lancelot in the play Camelot, "I find humility means to be hurt; it's not the earth the meek inherit, it's the dirt." We, too, have trouble with humility. We tend to see humility as an indicator of low self-esteem.

Yet, Christ made humility a virtue. This is because humility is not about thinking bad thoughts about yourself. Humility is about not thinking about yourself at all. It is thinking about others. When Mary mourned the death of her brother, Lazarus, Jesus shared her tears

and he shares our tears, also. Even when Jesus was in agony on the cross he still thought of others: his mother, his disciples, his executioners and in some deep and mysterious way he also thought of each one of us.

2. OBEDIENT IN DEATH

Jesus was humble in life and obedient to the point of death.

Throughout the New Testament we hear echoes of Isaiah. The early church saw in Christ the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Suffering Servant. And so it is in this hymn found in the letter to the Philippians. In the verses which describe Christ's self-emptying, we hear again Isaiah's song of the Suffering Servant: "he poured out himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors" (Isa 53:12). Paul adds that this death was on a cross, a cruel way to die, a death reserved primarily for rebellious slaves and foreigners.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" So he was acknowledged on Palm Sunday; so we welcome him into our midst even today ... for we know today what that first Palm Sunday crowd did not know--that he was coming to die for the life of the world. This story is not about Palm Pilots or even palm branches but the palms and feet of the Savior. The hand that once held the universe was fastened to the Roman gibbet by a rusty nail. This is so difficult to grasp and even more so when we realize why he did it. He died that we might live and have life abundant and eternal.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

3. EXULTANT IN RESURRECTION

Isaiah puts forward, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). But humiliation and death are not the end, for Isaiah also prophesied, "See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high" (Isa 52:13).

For resurrection to happen, death has to have occurred. For Jesus' resurrection to happen--that joyful Easter victory we wait to celebrate--he first had to die. After his resurrection he explained to his disciples: "It was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and so enter into his glory" (Luke 24:26).

Paul and others saw in Christ Jesus the Second Adam. A.M. Hunter puts it this way:

The First Adam, who was created in God's likeness, sought to seize parity with God, and through his disobedience lost the glorious image of his Maker. But the Second Adam, Christ, who is the Heavenly Man, although he pre-existed in the true likeness of God, humbled himself obediently and accepted the status of a servant... he chose the way of meek submission to God's will, which ended in a

cross. This obedience . . . reverses Adam's primal disobedience and leads to Christ's exaltation by the Father. (A. M. Hunter, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, 94.)

For his obedience, Jesus was given the "name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9). Names, we know, are extraordinarily important and meaningful in the Bible. A change in status often was accompanied by a new name: Abram became Abraham and Sarai changed to Sarah when they received the promise of God (Gen 17:5). Jacob became Israel when God entered into a new relationship with him (Gen 32:28). Saul, when the Holy Spirit filled him, became Paul (Acts 13:9). Now, in his exaltation, Jesus, the humble, obedient, crucified servant becomes Lord.

What this means for us in terms of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) is that the answer is not just a matter of imitating Christ's example, for that would often end in failure. Rather it is a matter of relying upon the power and presence of the Risen Lord in our lives. Paul puts it this way:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20 NIV).

CONCLUSION

We, with the Christian community at Philippi, are called to practice in our lives what the Spirit produces in our hearts through our relationship with Jesus Christ. This week, we follow the footsteps of Jesus as he goes to die on the cross. In our sorrow, it is tempting to turn inward. Self-examination is understandable during this holiest of weeks. But it must not overwhelm our concerns for others or our outreach to those outside the church. May we move through the Passion and crucifixion and, at the remembrance of the resurrection, affirm with all our hearts, "Jesus is Lord!"

So What Did Jesus Do?

He gave himself for you.

What Would Jesus Do?

He would live in you.

Amen.