

**Stanford Memorial Church
April 1, 2007 (Palm Sunday)**

**WHO WAS THAT MAN?
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.**

**Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29
Gospel: Luke 19.28-40**

Well . . . that was quite a spectacle—even for Jerusalem! And who could ask for a more perfect spring day, radiant sunshine and a soft breeze stirring the flowers. For a while though I wasn't sure our palm trees would survive. Have you ever seen so many waving palm branches? Where in the world did all those people come from?

I have to tell you though I was beginning to get a bit nervous when the Roman soldiers showed up. They seem to have a talent for being on the scene when an opportunity for an encounter presents itself, especially when it gives them an opportunity to try out their swords, clubs, spears—or any other weapons they have developed to ensure we know who is running this country. As if we had any question about that! Did you see their nodding to one another, the knowing smiles, the tensing of their muscles? Well I certainly did, which is why I decided the better part of wisdom was to move out of the line of fire, so to speak. Once those Roman soldiers charge into a crowd the blood will begin to flow. They could care less if some are killed and others maimed for life; they're just—as they say-- doing their duty. Then they accuse us of being terrorists! Well it's pretty hard not to fight back, in any way possible, when you see innocent bystanders—especially women and children—killed in one of their frenzied attacks.

But it was not easy leaving that ecstatic crowd, even if I risked getting my head cracked open. The enthusiasm, the surging sense of joy, the feeling of getting caught up in something greater than yourself . . . it was just so transforming and overwhelming. Oh, and there was something else, and you will undoubtedly get a laugh out of this—but I just had to see that colt, one more time, that Jesus was riding.

You may not believe this, but that colt was raised by my brother and me at our farm in Bethany. As you probably know, Bethany is little more than a stone's throw from Jerusalem. You go out, past the Mount of Olives, and there you are. Well our family has been raising horses for years, and we have seen a lot of horses, but *this* one was special. Not only did he have a unique, light coloring, and perfect lines; but from the beginning he had an independent nature combined with a kind of warmth and affection. I know this sounds weird but, my brother and I recognized this special nature almost from the time of birth and decided that this colt was going to be different. So special, in fact, that no one would ride him. I don't know what possessed us, but it just seemed like the right thing to do. Maybe we thought we could get more money for him if we said no one had ever ridden him, or, more likely, we were saving him for a very special occasion—like the marriage of one of our children. At any rate, the colt became more of a pet than a farm animal. So he would follow us around, and people were

forever wanting to pet him. As a matter of fact that's kind of what happened this morning. We had tied the colt to a tree and were having breakfast with some friends. Then my brother grabbed my arm and began shouting, "Hey, what are you guys doing untying our colt?" We jumped up, grabbed a couple of big sticks, ran outside and demanded to know why they were untying our colt. Well, you will not believe what they said. They looked at us, a little apprehensively when they saw our sticks, and then—as if it were the most natural thing in the world—they said, "The Lord needs it." *The Lord needs it.* I will remember those words for the rest of my life. It just seemed so right. From day one we knew this colt was special; so what could be more appropriate than to have the Lord ride him.

Then things really began to snowball, even though we don't have snow here in Jerusalem—you know what I mean. People seemed to materialize from everywhere, something no one had ever seen before in Bethany. Several individuals took off their cloaks and put them on the colt, for Jesus to sit on. And as he rode along, "people kept spreading their cloaks on the road" (Luke 19.36). As the procession moved down from the Mount of Olives toward the city of Jerusalem, "the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice . . . saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heavens!'"(Luke 19.38).

What about all those people waving their branches? It was like the Messiah had arrived. And how could you miss the disciples walking around Jesus? There was Judas smiling from ear to ear. I understand he is the political radical of the group, anxious to follow a messiah who will drive out the Roman pagans from our holy land. Of course you could not miss Peter, the tall one, who often seems so impetuous. He and James and John had given up their occupation as fishermen to follow Jesus. I'll bet they never dreamed they would be stars of a celebration like this. And what about the women who were there as well—Mary Magdalene, who had been with Jesus almost from the beginning of his ministry, as well as Mary and Martha from my home village of Bethany.

All the time I could not help but wonder, "where is Jesus in all of this jubilation and excitement. . . I wonder what he's thinking?" I thought he would be a little more friendly and grateful for all this attention and adulation. True, there was a slight smile on his lips, but he seemed more resigned . . . a little distant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. At times he appeared to me more like he was going through an ordeal rather than being the star of a popular uprising.

Maybe it had something to do with the religious leaders. While a few appeared interested, most seemed puzzled, and a good many others were obviously not happy. Have you ever noticed that it seems to be that way with some religious types, they just have a hard time enjoying life. And speaking of religion, we even had some of the leading Pharisees there, the most religious men of all. Those guys are so totally committed to being religiously perfect; every aspect of their life is determined by religious guidelines and rituals. They even tithe ten per cent of their salt! Did you hear some of them shouting to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop" (Luke 19.39). And then what about his response? I think it was something like, "I tell you, if these

were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19.40)? I still haven’t quite figured that one out. It’s as if the crowd is cheering and shouting for something in the here and now; but he is focusing on all of creation, something that involves everyone and the entire world in which we live. “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

By the way, you mentioned you were a visitor to Palestine. Aside from our Roman conquerors and the traders who pass through Jerusalem, we are not exactly known as a tourist destination—nothing like Alexandria or Athens, or even Pompeii. May I ask where you are from and what brought you here? Oh, I see, you are with the RINS, the Roman Imperial News Service and you’ve decided to do a story on this religious movement that’s beginning to attract some attention beyond Palestine. (By the way, please ignore my earlier comments about terrorism.) I had no idea that news of what is going on in our little country had traveled all the way to the capital of the empire. If you have come here from Rome, that’s like from one end of the world to the other. Now I understand why you asked me, “Who was that man?” when Jesus rode by with all the shouting and excitement.

Well I have to tell you that your question—Who was that man?—is a familiar one, one many of us have been asking for some three years now. Nowadays it is almost impossible to go to any part of the country and not hear people talking about this man Jesus. As near as I can tell, it all started about three years ago, with a strange kind of ritual in the river Jordon. There was this man called John the Baptist, a prophetic kind of guy who lived in the desert, exclaiming to people that they needed to repent of their sins and wrongdoings by being baptized in the Jordon river. He reminded me so much of the prophets of old that we read about in our ancient Hebrew scriptures. Well one day Jesus showed up on the shore, and I understand that there seemed to be some bond or recognition between them. At any rate, I was told that John the Baptist called Jesus his Lord, saying that Jesus should baptize him. But Jesus insisted on being baptized by John. Some even say that when Jesus came up out of the water they heard a great voice, like from heaven, saying “This is my beloved son.”

Well that was the beginning and there have been no end of stories since then. A number of men and women have given up their jobs and left their families in order to become his followers. I don’t know how they survive, but somehow they do. There have been stories of his feeding as many as 5,000 people from a couple of baskets of bread. And that’s just the beginning. A number of others have been attracted by his teachings, in one way or another telling us how we need to care for one another—even those that we might have considered to be our enemies, as well as the needy and outcast. That’s pretty hard to swallow when you’ve been taught all your life not to be too nice or people will take advantage of you, or you need to watch out and get the other guy before he gets you.

Then there are the many stories about Jesus performing miraculous healings—some who were blind, a number of lame people, several who were crippled, and even some who seemed possessed by demons. Well that struck me as pretty far out until Jesus came and visited our little village of Bethany about a year ago. We had a well-known man there by the name of Lazarus. A kind of natural leader, he had even been mayor at

one time, successful in business; in fact, at one point he actually helped my brother and me when we were going through some rough financial times.. He was probably the first person you would turn to if you needed some good advice, whether about business, your marriage or raising your children. But the ironic thing is that he never married; instead he lived with his two sisters Mary and Martha. They were always a joy to visit, Mary and Lazarus would be so interested in you and how you and your family were doing, though Martha seemed a bit compulsive at times: the meal had to be perfect, the house had to be perfect. You know, that kind of person. Then she would become miffed because Mary was spending too much time having a good time with the guest rather than helping in the kitchen. Then one day, out of the blue, Lazarus became seriously ill and died. At least when we held a mirror to his nose we did not see any evidence of life. But Jesus, who had visited the family before, happened to be in the neighborhood and immediately came to see them. He left the crowds that were following him just about everywhere, to express his concern and caring for Mary and Martha. But that is hardly the end of the story. Shortly after he arrived, Jesus went into Lazarus' room, we thought probably to say a last goodbye. But I will never forget the scene when Jesus came out of the room. Lazarus was with him, looking as hale and hearty as ever. Needless to say, the people of Bethany were about as close to speechless as you can imagine. Here it is a year later and we still shake our heads and wonder about it.

Well, I apologize for rattling on here a little too much, but you asked "Who was that man," and I just could not help thinking about all the things I have been seeing and hearing these last months about Jesus. The bottom line for me is his caring for others, being kind of a living example of how we should live with one another. It's hard to imagine how different this world could be if we could actually follow his example. What would it be like not to have wars? What would it be like to have so much caring for others that we would not have to worry about hunger and starvation? What would it be like if children who lost their parents were taken care of by other families? What would it be like if widows did not have to become destitute when their husbands died? What would it be like if we could provide quality schools for our children?

So you ask me, "Who was that man," and I have say I am still trying to figure that one out myself. Maybe this demonstration today will set in motion a whole new way of living and doing things, of changing the way of why we are here and what we are doing with our lives.

I'll tell you what, I have this feeling that things are sort of coming to a climax here in Jerusalem. So lets meet here next weekend and see what happens; rumors are that there may even be another demonstration. Maybe we can go out for dinner afterwards and talk about it; and maybe then we will really figure out who he is. See you next week.