

**FROM ROCK STAR STATUS TO REALITY; MARK 11:1-11; APRIL 5, 2009 – PALM/PASSION SUNDAY; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER**

We live in a ‘rock star’ age. Our new president has been described as a ‘rock star’; more and more media is devoted to feeding our fascination with celebrity – video bios of the top 100 female stars; headlines in the daily paper for the finalists of *American Idol*.

I do admit being glued to my television to make sure I didn’t miss Bruce Springsteen hopping around stage at the Super Bowl half time show. I’m amazed he didn’t break an ankle, at age 62, leaping off that grand piano.

It’s all rather ephemeral. Maybe it takes us out of the daily grind by seeing what the rich and famous do for housing or transportation or what kind of clothes they like to wear. But I often wonder who will remember tomorrow which celebrity was ranked 52 in last week’s 100 countdown or who was number 1 for that matter. How fickle our taste for fame.

And isn’t this the way it was when Jesus entered the Holy City 2,000 years ago: lots of frenzied ‘to do’ at the sight of him, then a chilling reversal of public opinion days later when he was brought before the crowd by the authorities.

My hunch is Jesus wasn’t surprised. He never deceived himself by the swirl of attention and paparazzi surrounding him. He never lost sight of his mission and knew that reality would settle in; and that that mission would ultimately expose his followers’ compromised commitments and ambitions for personal gain.

Today’s lesson from Philippians puts it succinctly: “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness and humbled himself, obedient to the point of death.”

There’s a certain justice to Jesus sending James and John to secure transportation into the Holy City. Just hours before these two had been arguing about who would get to sit where when Jesus’ new administration took the reigns of power.

But no sooner are they contemplating their cabinet seats than Jesus puts them on donkey detail.

And this fits Mark’s unvarnished view of the disciples. So Mark the most succinct of the Gospels spends precious words, in today’s story, going into the details of the disciples’ unglamorous assignment. He doesn’t want us to miss the point that these self-appointed Future Secretaries of the Jesus Administration are schlepping around Jerusalem to borrow a donkey.

But rather than teasing these two, who instead of becoming power brokers in the new regime, transform into apostles and finally martyrs for Jesus, Mark holds them up as reminders that our following Jesus is not about us, it is about him.

He wants to show us that it’s not always the big and important things we do but sometimes the little things that end up changing the world.

It’s not easy in a society of VIP treatment and signing bonuses to get this but I am convinced the more we do the more real our lives become.

It's not about us, it's about him. We just saw "Rachel Getting Married" a powerful, painstaking portrayal of an American family dealing with addiction and the tragic death of a child. What drives the plot, in part, is the dynamic between two sisters who think that the other one always thinks that everything is about her and relentlessly tries to steal the show. That's what we're dealing with.

Disciples can act that way too. But today's story reminds us that it takes putting our egos aside to make room for Jesus before we can recognize or hear him.

And that new awareness often begins with some menial task. Henri Nouwen tells the story of his caring for a profoundly retarded young man named Adam. Nouwen, the famous author and Yale/Harvard professor emptying himself, struggles with his impulse for self recognition and importance to care for the basic human needs of a man who could barely say his name.

The inspiring thing that Mark communicates today is that all of us, even the self-aggrandizing James and John, have the capacity to empty ourselves like Jesus.

It's true. I've seen you do it time and again. Someone takes their homemade spaghetti sauce to a friend who lost her husband; an exercise buddy arranges rides to Roswell for his friend fighting cancer; a family bakes cookies for a son of the congregation going off to boot camp.

Or two disciples spend the afternoon mucking through stables to find a donkey so their teacher can make the final leg of his journey into the city.

There is a spiritual chemistry at work in these small acts of service and caring and it is this: when we set aside—not our own needs—so much as our very human tendency to think 'it's about me' in order to make room for our neighbor in need, for the stranger, for Jesus who said he comes to us in the least of these – we carry out the will of God.

Every time we empty ourselves in some act of service we make room for Jesus to touch the heart not just of the recipient but our hearts and lives. And we enter a reality, a way of being, that no other experience or possession can match.

It's the only way I can explain the comment I hear over and over from tutors and Habitat volunteers and Sunday School teachers and husbands and wives and parents whose example of caring for their own families has inspired me – it's the only way I can explain the comment, "I get more than I give. I'm the lucky one. What a blessing to serve."

Yet, it is an irony that we often have little time for such things. We stand on the very springs of living water that would quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger yet choose to fill our lives with more work or entertainment or busyness in a search for meaning.

It's not how eloquent our words to a grieving friend or how good the cookies for the new soldier but the fact that we've placed someone else's welfare ahead of our own that speaks volumes to others in a vocabulary of caring the world is desperate to hear and our lives were designed to embody.

It's hard to imagine God's word ever getting through to us, ever being heard and responded to, without faithful disciples swallowing their pride to get a donkey or spending an afternoon to bake then deliver a tin of chocolate chips.

So come to the table of broken bread and wine poured out: holy reminders of Jesus putting *himself* aside to ride to his death so that God's invitation could be extended to you and me in this rock star-obsessed world.

How fickle our taste for fame.

How deep and real our longing to give something lasting, something of God. Amen.