

Drew Dyck, the tongue in cheek writer of *Christianity Today's* Church Humor page, recently had a column titled, “The Subtle Art of the Spiritual Humble Brag.”

(Churchhumornewsletter@lists.christianitytoday.com). It tickled my funny bone. He begins: You’ve probably heard of the humble brag, a supposedly self-deprecating statement with the secret purpose of making yourself look awesome. For example: “I can’t believe I tripped over the dog and broke my arm. Now I’m going to have to get someone else to write my acceptance letter to Harvard.” Or, “I’m really forgetful, but not as bad as my good friend, Tom Hanks.” Then there are spiritual humble brags. But here you have to be careful. Since it’s a spiritual humble brag, you don’t want to get busted. So before I try them out on social media, let me test my spiritual humble brag on you? OK here goes. All my pants are worn out in the knees. But spending three hours in prayer every morning is totally worth it! #blessed. Drew then asks, “What do you think? Not subtle enough?”

To be honest there wasn’t much subtleness to Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. All four gospels tell the story of Palm Sunday, but only John’s gospel notes that “*At first his disciples did not understand all this*” (12:16). I can see why because it was so out of character for Jesus. What the gospel story makes me wonder is what Jesus thought of himself. Beginning with his actions in coming into Jerusalem, as well as in Jesus’ instructions to his disciples, we get some insight as to who he was. He came to Bethpage and Bethany on the east side of Jerusalem, which sits nearly on top of the Mount of Olives. The rabbis and Josephus the historian both associated this Mount with Messianic themes. So they begin there and prepare this grand entry into Jerusalem, all this after Jesus has worked so hard to keep a low profile up to now.

He is not entering as a tourist or a worshipper, but as a king. He chose an unriden donkey and commandeered it as a king would. Then he told the disciples to tell the owner of the colt that “the Lord” needed it. And he told them with a display of divine foreknowledge exactly where the colt would be waiting for them. One writer said that “All this ‘looks like a claim to authority,’ and his actions encourage the crowd to blazon his name jubilantly from the street corners and rooftops.”

The reformer John Calvin once wrote: “Whatever title that men may hold, they are to be listened to only on the condition that they do not lead us away from obeying God. So we must examine all their traditions by the rule of the Word of God. We must obey princes and others who are in authority, but only in so far as they do not deny to God his rightful authority as the supreme King, Father, and Lord.”

We must remember that even though the crowd may have been a little off in their perception of Jesus, he was not. Everything that he said or thought about himself was absolutely true. He is truth. He said that too. Jesus was clearly making a statement about himself that he was King and Master, and Lord, that he was God in the flesh, that he was Messiah, Savior, Deliverer, Spotless Lamb, Servant, and Final Sacrifice. We will never know the fullness of all that Jesus is, for I believe that even in heaven there will be perfections about him revealed to us. And we constantly need to be reminding ourselves of these truths because these are the things about him that keep us grounded when trouble and discouragement comes. Do we treat him as though he was our king? Do we live to lavish praise upon him? Would we be willing to lay down our earthly treasures for his donkey’s colt to walk on? Is our life marked with unquestioned obedience to his commands? Are we OK when his will for our life doesn’t line up with our own?

And then I was wondering what the crowds thought of him. I'm including the disciples with the crowd. This text demonstrates the intentions of most religious people. They want political deliverance first and then obedience. They want an earthly king. They were chanting religious quotations, but motivated by personal or nationalistic interests. And the disciples were egging them on! Oh, Jesus was declaring his kingship, but not kingship over that kind of kingdom. And then after all the starstruckness (Is that a word?) the crowds seem to vanish and Jesus is left with the disciples alone in the temple courts. How fickle people are! Maybe they were waiting for a coup that day? Maybe they were looking for miracles or free food.

One of Denmark's leading sculptors had a burning ambition to create the greatest statue of Jesus ever made. He began by shaping a clay model of a triumphant, regal figure. The head was thrown back and the arms were upraised in a gesture of great majesty. It was his conception of Christ the King: Strong, Dominant. "This will be my masterpiece," he said, on the day the sculpture was completed. But, during the night a heavy fog rolled into the area and sea-spray seeped through a partially opened window of the artist's ocean-side studio. The moisture affected the shape of the model so that when the artist returned to the studio in the morning, he was shocked to find a wounded figure. Droplets of moisture had formed on the statue creating the illusion of bleeding. The head had drooped. The facial expression had been transformed from severity to compassion. And the arms had dropped into an attitude of welcome. The artist stared at the figure, agonizing over the time wasted and the need to begin over again. But something came over him to change his mood. He began to see that this image of Christ was the truer one. Then he wrote at the base of the newly-shaped figure: "*Come unto me.*" How easily people become disillusioned.

The crowds completely missed the point of the last few years of Jesus' ministry. They missed what he had just reiterated in Mark 10:45: "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.*" And of course on their way to Jerusalem he told the disciples on the road that he would be condemned to death, killed and three days later he would rise.

Some of our preconceptions and traditions may not be in line with what we know about Jesus or what is taught in the Bible. We must leave room for the Sovereignty and Mystery of God. He may not always do what we think. He may have reasons that are beyond our comprehension. Don't ever get to the place that you think you have God figured out or contained. Try not to lead him. Instead follow Jesus. Who is Jesus Christ? He is the One who comes in the name of Yahweh, the Great "I Am." He is the Savior of Israel. But despite the color and spectacle and apparent joy that surrounds the events we now call Palm Sunday, all that exuberance is not the final word on what it means to be the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

What does Palm Sunday reveal about the identity of Jesus? Maybe another way to approach that question is to ask, What if the gospel story ended with Palm Sunday? Like the disciples, we might like it if the gospel could conclude right there. After all the disciples had been through, they must have seen Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and thought, "OK. Now that's more like it!" But there is no salvation on Palm Sunday. That festive atmosphere, in one sense befitting the true, deep-down royalty of Jesus as God's Son, just doesn't fit our world. It doesn't address the problems that need solving.

Palm Sunday often seems like the one bright spot in the otherwise dark season of Lent—a brief reprieve of celebration and happiness before we plunge into the darkness and pain of Holy Week. But on this day,

as always, we need to look deeply into the eyes of the man who is bumping along on a donkey's colt. We need to see in them a reminder that the "One who comes in the name of the Lord" needs to complete the difficult work of the Lord. Before the story is over, we'll know that the work of the Lord is bloody and ugly and raw.

We in the church won't help the Holy Spirit save anyone if we never get past the glitzy good feeling of Palm Sunday. If we don't follow Jesus through the passion and pain of Holy Week, our faith could easily end up looking like nothing more than a spiritual humble brag. Hollow and immature.

But if we want to have an authentic life-giving faith, we need to come to the Savior hanging on a wooden cross who cries out to the Lord in whose name he has come: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?*"