

A Less-Than-Immaculate Reception

You've got to be pretty old to remember this: It's a football play that is still considered to be the greatest play of all time. A big game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders, with the 1972 AFC championship on the line.

It's the Steelers' ball, and they are down by one point: Raiders 7, Steelers 6. It's 4th and 10 from the Steelers' 40 which means the Steelers have 60 yards to go. There are 22 seconds left on the clock, and then the game is over.

Needless to say, the Raiders' fans were already starting to celebrate. Last play of the game, with everything on the line. The ball is snapped, and quarterback Terry Bradshaw drops back.

He is immediately swarmed by the Raiders defenders, and it looks like he might get sacked. He scrambles to the right, ducks under one tackle, and at the last second heaves a desperation pass 25 yards downfield to running back John Fooqua.

Unfortunately for Mr. Fooqua, there was a Raiders defender headed his way at high speed by the name of Jack Tatum. Tatum's nickname was '*The Assassin*', and for good reason. Tatum simply crashes into him, and that's the end of the line for Fooqua on this day.

And it would have been the end of the game, except for one small detail. The football that Fooqua was trying to catch? It hit Tatum square in the chest, and his chest was so muscular that the ball bounced off in the air, straight back 8 yards towards the Steelers.

And just before the ball landed, a rookie fullback by the name of Franco Harris reaches down and snatches it—just inches from the ground. He grabs the ball and he runs for a touchdown. You can watch it yourself on YouTube if you like.

Incidentally, I was surprised to learn that that game was the Steelers first playoff victory ever, after 4 decades in the league. That game started a turnaround for them, and they went on to become a dynasty, winning a total of 4 Super Bowls in the next six or seven.

Well, anytime you have a play like that, it going to get a title. And this one? Does anyone know? *The Immaculate Reception*.

If that sounds familiar, it's a play on words taken from a heretical teaching about Jesus' mother's birth. The Immaculate Conception they call it. But you have to admit, *The Immaculate Reception* does have a certain ring to it. For a football play, at least.

Well, this morning we are looking at another reception but not of the football variety. It's the reception that Jesus got when He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Because of the varied nature of that particular reception, I'm changing the title just a bit from the football play. My sermon this morning is titled: "*A Less-than-Immaculate Reception*". You'll see what I mean before long.

John 12:12-16

12 The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,
(continued)

13 took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' The King of Israel!"

14 Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written:

15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, 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 were written about Him and *that* they had done these things to Him.

So this is why it's called Palm Sunday, if you didn't already know. As a matter of fact, there is a scene recorded in the book of Revelation where all the participants will be doing essentially this very thing.

The Apostle John was given a vision of heaven where this was happening. These folks are leading a worship service where all the angels and leading figures join in and fall down on their faces before the Lord.

Revelation 7:9-12

9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, **12** saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, *Be* to our God forever and ever. Amen."

What an amazing scene that is. It is reflective of the type of reception that Jesus is worthy of. The type of reception that He should have received back on that first Palm Sunday.

Now, from what we just read in the Gospel of John, it sounded like this was a totally positive experience. And from the perspective of the crowd, it definitely was a time of tremendous excitement and rejoicing.

For the disciples as well, because they must have felt like at long last, this was it. Finally, they were witnessing universal acclaim for Jesus and His teaching.

But as is so often the case, Jesus sees things from a different perspective. He was not caught up in the emotion of the moment, because there were other considerations being factored in. Considerations which are listed later on in this chapter, as well as in the other 3 Gospels of **Matthew, Mark, and Luke**.

The reception of Jesus on this occasion was—for want of a better term—less than immaculate. Less than what it might have been. Less than what it should have been. And that holds some important lessons for us, which may prove beneficial in our own lives.

There won't be time to delve into all of these things, so just a few will have to suffice to make the point of the message. Here are the basic facts: Jesus is received. Not perfectly, not immaculately, but received nonetheless.

I'm speaking in general terms now, addressing the state of the church as a whole. The true church, which is those who have been born again through Christ entering their lives. The church is comprised of all those who have received Christ as Lord and Savior.

The question of the day is this: when you received Jesus, was it a perfect reception? I know it wasn't for me. I didn't know much at all regarding what was expected of me as a Christian. I could have been a much better receiver. But Jesus came into my life, in spite of all my imperfections.

I was allowed to come Jesus as I was, and I was not pushed aside for all the problems and hangups in my life, of where there were—and are—many.

I take great comfort in the fact that Jesus classified His ministry this way: “***I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.***”

But I must hasten to add that Jesus was not planning on leaving me the way He found me. And that, my friend, is where the rub is for a lot of folks. Because when a person invites Jesus in, they must understand that He comes in as ***the Great Disruptor.***

Matthew 16:24-25

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

You see, Jesus has an agenda when He enters our life. His agenda—His purpose is a better term—His purpose is essentially to duplicate His own character within us. It’s for our own good, and for the good of all heaven and earth that we get changed into His image. Imperfectly so, to be sure. But changed nonetheless, bit by bit, piece by piece.

Changed to be more like Jesus all the time. And that change has as a starting point the act of receiving Him into your life. It is the beginning of a major transformation.

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Let’s consider together some of the events that took place during the course of that fateful day, paying particular attention to Jesus’ own reactions as the day went on.

Matthew 21:10-11

10 And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, “Who is this?”

11 So the multitudes said, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.”

So what we have here is the expression of a limited view of who Jesus actually was. “A ***prophet.***” That’s it. You may remember, when they were quizzing John the Baptist, they were asking him if he personally was “The Prophet”

And that was just a reference to the prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. But for a lot of the crowd, Jesus was simply lumped in with all the other prophets, instead of being recognized as the Messiah.

You will get all kinds of folks from all kinds of religions or from no specific religion at all who will gladly classify Jesus as a prophet. Well, that’s not good enough. That is less than it should be.

Do you remember how excited Jesus was when Peter answered His question?

Matthew 16:15-16

15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

16 Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

We would do well to think often and to think deeply about who exactly Jesus is. Read your Bible with a hunger to know Jesus better, in every aspect of His relationship to you and to all His people. That was Paul’s driving passion in life. “***That I may know Him...***”

Jesus is the Bread of Life. He is the Fountain of Living Waters. The Rock of our Salvation. This is one of the main ways we grow in our faith.

2 Peter 3:18a

But ***grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord*** and Savior Jesus Christ...

There is so much to learn and experience regarding who Jesus is to you as a person.

I knew nothing about Jesus—theologically speaking—when I became a Christian. My lifelong goal has been to become a Jesus scholar. To dive deep into the Word. We must make a point of asking the Holy Spirit to teach us more about Jesus. More about His ways. More about His mind, and His heart.

OK, let's read on.

Luke 19:37-40

37 Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen,

38 saying:

“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

39 And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.”

40 But He answered and said to them, “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.”

This is the high point of the day. And the Pharisees just had to butt in to try and get everybody straightened out to their view of things.

Some of them were willing to acknowledge Jesus as a prophet. Kind of hard to deny that fact after all the miracles that Jesus had performed.

But these Pharisees knew precisely what this crowd was chanting. It was the proclamation of the Messiah. And Jesus informs these Pharisees that they are sadly mistaken if they think He's going to try and calm these folks down.

No, Jesus says this proclamation is absolutely appropriate. More than appropriate, it is demanded by heaven. So back off.

These Pharisees are still scheming, still living in denial of the obvious truth of Christ's identity.

Consider the bizarre reaction they were having to the events of just a day earlier, with the healing of Lazarus.

John 12:17-19

17 Therefore *the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead*, bore witness.

18 For this reason the people also met Him, because they heard that He had done this sign.

19 The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, “You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!”

They aren't denying a great miracle has taken place. Rather than take the logical approach and simply praising God for this great miracle, they start complaining that this miracle of Lazarus getting raised from the dead after four days in the tomb is getting too much attention.

In fact, we're told elsewhere that they were actually plotting to assassinate Lazarus on that basis. His being raised from the dead was bad for Pharisee business, so to speak.

And then Jesus took a look at the whole city and mourned over its stubborn refusal to believe.

Luke 19:41-42

41 Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it,

42 saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things *that make for your peace!* But now they are hidden from your eyes.

I was struck by the phrase, “*especially in this your day.*” This was it. The day they had been waiting for, been dreaming of, for centuries. It was finally upon them, and they blew it. They were blind to the opportunity that was right there in front of them. Their day had come, and they were asleep at the wheel.

And it makes me wonder. How many people has this happened to? On an individual basis.

It's not like they never had the opportunity to respond to Christ. It was right there in front of them, and they turned away. Sometimes it happens in very graphic terms.

I remember a friend—a very good friend that knew me well. I got saved, and while he didn't care to join me in the experience, he didn't put me down for it either.

So I'm over at his place—we're both still in high school. And I'm witnessing to him, talking to him about Jesus. His name was Rick.

And I could tell, he was thinking hard. Right then there was a knock at the door. A mutual friend named Larry. Larry was the guy who talked me into using drugs for the first time. He was deep into it, both using and selling.

So he comes in and says, "**Hey Rick, I just scored a bag of reds.**" And I said, "**Rick, Jesus is giving you the chance to choose. This is your time. Jesus, or drugs.**" And Rick goes, "**Oh man, this is really weird. But...I'll see you later Doug.**"

And I look back on that incident and remember this passage from Scripture. "**If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!**"

I lost track of Rick. I don't know how things turned out for him. The last I heard of Larry, he was doing hard time for selling drugs.

Listen to me please—nobody is guaranteed a second chance at turning to Jesus. Maybe this is your day. It could well be somebody's day right here and now. Don't let it pass you by. Recognize it for what it is, and reach out to Jesus in a simple prayer of faith.

And then one last consideration for the day. Jesus has already entered the city, He's no longer on the donkey, and a lot of the excitement is over. He decides to go to the Temple, and decides

to re-correct something He dealt with three years ago.

Matthew 21:12-14

12 Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

13 And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'

14 Then *the* blind and *the* lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.

The Temple's primary purpose was to serve as a place to connect with God. A place to come and pray and worship. This had gotten all twisted around to serve another purpose.

And Jesus would not leave this world before making the point one more time. This was going to be a house of prayer.

And then I appreciate what comes next. Jesus is healing folks. The Temple—or in our case, the church—should be a place of healing sick souls. And prayer is a major part of that sort of thing happening. We must never forget that.

It was such a hectic day. A busy, bumpy, less-than-immaculate reception that Jesus experienced. And yet He entered the city anyway.

Because there were honest and sincere souls there who really did want to love Him and follow Him. Hundreds if not thousands of folks just like that. All of them imperfect. All of them flawed. All of them lacking understanding—including even His closest followers.

Jesus entered the city with his eyes open wide to the realities of that. He accepted any of the accolades that were sincere. He dealt directly with the hypocrisy and sins that He encountered.

It was clear to Him that some of those folks would not be reached that day, no matter what. Their minds were made up and frozen in a self-serving disposition. How they responded later on—well, that's the part of the story we're not privy to.

But this much I do know. It is imperative that we recognize when Jesus is drawing near, and that we welcome Him to the best of our abilities.

He is not demanding perfection. He will refine us over time, but we are commanded to respond to Him in faith. That's all He is after, don't you know. To believe in Him, and to follow Him and keep His commandments because you value His opinion more than any other.

The process is a long one, but it begins with a single decision. Have you made yours yet? Is today your day? The day the Lord has been working towards in your life?

Whether it is for salvation, or for a deeper commitment. Recognize that Jesus stands ready to bring peace for the confusion, direction for the aimless wandering, and strength to overcome weaknesses. He is, after all, the King of Kings, and all power in heaven and earth has been given to Him.

Receive Him gladly into whatever part of your life He seeks entrance to. Even if you don't think you have what it takes. We come as we are, and He begins the work right away. You will never be sorry.