

March 20, 2005  
Isaiah 50:4-9, Matthew 21:1-11  
“More than meets the Eye?”  
Dr. Lewis Galloway

My wife Bunny loves to read mysteries. A part of what makes a mystery work is that there is always something going on behind the scenes. There is more to the story than meets the eye. As the story unfolds, clues are given to help the characters and the reader see the truth beneath the surface actions and relationships. Neither the characters in the drama nor the reader can discern the truth until everything is exposed in the final moment of revelation.

In many ways the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is like a mystery. There is something going on behind the scenes. There is more here than meets the eye. The story is familiar; the action is clear. This day of triumph and celebration appears to be the culmination of the ministry of Jesus. The prophet from Nazareth is proclaimed as the Messiah, the Son of David. The people of Jerusalem gather with the disciples to welcome Jesus, the Davidic King into David's royal city. There is something more to this Palm Sunday parade than meets the eye.

How do we know? Do we know it simply because we have read the end of the story and we know what is going to happen to Jesus? We know

that the cheering will stop,  
that the joy of this day will turn to sorrow,  
that the happy crowds will turn against Jesus,  
that one of his best friends will betray him,  
that the religious and political leaders will plot against him,  
and that the city that welcomed him will demand his blood.

Jesus knows it too. As Jesus enters the city, he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. He takes into himself the hurt, the betrayal, the despair, the loneliness and the needs of the world.

We know there is more going on than meets the eye because we know that every human life faces times of challenge, sacrifice and suffering. Every one of us knows what it is to carry on with our responsibilities in spite of personal loss, to keep hope alive even when we feel disappointed, and to encourage others even when our own hearts are running on empty.

We know that there are many forces that impinge upon our lives. We are not free from the pressures of our work, the expectations of others, the good and bad decisions of government, the demands of our teachers, the needs of our families and friends, and the realities of the times in which we live. The economy is down; people we know have lost their jobs; no matter how hard we try to communicate our feelings someone is bound to misunderstand because their feelings and experiences are different from ours. We are influenced more than we realize by the times and circumstances in which we live.

One of the best books I have read in recent years is David McCullough's biography John Adams. McCullough paints a portrait of a talented, but not perfect man, who gave his life to the formation of this great democracy and served as its second president. John and Abigail Adams sacrifice their

personal lives, their economic well being and their family life for the establishment and preservation of law, peace, justice and freedom in this land. In 1797, Adams is being inaugurated as the second President of the United States. He is in Philadelphia waiting for Abigail to join him. The illness and subsequent death of John's mother back home in Quincy, Massachusetts, delays her arrival. John was not able to be with his mother when she was ill or attend her funeral when she died. His responsibilities as President keep him in Philadelphia separated from his family. Knowing the heavy responsibilities and challenges before them, Adams writes to Abigail:

You and I are entering on a new scene, which will be the most difficult and least agreeable of any in our lives. I hope the burden will be lighter to both of us when we come together. (John Adams, p.482).

John Adams, the new President appears on top of the world; yet he knows the hardship and formidable tasks that lie before him. In any life, there is always more going on than meets the eye.

The events of Palm Sunday tell us that there is something more than meets the eye going on in the life of Jesus and in our lives. There is another player working behind the scenes in this mystery than the forces of threat. We get a hint of this other power when Jesus instructs his disciples on how to find the donkeys he will ride into Jerusalem. Jesus appears to know already what they will find. He anticipates what the owners of the donkeys will say and how to answer them. This is the gospel's way of telling us that the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is no accident of history. The path that Jesus travels is directed by another hand and will reach a destination beyond the imagination of anyone who followed the parade that day. Behind all the threats, the foreboding, and the evil schemes of the leaders, there is the mysterious and unseen hand of God.

Jesus knew all the forces gathering strength to act against him. He knew the evil that was working behind the scenes to destroy him. He also knew there was an even greater power at work. Because of his trust in God, he could set his face to Jerusalem. Jesus could freely accept his destiny and not fall victim to fate.

Who then is this? This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, the Son of David who enters the city to take up his crown, his throne and his kingdom. He accepts his destiny knowing that his crown will be made of thorns that cut his flesh, his throne will be a cross raised amid the taunts of a bloodthirsty crowd, and his kingdom will lie beyond the grave. Jesus is never as free as when he accepts the unacceptable and binds his will to the will of this unseen God.

In the same way as in the life of Jesus, there is something mysterious at work in the story of our lives. Of course, there are the thousand visible and obvious tasks and encounters that make up our day. There are also all those less visible factors and circumstances that influence us. There are those forces and demands that press upon us and influence what we do and how we do it. We have our own way to go through the crowd. We have our own destination to reach. We will never reach our goal unless we tune our hearts as Jesus did to the music of the unseen hand that leads us to our destiny. We are never freer, never more true to our deepest selves, than when we bend our will to the will of God who made us to serve a holy purpose and who leads us to our destiny.

In the early sixties, a seminary student was assigned to do an intern year in the New York Department of Welfare in East Harlem. Having grown up in a white middle class culture, he was

suddenly facing situations of poverty, hopelessness and brutality that were totally foreign to his experience. The hard realities of life in East Harlem began to shake the foundations of his faith. The God that he had known all of his life was way too small to handle the kind of problems of destitution, abuse, drug addiction and joblessness the people in East Harlem faced. His faith in God began to collapse. All the traditional affirmations no longer made sense to him. How do you believe in God when there is so much pain and suffering around you? For the first time in his life, he saw beneath the surface of life and saw the evil, the brokenness and the hurt that were a part of the daily life of so many people. He came face to face with the dark forces and depraved powers that prey upon human happiness. He no longer believed in the God who made everything nice for middle class folks and kept things going for the “good” people.

In the small church he attended in East Harlem, the women often sang a song that began, “I wish that I knew what it meant to be free.” He thought to himself, “What a wish. What chance do these people have of ever being free?” They were the victims of society, the poor uneducated people who would never have a decent job, a nice house in a safe neighborhood, and good schools for their children. One Sunday in church when they were singing the same song, he began to listen to the words of the last verse: “I’m so glad that I know what it means to be free.” Somehow he had missed it. The answer to the question the song had raised was found right there in those words: “I’m so glad that I know what it means to be free.” Oh, it was not really in the song; it was in the faces and the hearts and the faith of the women who sang it. It was their faith in the mysterious, unseen hand of God that made them free.

There was more going on in their lives than meets the eye. There was a mystery at work for good behind the scenes of poverty, urban decay and violence. He realized that these women had a different experience of God than he had ever had. They knew a God who was tough and strong enough for the hard places of life. Like Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, they knew all about the men who could talk sweet one day and steal your last dollar the next. They knew all about killing themselves working for the wages of slavery. They knew all about how the rich stay rich by keeping the poor in poverty. They knew what it was like to send their children to unsafe second-rate schools.

They also knew something more. Much more. They knew Jesus. They found their freedom, dignity and hope in him. At that moment, faith that he had abandoned, or perhaps I should say a new faith, began to take root and grow again in that young seminary student. At that moment he began to see that he was a follower of Jesus on the road to his own Jerusalem.

Isn’t that the way it is for all of us? Things look one way from the outside of life. In each life, there are the obvious facts. When we dig a little deeper we see there is more than meets the eye. We see the struggles and pressures, the painful misunderstanding and the shattered dreams, that press in upon us and threaten to undo us. When we dig a little deeper behind the scenes, we discover a still deeper mystery—the mystery of God’s work. The sad thing is that so many of us stop before we discover the truth. We know the things that are against us, but we do not yet know the God who is for us. It is when we touch the mystery of God’s unseen hand in our lives that we discover our freedom. Because God is for us we too can sing, “I’m so glad I know what it is to be free.”