

NEVER TAKE YOUR EYES OFF THE BIG PICTURE

What a scene on that first Palm Sunday. Imagine arriving in Jerusalem – a town whose population would have been as much as a million people because of Passover. As Jesus arrives and his name is called out in celebration, people curious to see this carpenter from Nazareth would have crowded into the streets.

Soon, a fever seizes almost everyone there. They spread their coats and palm branches in the streets, all seemingly to welcome Jesus as a conquering hero. For some of the disciples, it had to have been a satisfying sight. Jesus was finally being received as the king that he was.

But Jesus knew better. He knew some of those greeting him in joy on Sunday would be the same ones yelling “crucify him!” on Friday. He came not to conquer out of force – he came not to satisfy the people. Rather, he came in obedience to his Father, coming to conquer our hearts through his selfless sacrifice on the cross.

Of all the chapters in Dr. Henry Cloud’s book *Never Go Back*, I think my favorite is his chapter about not losing sight of the big picture. So often we can be overwhelmed by one moment in our lives – one of great satisfaction that we don’t want to leave or one of great despair that destroys all of our hope.

Dr. Cloud gave the example of the stock market crash on Wall Street in 2008. Two very different reactions were noticed among stock market executives.

Those who struggled tended to be younger in terms of age and experience. For years, they had been trained to think they knew the formula for success: Do certain things and you will succeed. But when the market crashed, those strategies didn’t work. Younger executives felt lost. They felt the good times are over. Their brains basically stopped working.

APRIL 14, 2019/PALM SUNDAY

But there was a second group of executives who thrived through the economic downturn. Some had been in business during a minor crash in 2002 and even larger crashes of 1973 and 1987. Those who had gone through those downturns had a very different perspective. They knew downswings eventually were followed by recoveries, and knew how to handle a temporary event.

And that is Dr. Cloud's point: whenever hardship occurs, we need to keep things in perspective. We need to think of a crisis as one scene in a much longer movie and never take our eyes off the big picture.¹

I was looking through YouTube this week and came across a series of 2-3 minute clips of *My Cousin Vinny*. The language of that movie leaves a lot to be desired – it certainly earns its R rating. However, when I can see a version of the movie with all the swear words censored out, I really think it is one of the funniest comedies I know.

Joe Pesci plays Vinny, an inexperienced loudmouth New York lawyer, who goes to Alabama to defend a young cousin falsely accused of murder. In the preliminary hearing, he meets the judge, played by Fred Gwynne – remember the intimidating Herman Munster in TV's *The Munsters*? Fred is even more intimidating as a judge. He immediately demeans Vinny for everything – his leather jacket, his manner, his speech – while the local prosecutor and sheriff try to hide their smirks at the next table.

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You'll Never Do Again* (Howard Books: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 111-113.

APRIL 14, 2019/PALM SUNDAY

That scene makes us think Vinny doesn't have a chance of winning the case. But that one scene isn't the whole movie. Vinny keeps plugging along, and is stunning as he blows holes in the prosecutor's case.

As Dr. Cloud says, "For successful people, no one event is ever the whole story. Winners remember that – each and every day."²

How appropriate to pair this chapter from Dr. Cloud with Palm Sunday. For the Jews hearing Jesus was coming, it seemed like everything as just right. All Jesus had to do was seize the moment – declare himself king over the people and overthrow the Roman government. Easy peasy, right?

But Jesus understood what was really happening on that morning. He did not allow the emotion of Palm Sunday to overwhelm him or sway him from his course because he didn't take his eyes off the big picture. He would not be a Messiah of awesome power, but one of humble service and love.

Because there was no way he could have said this to all those gathered, Jesus did something visually that they couldn't miss. He chose to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. His entry was not intended to be like a conquering king, but one who comes in peace. He was a king, but not an ordinary one. Jesus was the king of fishermen, of tax collectors, of women, blind men, Samaritans and lost sheep. The cloaks that lined the street that day were not the expensive purple cloaks of royalty, but rather were tattered, dusty, sweat-stained rags.

Jesus was – and is – the king of the oppressed and suffering. On Good Friday, he will enter into that pain by dying on the cross as a way to embody God's love for us.

² Ibid., p. 115.

APRIL 14, 2019/PALM SUNDAY

After Jesus dies, some of his followers will mournfully say, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” He was and is. Jesus has redeemed all of us and is still our king today.

So when hardships happen in our lives, how do we deal with them? As Dr. Cloud says, remember the three P’s.

The first is “personal” -- emotionally, don’t take everything personally. Now we need to be sure to balance this with my sermon from a couple of weeks ago: never fail to ask why we are where we are. There is a part that we may play in our hardship. But when a relationship ends – personal or business – recognize the responsibility played by the other person.

The second “P” is pervasive. When something happens in one part of our life, we often allow it to affect all areas of our lives. When someone attacks us in a personal relationship, we begin to believe that everyone at work, in church, in our social circle – everyone sees us through the eyes of the one person against us. Don’t allow one person’s opinion to color how others see you.

And finally, permanence. Suffering certainly feels that way. The future looks completely hopeless. We lose energy, become depressed, feel anxious, throw in the towel or completely retreat from life.

Dr. Cloud reminds us to always remember, what is happening may be painful, but it isn’t our entire life. Particularly for those of faith, we know God promises to take us through anything. When we accept that a hardship is temporary – it’s just one scene from our life – we go from simply reacting to responding and planning for the long term.³

³ *ibid.*, pp. 117-120.

APRIL 14, 2019/PALM SUNDAY

Jesus is not remembered for Palm Sunday or even Good Friday. He is remembered for all he did while on earth and the miracle of Easter. May we likewise set our sights on all God has for us in this life and in the life to come.