

### WHO ARE WE PRAISING ?

Do you remember the PEANUTS comic strip about the **GREAT PUMPKIN**? It seems that EVERY Halloween, Linus goes out to the Pumpkin Patch, and sits there WAITING for the **Great Pumpkin** to arrive. And according to Linus, the **Great Pumpkin** is coming to ALL who are FAITHFUL! And, he will give GOOD things to GOOD people and BAD things to BAD people! And therefore, Linus tries very HARD to be GOOD and FAITHFUL! And EVERY year, just before Halloween, Linus writes LETTERS to the **Great Pumpkin**. THEN on Halloween night, he goes to the Pumpkin Patch to WAIT, hoping that THIS year he will finally SEE the **Great Pumpkin**. But EVERY year something HAPPENS! Either Linus falls ASLEEP, or he has DOUBTS, but SOMETHING always HAPPENS so that the **Great Pumpkin** NEVER comes! And EVERY year, Linus has to EXPLAIN to his friends: *Gee, I MUST have done something WRONG, so that the Great Pumpkin COULDN'T come! Otherwise, he WOULD have!* And the NEXT year, just before Halloween, the RITUAL starts all OVER again!

Well, let me tell you: Linus is NOT too far OFF when he talks about a **Great Pumpkin**, because I believe that ALL of us are waiting for SOME sort of **Great PUMPKIN**! ALL of us are waiting for SOMEONE or something to come and help us LIVE our lives more FULLY and more prosperously. Moreover, MOST of us are waiting for someone who will give those BAD guys -- those CRIMINALS, those FREELoadERS, those IRAQIS, those AL QUAEDA, WHOEVER we define as BAD -- someone who will GIVE those BAD guys JUST what they DESERVE! And to us GOOD people, he will give GOOD things! WE will be REWARDED!

Now of course, we don't SAY it quite like that, DO we? But we ARE waiting for a **Great Pumpkin**! TODAY, we USUALLY call them POLITICIANS! And EVERY 4 years, we look for ANOTHER **Great Pumpkin** to RISE above the crowd, someone who will bring us JUSTICE and PROSPERITY. In fact, it's VERY interesting to watch the PRESIDENTIAL primaries to SEE just how EACH of the candidates actually PORTRAYS himself, or HERSELF, as America's **Great Pumpkin**! And I remember, at George W. Bush's FIRST inauguration, EVERYONE seemed so EXCITED! It was like watching LINUS in the PUMPKIN patch on Halloween NIGHT, as he sees this great, big ORANGE thing coming over the HORIZON: *The GREAT PUMPKIN has ARRIVED! He's HERE! He's HERE!*

Well, this is SOMETHING of the feeling that was present in Jerusalem on that FIRST Palm Sunday, 2000 years ago. The PEOPLE had been WAITING for a MESSIAH for centuries! And HERE was a popular PROPHET, a MIRACLE-WORKER! And SO, they got all EXCITED, and the NEWS spread like CRAZY! And WHEN they SAW that PROCESSION coming over the Mount of Olives, HEADING toward the TEMPLE, they began YELLING and SCREAMING and CARPETING the road with their cloaks: *Here He COMES! Here He COMES! It's the Great Pumpkin! HOSANNA to the Great Pumpkin!* (I'm translating FREELY here, you realize.) But they shouted: *HERE He IS! HERE is the One who will SAVE us! HERE is the One who will SOLVE all our PROBLEMS! HERE is the One who will REWARD us for being GOOD guys! HERE is the One who will PUNISH those evil ROMANS! LOOK! HERE He COMES! HOSANNA to the Great Pumpkin!* Yes, they were JUST like LINUS in the Pumpkin Patch: WAITING, WATCHING and HOPING! And they ACTED just like LINUS would IF he had seen some great big ORANGE thing coming over the horizon! HE, too, would have JUMPED UP and DOWN, SCREAMING with ECSTASY! He TOO would have CARPETED its PATH with PUMPKIN leaves, and SHOWERED it with pumpkin SEEDS, or maybe orange CONFETTI! And it would have been the most EXCITING Halloween of all-time!

HOWEVER, SUPPOSE that great big ORANGE thing coming over the HORIZON turned out to be just another great, big harvest MOON, OR, just another POPULAR politician? WHAT would Linus DO then? And what would WE do? Well, DISAPPOINTED and DISILLUSIONED, and we'd either THROW him out, OR just wait ti'l his TERM expires! And THEN, we'd go BACK to the PUMPKIN Patch to watch and wait for the REAL **Great Pumpkin**!

Well, JESUS knew that THAT'S the way people ARE, and that in HIS day, people were REALLY waiting for a **Great Pumpkin** rather than HIS kind of Messiah! He KNEW that it was NOT by GOD'S way of

salvation that people wanted to be SAVED, but **by** their OWN way of salvation! Yes, He KNEW, as He RODE into Jerusalem, amid all the CHEERS and PALMS, amid all the EXCITEMENT and HOSANNAS, that His PEOPLE would MISUNDERSTAND Him and quickly become DISAPPOINTED and DISILLUSIONED. After all: He EMBODIED God's TRUTH. **HE** was God's TRUTH in the FLESH! And the truth HURTS those who live in a world of ILLUSIONS! And WHEN people get HURT, they become like wounded BEARS! Their FIRST response is to STRIKE BACK and hit ANYONE who is IN the way, just like WE did after 9/11! Yes, Jesus KNEW that His people, AS they awaited their ILLUSIONARY **Great Pumpkin**, would reject HIM – AND reject HIS way of salvation. And HE would end up SUFFERING by THEIR hands.

However, Jesus ALSO knew that IN His suffering, He would FULFILL Isaiah's prophecy (declared hundreds of years earlier) of a Messiah who would COME as a *SUFFERING SERVANT*, and WHO, **BY** His suffering, would bring God's SALVATION. You see: CONTRARY to popular opinion at the time, ISAIAH did NOT expect some sword-carrying GENERAL to come and lead the Jews into BATTLE against the Roman LEGIONS and become a HEBREW Alexander the Great! No! ISAIAH expected a loving SERVANT, who would bring CONSOLATION to us in our despair and HEALING to us in our woundedness. AND, He would sacrifice HIMSELF for the sake of LOVE. Yes, Jesus KNEW that through HIS actions, GOD would win a great VICTORY, and that divine VICTORY would be what people really NEEDED whether they KNEW it or NOT! And He loved them ENOUGH to give them what they NEEDED!

Well friends, sure enough: that vision of a *SUFFERING* Messiah did not SET very well with the people of Israel. Somehow they just could not grasp THAT kind of SAVIOR! After all, the ASSUMPTION of the WORLD has always BEEN what it STILL is: *VICTORY comes on MY terms or it's NOT victory! You're EITHER the Great Pumpkin or you're NOT! Only ONE party can WIN! Either the GOOD guys WIN or the GOOD guys LOSE! Either you're FOR the RED SOX or you're AGAINST them!* Yes, THAT'S the way of the WORLD: *if VICTORY doesn't come on MY terms, it's NOT victory!* And, THAT is why all those HOSANNAS on Palm Sunday so QUICKLY became shouts of *CRUCIFY, CRUCIFY!* HE was NOT the **Great Pumpkin** they AWAITED! And THEREFORE, He would SUFFER for it! And Jesus KNEW that!

And THAT'S why, in LUKE'S gospel, in the midst of receiving a HERO'S welcome, AS Jesus hears ALL those HOSANNAS, and sees people CARPETING the road with CLOAKS and palm branches: just as SOON as Jesus rides to within SIGHT of Jerusalem, He STOPS. And I read NOW from the Gospel of LUKE:

**When He came in sight of the city, He WEPT over it, and SAID: *If ONLY you had known, on this great day, the WAY that leads to PEACE! But NO, it is HIDDEN from your eyes! For a TIME will come upon you, when your ENEMIES will set up siege-works AGAINST you; they will ENCIRCLE you and HEM you IN at every point; they will bring you to the GROUND, you and your CHILDREN within your walls, and NOT leave ONE stone STANDING on another, because YOU did not recognize GOD'S moment when it CAME!***

Yes friends, Jesus WEPT over their EMPTY waiting! Jesus WEPT, because He KNEW that they would ONLY find DEFEAT! Their ILLUSION of a **Great Pumpkin**, who would overthrow ROME, would bring them NOTHING but DEATH and DESTRUCTION! And SO, Jesus WEPT! He WEPT because they did not recognize GOD'S way of SALVATION, GOD'S Messiah, GOD'S truth, when He came.

Well friends, God's TRUTH, God's Messiah, STILL comes to us, whether or not we are READY, just as He came to JERUSALEM on this VERY day SO long ago. And He STILL confronts us with the TRUTH, whether or NOT we can ACCEPT it. AND, He still WEEPS over ALL who CONTINUE to live ILLUSION-FILLED, FUTILE lives (which, unfortunately, is MOST of us), and over ALL who live their lives in FEAR and AWAIT some **Great Pumpkin** to SAVE them. Yes, it's ALL still happening TODAY! MORE than EVER, people are praising JESUS and CHEERING Him on, STILL shouting their HOSANNAS and waving their PALMS! BUT, the question REMAINS: *Do we really know WHO it IS we are PRAISING, any MORE than His OWN people did? Are we really and truly praising our SAVIOR, God's MESSIAH, God's TRUTH, OR, are we just cheering for some great, big ORANGE thing coming over the HORIZON, who promises to GIVE us what we WANT?* Well, I HOPE and PRAY that ALL of us will STRUGGLE with this QUESTION as we enter this HOLIEST week of the year: *WHO are we PRAISING?* Friends, your ANSWER to THAT question will make ALL the difference in the WORLD! *WHO is JESUS for YOU? WHO are you praising?* Amen.