

Echoes of heaven and earth

As the disciples make their way towards Jerusalem on what we call the first Palm Sunday, we can well understand why the Pharisees tried to silence them. We know why they're nervous - these foolish disciples are proclaiming the coming of a king as they march into an occupied city. 'Blessed is he who comes as king in the name of the Lord!', they cry, and that was not an advisable thing to do any time – but least of all at the Festival of the Passover, when pilgrims were flocking to Jerusalem and the Roman presence was reinforced. After all, the Passover was a very nationalistic occasion. It commemorated the release of the Israelites from the foreign power of Egypt centuries before. And the foreign power of Rome was only too aware that if there was a likely occasion for some hothead to start an uprising, the Passover season was surely it. So all the political and religious authorities needed to be on the lookout for any sign of rebellion.

In Luke's account however you could argue that in fact the Romans, and the Pharisees, had nothing to worry about. Indeed you could argue that in Luke's account of what happened on that day every possible precaution has been taken to avoid offence. Everything seems to have been done to render Jesus' procession into Jerusalem politically harmless. So, on other occasions in Jewish history there had been nationalistic parades and demonstrations against occupying powers, and such protests usually included certain features. For a start they were accompanied by shouts of 'hosanna!' and references to King David – he, after all, had been the king when Israel was at the peak of its power. And then as well as that people had cut down branches and waved them. These things had accompanied previous demonstrations in Jewish history and were well-known gestures of protest and defiance, and they appear in the other gospel accounts of Palm Sunday. But the interesting thing is that in Luke's Gospel, despite our worship earlier in this service, there are no hosannas, and there are no references to David, and nor are there palms or indeed any other kind of branches. Jesus is indeed proclaimed king but this seems to be emptied of any political content whatsoever. Whatever Jesus is doing on the colt, he is not offering himself as an alternative to the Romans. He is not about to lead an uprising. So what is happening? What's going on? Well, we're told in verse 37 that the whole multitude of disciples were praising God joyfully 'for all the

deeds of power that they had seen.’ In other words this was a group of followers of Jesus from up North in Galilee who had witnessed extraordinary things that Jesus had done. Some of them had doubtless been healed and they were now praising God for this one in whom God’s power had been demonstrated in their lives. This is no threat to Rome or to Jerusalem. Let the Pharisees just relax and chill out! Just let Jesus and his disciples get on with their harmless little procession!

Well, maybe. But I want to suggest that there might be actually be more going on here in this scene than meets the eye. I want to suggest that there was rather more to this procession into Jerusalem than appears – more, even, than a challenge to the Roman occupiers. The first thing I want us to notice more closely is what the disciples shout. Listen again: ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!’ Think especially of those last words: ‘Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven.’ Now, what does that remind you of? Well, do you remember Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, and that heavenly choir of angels in the skies above the shepherds’ fields outside Bethlehem, and what they proclaimed? Remember? ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours.’ In other words the disciples here are practically quoting what was proclaimed from the skies at Jesus’ birth. And what was happening then in the song of the angels was that heaven was acclaiming this child. Heaven was giving its verdict on Jesus. Praise was resounding from the very throne room of God in recognition of this baby who had just been born. And so in the disciples’ procession into Jerusalem on that day 30 years later we catch echoes of that heavenly praise, of heaven’s affirmation, heaven’s acclamation of who Jesus is – the Lord of all.

That’s not all, however, because there is even more going on here. Let’s look at Jesus’ rebuke to the Pharisees who are trying to silence his disciples. Listen again to his words: ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!’ Now that’s interesting. It suggests, does it not, that if heaven is proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and King so too is nature, creation – the very rocks, the very stones that built the great Jerusalem temple. Not only does the angelic host proclaim that Jesus is Lord but so too do the very rocks and earth. And here, surely, we glimpse the beautiful, wonderful fact that praise is an act of the whole creation, the entire natural world.

Let me take you back for a moment to a psalm, psalm 19, which begins with the words, ‘the heavens tell out the glory of God, heavens vault makes known his handiwork.’ Here we are told that creation, the very handiwork of God, voices praise to its Maker. Nature proclaims the glory of God, and it’s interesting to consider that in the light of certain other beliefs in the ancient world, and particularly those held by the Greeks. You see, the ancient Greeks in their wisdom looked up at the stars and the planets and they believed that they emitted what they called ‘the music of the spheres’. To the Greeks, different heavenly bodies of different sizes were tuned to different pitches, and together they orchestrated a huge, inaudible, cosmic sound as they played off one another. The universe resounded with this mute celestial music. Shakespeare picked this up in his play *The Merchant of Venice* where two lovers, Lorenzo and Jessica, stare up into the night sky. And Lorenzo says,

‘Here we will sit and let the sounds of music
Creep into our ears; soft stillness of the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.’

And then he looks up at the stars and he exclaims:

‘There’s not the slightest orb which thou behold’st
But in his motion like an angel sings.’

Here is the night sky echoing with the music of the spheres.

So to the Greek mind the universe was singing as created bodies connect with one another and relate to each other. And this is the scientific mind. To the Hebrew mind however, like that of the psalmist, this silent symphony of the heavens is rather different. For the psalmist the song of the universe is a song of praise – creation’s praise, as all created things - and not just the stars and the celestial bodies – all things give praise to their Creator.

Here, you see, is a totally different vision. Here is a universe resounding with praise for its Maker. Praise reverberates in every rock and every grain of sand. Praise rises from every leaf that trembles and every dawn chorus that stirs. Praise resounds in every river and in every bud that blossoms and every drop of blood that pulses through the veins of every living creature. The universe is alive with praise. And the disciples, singing and dancing their way to Jerusalem, add their parts to that deep, silent score that is written into the very constitution of the cosmos. In their praise the silent symphony of worship that surrounds us is given expression. In their praise all creation’s praise is

given voice. It becomes audible. And if the disciples are silenced – well, maybe the stones will finally cry out themselves.

So – do you get the picture? As that little motley, ragtag band of disciples enter Jerusalem and as they joyfully acclaim Jesus as king, two things are being brought together. On the one hand, the praise of heaven, the praise that sounded from the skies at Jesus’ birth, heaven’s fanfare for the coming of the King and Lord of all; and then on the other hand the praise of creation – of rocks and trees, of flowers and mountains and rivers and stars. And both come together in the song of the disciples:

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.

And it is interesting that shortly after Jesus enters Jerusalem he goes to the temple, because the temple was believed to be the place where heaven and earth came together. The temple was the place where heaven and earth were joined like a hinge. Only here it is not in the temple where this union takes place but in the disciples’ praise.

In the days that follow Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, heaven and earth will be prised apart. Human beings will reject God’s King. The voice of religion, and the voice of politics and the clamour of the mob will shout against the voices of heaven and of creation. And of course that still happens today, as ever. A world that resists Jesus of Nazareth will always be a world out of sync with heaven and it will always be out of sync with the deep foundations of the universe. But when you or I become a Christian, when we confess Jesus as Lord, then our lives are aligned – aligned with the angels and aligned with the rocks, as we find our true place between heaven and earth.

Poor Pharisees. Poor deluded Pharisees, instructing Jesus to silence his disciples. They were worried lest Rome be offended. What they didn’t realise was that something far greater than that was taking place here. When the voice of heaven and the voice of creation unite in God’s people then we bear witness, in the words of our reading from Philippians, that ‘one day every knee will bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’.

And the Pharisees, and Rome, and every one of us need to pay attention Amen.

On the first Palm Sunday
Jesus said that if his disciples were silenced
the very stones would cry out...
O loving God,
we praise you for the wonders of creation,
for all the things that you have made:
the rocks and the plants, the rivers and the stars.

All things praise you, their Maker.
Yet we mistreat nature and we exploit it.
We poison the oceans, and we pollute the air
and beautiful animals are threatened with extinction.
Help us, we pray, to live so that everything
that you have made is treated with care and respect...
On the first palm Sunday Jesus' disciples proclaimed
that he was king and Lord.
We pray today for those who rule our nations and our world,
for prime ministers and presidents
and governments and politicians.
We ask that they may govern fairly
and in line with your will for all people.
We pray for peace in Syria,
so that people will no longer feel forced to leave their homes
and make dangerous journeys in search of safety...
And we pray for Jesus' disciples – for us, your church –
That we may faithfully proclaim to the world
that Jesus is Lord of all –
that he gave up everything and died a cruel death,
but that he now lives as Lord and Saviour of all.
In this coming week, as we remember what he did,
bless our worship and our witness, our services,
and all who pass through our doors.
May they be inspired to love and to serve you.
And we pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.