

Luke 1:2-44; Psalm 19:1-6

14.04.19

### *Sounds of Palm Sunday*

Jerusalem was filling up as Jews from all around the Roman Empire converged upon it for the great annual festival of the Passover. Once again God's ancient, foundational acts in Israel's history were to be remembered and celebrated: the miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt under Moses and out into freedom. In these great events lay the seeds of Israel as a nation. Israel, however, had fallen on hard times since then. Destruction and domination under one empire after another had deprived them of their independence and denied their sovereignty. Hope, however, was never extinguished: hope of a new Moses, a new King David who would restore Israel's fortunes and make them great again. He would enter Jerusalem in triumph and end their captivity and restore their sovereignty.

Now, for those with eyes to see, it was all taking place. Jesus' disciples proclaim him king as they wind their way down the Mount of Olives and approach Jerusalem. And Jesus has planned all this and it is all part of his strategy for offering himself to the capital city of Jerusalem as their king – though as the events that follow in the days ahead will show, his understanding of kingship and of what it meant for Israel to be restored as a nation differed greatly from the expectations of the day.

What I want to do this morning is to pay attention to the sounds of Palm Sunday, to what we would have heard if we had followed Jesus that day. Palm Sunday is a very visual event that we can imagine in our minds' eyes, but it also very auditory and we can access it through its sounds. And the first sound to strike us would have been chants and songs:

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

Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

These words are being voiced mainly by the disciples and followers of Jesus who have come down from the north of the country and who will have witnessed Jesus' ministry there and his teaching and his healing – his deeds of power. So they acclaim him as they approach Jerusalem! I would suggest however that there is more to their praise than meets the eye, and we have to dig a bit deeper to understand the full significance of what they were doing. And here we note one feature of Luke's gospel which is unique to him: the

Pharisees in the crowd command Jesus to silence his disciples, to which Jesus replies, ‘I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout out!’ Now, what are we to make of the idea that the very stones beneath their feet are bursting with praise and would give voice if the disciples are silenced? Well, here we glimpse the beautiful, wonderful fact that worship is an act of the whole creation, the entire natural world.

Let me take you back for a moment to the psalm we read earlier, Psalm 19, which begins, ‘the heavens tell out the glory of God, heavens vault makes known his handiwork.’ This is just one example of several places in the Old Testament where the whole creation is pictured as praising God simply by virtue of being God’s handiwork. So we find passages describing mountains and hills bursting into song, fields clapping their hands – all creation giving God glory just by being what it is. As we read on, however, in Psalm 19 we find something rather strange: we are told that creation’s praise is silent. It is mute: ‘there is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard’, we are told. So creation praises God, but silently – and it is waiting for human beings to come along and to give voice to that praise! We who have language, we who have song, we are called to give deliberate, intentional, conscious expression to creation’s wordless worship. We are the place in the universe where the praise of all created things is articulated freely and intentionally. So what we do here when we gather together like this has cosmic dimensions – here in our praise the whole cosmos is attuned to God! And therefore if those disciples on the road to Jerusalem are silenced the very rocks will have to cry out!

Now, let’s leave that aside for a moment – we will come back to it - and let’s move on to another, very different sound of Palm Sunday, one which provides stark contrast to the joy of the disciples. It is the sound of Jesus weeping over the city: ‘As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘if you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes.’ And Jesus goes on to lament how in days to come their enemies will set up ramparts and surround the city, and hem the people in, and crush them and their children and will not leave on stone standing upon another. And of course Jesus is referring here to the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 when the Romans brutally crushed an ill-conceived Jewish revolt. And it was ghastly, and accounts of the siege and the fall and the destruction of Jerusalem make for sickening reading. So Jesus weeps for his people and their city. He realises that they will reject him as king

and go after a very different military ruler and it will lead to disaster. And while his disciples may proclaim, ‘peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven’ Jesus knows that there will be no peace on earth, and there will be no glory for Jerusalem but only slaughter and catastrophe.

Jesus looks into the future, then, and he weeps. And perhaps that might prompt us this morning to imagine what Jesus might see if he were to stand with us today and look into future and to see what is coming. I wonder, would he weep? The simple question is whether the human race, like Jerusalem in Jesus day, is headed for progress or destruction.

What prompted me to think about this was a fascinating conversation I happened to read this week with one of Britain’s leading intellectuals, a political philosopher called John Gray. What is interesting about John Gray is that he is an ardent atheist, and yet he has great respect for religion and utter disrespect for the new atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens whose critique of religion he regards as superficial. Gray understands religion. He gets it, and understands its importance. And Gray is profoundly uneasy about the future. He is scathing about optimistic and confident assumptions that left to itself the human race is on an upward trajectory, destined to progress. For him the human race is far too flawed and dangerous to ever have been put in charge of the planet. Yes, he acknowledges that science and technology have greatly improved human life, but the same technology that treats cancer also dreams up ever more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction. And both Gray strongly rejects the belief, inherited from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment that, left to itself and stripped of the baggage of religion reason alone can tell us what is good and right and true. Gray points out that many of the great Enlightenment figures who so exalted reason were deeply racist – in other words they were very much people of their time. And the point is that what is considered reasonable changes in different times and places and contexts. It’s like a chameleon. It adapts to its surroundings. There is no absolute, disengaged reason that we can tap into. So, for example, it was not so long ago that torture was seen to be incompatible with good, rational, enlightened values, but we now have an American President that boasts that when it comes to terrorist suspects waterboarding is too good for them. Reason alone cannot act as a compass to direct us to where lies progress and what is good and right. That must come from somewhere else. And without faith and religion where do we turn?

Again, Gray makes the interesting observation that something that came in with Christianity, an innovation of Christianity, was opposition to cruelty and to tolerating cruelty. It's why Christians refused to go to the arenas to watch gladiators and slaves being pitted against wild animals, and how Christians got the reputation for being anti-social as a result. And of course Christianity was corrupted when it became a power and it soon perfected the art of torture and cruelty, but that fundamental resistance to cruelty was there at the beginning, waiting to be reclaimed. And that got me to thinking of how we seem today to be finding ever more ingenious ways to be cruel to one another. Children take their own lives because of on-line bullying. Refugees are separated from their children at border crossings. Social media engages in mass shaming of people who are deemed to have voiced unacceptable opinions. So yes, progress in science and technology gives increasing scope for good and for the creation of a better world, but progress also unlocks deep caverns of hatred and cruelty and inhumanity and there is no saying what will prevail in the end and how the future will be shaped. So we might imagine Jesus on that first Palm Sunday looking out, but looking out beyond Jerusalem, and beyond 70 AD – looking out to the ends of the earth and to distant centuries and seeing the future of the human race and knowing that it will not end well. For all our sophistication we still do not know the things that work for peace – and so he weeps for us.

These, then, are the sounds of that first Palm Sunday: praise. The joyful worship of Jesus' disciples giving voice to the silent liturgy of creation. But then the sound of weeping, of Christ grieving over Jerusalem's future. And you and I, followers of Jesus, are called to a task. We know, because of the events of the first Holy Week, that whatever the future holds there awaits beyond history a new Jerusalem, new heavens and a new earth. And therefore even if we foolish human race destroy ourselves, the ultimate future is certain. Meanwhile, in all the ambiguities of history, in all the follies and failures of human life, there is no greater task for us than to join in that great voicing of praise that God's creation offers; no greater task than this one to which we are called: proclaiming that Jesus is Lord with our lips and with our lives. It's our vocation. Our very beings are called to resound with those Palm Sunday cries: 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

And if we neglect that task – well, the very stones will shout it out instead. Amen.