

If Stones Could Shout

Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday is one of those Holy Days where worship tends to find its most memorable expression not so much in the liturgy of the day, but in the optimistic atmosphere of the moment. In other years than this, it meant children, herded by their church school leaders, streaming along the sanctuary aisles, clutching armfuls of palm fronds to share with the congregation. It is the Church's version of a Super Bowl victory parade (remember those?); except with the hero of the day on board a donkey instead of a Duckboat.

But, a careful reading of the Gospel accounts of that day reveals that the celebratory atmosphere we focus on mostly happened before Jesus actually entered the city of Jerusalem. Within the walls of the city, a dark and sinister sense of foreboding hung heavily over the Passover preparations. The Roman Empire was very tolerant about allowing the cultures they conquered to practice their native religions—so long as that practice posed no challenge to the authority of Rome. Which meant that Passover was a tense time in Jerusalem under Roman occupation. Passover celebrated the memory of how God had liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt long ago. But the sweet memories of that deliverance from one oppressor, probably turned to a sour reminder that Israel was once again, an occupied country ruled by yet another oppressor. The Roman Empire.

The opportunity Passover presented for unrest among religiously zealous and patriotic Jews was not lost on the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. It was also a major concern for the Jewish religious authorities, who feared that any lawlessness during the holiday would surely invite a swift and merciless response from Pilate and his army. So, when news reached them that Jesus was approaching Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives on a donkey and a rambunctious crowd of followers, a kind of crisis response team made up of Pharisees, went out to look into whether this caravan might be something that might disturb the fragile peace of the city.

What they saw quickly confirmed their worst fears. The crowds were spreading palm branches and clothing on the road before Jesus in a way that was reminiscent of how a conquering hero or a king enroute to his coronation would be honored. As the procession wound its way closer to the city gates, the people sang out the words to the 118th, Psalm, which was the traditional way to greet pilgrims arriving for Passover. But instead of singing, "Blessed is HE who comes in the name of the Lord", the way it is written in the Psalm; they sang, "Blessed is the KING who comes in the name of the Lord." It was as if riding with Jesus on the back of that donkey, where the fragile hopes of the oppressed and exploited peoples gathered in that city. Some of the Pharisees begged Jesus to silence his disciples before Pilate and his soldiers caught wind of what they were doing. Jesus answered them, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

His message was clear. God's Kingdom advances with an irresistible momentum that cannot be stopped, not even by an immovable object, the likes of the Roman Empire. Jesus had not come with a mob of insurrectionists eager to incite a violent rebellion. But neither was he intimidated by the risks that came with speaking truth to the powers that be. The truth that God, not any earthly emperor or empire, was the authority he represented. The promise that the power of love will triumph over the love of power.

The hopes of people who otherwise would have no hope at all still ride along with Jesus today. Many times, Jesus's followers have carried those hopes through to triumph in their courage to speak truth to power. Victories have been won and God's Kingdom has been advanced. In the abolition of slavery. The ending of apartheid. The struggle for civil rights, and many other movements that have bettered the human condition, Christians have not been silent. In fact, it has been their voices that have led the way.

The temptation is always there though. The temptation to heed the Pharisees warning. To share their fear. To be silent. To avoid rocking the boat. To play it safe. When that has happened; when the voices of Jesus's followers have failed to speak out against suffering and injustice, the stones have cried out. Just as Jesus said they would.

Stones have cried out from the rubble of cities and homes demolished by war, where words of peace were muffled behind the rattly of sabres. They have shouted from the remains of crumbling neighborhoods swallowed by poverty and forsaken by the world, and voices of solidarity with the poor did not speak out. They echo through the stones of the Earth itself ravaged and polluted in the quest for wealth or scorched lifeless in the pursuit of power; when words of determination, might preserve a better world for our children. According to Jesus, silence is not an option in the middle of a collision course between justice and injustice. And if his followers fail to speak out, the stones themselves will shout their testimony. When they do their voices will call to account, not only those responsible for doing harm, but also those who could have done good, and did not.

In Jerusalem by this week's end, most of the voices that cheered Jesus's entry into the city had indeed fallen silent as he was tried sentenced, and crucified by Pilate. In the void of that silence, one stone, raised its voice with a shout, that has echoed through eternity. A stone that covered the entrance to a tomb. Its message still proclaims a message of life that conquers death. A message of a justice that surpasses all tyrannies. A hope, that does not succumb to despair. The message of the resurrection has been an irresistible force that has compelled men and women through the ages to seek their voice and join the parade who have have stood with and speak for the least, and the last. Just as Jesus did.

With God as our source of courage and strength, may that message continue to reverberate through voices like ours.

And maybe, stones will never need to break their silence again.

©2021 Raymond Medeiros

Preached FCCW, 3/28/2021