

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PALM SUNDAY, THE WEEPING AND THE PRAISE

24th March 2013

Psalm 118:1-2, 18-29

Luke 19:28-44

Have you ever had a birthday when you were ill and didn't feel like celebrating? I remember my entire family turning up on my 40th, bearing gifts and food and I had such a sore throat and wasn't really terribly pleased to see them! We did celebrate, though. Or maybe you have had a wedding to attend and you found that you weren't in the mood, when you got there. Or it may be that you are one of these people who look forward to big events so much that when they arrive they cannot match up to your hopes and you end up feeling let down.

Jesus, it turned out, was not in the mood for Palm Sunday. He set it up, he knew it had to happen like this, that he really couldn't just slip into Jerusalem unnoticed, as he had before, not this time. He knew that things were coming to a head and that he had to make certain statements in deed as well as word, and so he put the events of Palm Sunday in train. He organised the colt, he sent his disciples with the password – “the Lord has need of it” - and he sat on it.

Jesus knew that this would set off associations with his disciples and with the crowds who were always milling around outside Jerusalem, and it did. The large crowd of disciples – not just the twelve but those who sometimes joined with them - saw him on the colt and they remembered Zechariah's words that this was how the King would come to them.

They saw a king and their expectations and their hopes and their long-held-down frustrations burst out. The disciples had probably long wondered when they were going to be vindicated for having left everything to follow this man, and now this seemed to be the day. Finally he was declaring himself as the king. And so they took up the words of the Psalm we read today, and added other similar words and let themselves go in praising and shouting and having a great time. The verses of Psalm 118 which we did not read are about God giving victory in war and in oppression, and the cheering disciples would know this and have this at the back, or maybe the front, of their minds when they quoted. There were going to be “glad shouts of victory in the tents of the righteous” (that was them). This was the King and they were his followers and it was how God had planned it and maybe it would be the end of the Romans, and people were going to see that they were right and it was just a fantastic day!

And Jesus knew that what his disciples were doing was right and proper and what should be done. So when the Pharisees told him to stop these men making such a racket he refused. He said that if

they were silent even the stones would shout aloud. This was Palm Sunday (not that they called it that then) and this was what should be done.

And this is Palm Sunday and so we have sung our praises and hailed Jesus as our King.

But with all this going on, Jesus found he wasn't in the mood to enjoy it. Maybe it was the sheer emotion of the experience which weighed on him, leading him to be, not elated and proud and happy, as surely his disciples must have expected, but sad. He wept. He wept and thought of how little all this cheering and elation really meant. He thought of how this was the outpouring of the frustrations of a people who had long held their hopes and prayers in their hearts and given them no expression. He wept because he knew that in their hearts was not a desire for people to live at peace with each other, but a desire for their own hopes to triumph, no matter what.

Because he was in this charged atmosphere but not emotionally part of it, Jesus could see with shocking clarity the ultimate outcome for these people, not that day, but soon, too soon. He could see how the need to break out and try to win their own way with violence would bring down on them far greater powers than they could hope to master. He could see how this would lead to tragedy after tragedy, and could feel how he might have stopped it happening if only he had been able to get his message across better, if only he had found a way of getting them to listen to him, if only he had succeeded. He wept.

Jesus wept and the disciples cheered and both were right to do so.

Sometimes the church finds it easier to weep with Jesus than to cheer with the disciples. It can seem more real, more pastoral and supportive to weep with those who weep. And there is always much to weep over: the injustice of society, the wars in the world, the suffering of the poor and the indulgence of the rich (that's us). There is much that should drive us to our knees in tears as we plead with God for mercy and justice, always remembering that justice does not mean that what I want is going to happen. When we pray, as we have been and will continue to do, for the people of Syria, or for the Christians in Pakistan or parts of Nigeria, we should do so with tears in our hearts and on our faces. There is time for tears, as the book of Ecclesiastes tells us, and one of these times is Palm Sunday, when Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

We can weep, as I am sure Jesus still does, over the faults and failings of his church and the questions and factions which divide it: to marry or not to marry the gay couple? To ordain or not to ordain the gay minister? To allow women to be in leadership in the church or not? To forgive the child abuser? To use one translation of Scripture rather than another? To sing or not to sing? Law over grace or grace over law? How the church divides and fights over matters which are not at the heart of the gospel at all – or are they? And Palm Sunday is a day for weeping with Jesus, as he wept over the people who had not heard him well enough to understand and follow him, to live as he lived and love as he loved and forgive as he forgave time and time again.

We can weep, as Jesus did, over our own missed opportunities, the times we failed to speak a word in season, to point to God and his love; the times we failed to act and react with love and forgiveness as the Lord we follow would expect of us. Jesus wept because the people did not recognise the day that God had come to them, and we may weep because we have missed the chance to be the message, to be the love, the hope the comfort that God's presence would bring to someone who badly needed it. Palm Sunday is a day for weeping.

And yet Jesus would not stop his disciples from cheering and praising. He told the Pharisees that the stones would cry aloud. There is a necessity about praise which perhaps we forget at times.

“The Lord be with you” begins our communion liturgy. It goes on “Lift up your hearts” with the people responding “We lift them up to the Lord” Then “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give both thanks and praise.” And after the people have said that, the celebrant (that’s usually me) says “It is indeed right, it is our duty and joy, in all times and places to give you praise...” In all times and places. Not just when we feel like it, not just when we are happy and things are going well for us, but at all times and in every place to give God thanks and praise, for what he has done, is doing and for the wonders of what he will do in the world and in our lives.

If Palm Sunday is a day when we might weep with Jesus he would also have us rejoice and praise with the disciples. In fact, when you think about it, and especially when you read Luke’s account of it, Palm Sunday was a very emotional day. It wasn’t much like a Scottish Sunday in church, more like a last Sunday at Hamden Park when the Communities Cup final was played out by two teams of under-dogs. Cheers and tears. Agony and ecstasy. Letting it all hang out. And yes, the next day some of the disciples might wonder at themselves – had they really gone on like that and made such an exhibition of themselves? And Jesus might wonder if anyone had seen his pain. But on that day it was right to weep and praise, to praise and weep.

In our prayers for others we will weep, inwardly if not in outward show. We will weep and we will declare ourselves to care. But we should also praise.

Praise God for sending Jesus. Hosanna!

Praise for his ministry amongst the poor, the outcast, and the stranger. Hosanna!

Praise for his teaching and his proclamation of the Kingdom. Hosanna!

Praise for bringing light in dark places, hope in desperate situations, love into loveless lives. Hosanna!

Praise that he cared enough to weep. Hosanna!

Praise for his love in my life and yours, for his work in the world over twenty centuries, for his people transforming whole societies with justice and grace. Hosanna!

We should praise. Every day, no matter how we are feeling, we should praise. We should recall the work of Jesus, the work of God and give thanks. And if we really can find nothing in our own circumstances to give thanks and praise for, then at least we will be reminded that we and our lives is not the whole of life in the world, even though it can feel that way to us at times. It is our duty and our joy in all times and places to offer thanks and praise. And when we do our duty the joy will follow. Praise Jesus for his being human, one of us. Hosanna!

But what about praise for his claim of Messiah-ship? What was to be the response then? Not hosanna, but “Crucify! Crucify!” Jesus was not crucified for his good works, but crucified for his claim to Kingship. As we go on through this Holy Week we will leave the hosannas behind us. We will leave the praise and we may well find many more reasons to weep. But we know that Easter Sunday will soon be with us. Easter Sunday, when those who have gone with Jesus through his arrest and crucifixion, who have stood and watched at the foot of the cross with weeping, will find their sorrow turned to joy. Amen.