

C Palm Sunday
 March 24, 2013
 Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29
 Luke 19.28-40
 "The Rejected Stone"

"Teacher, order your disciples to stop," the Pharisees beg Jesus. He replies, "I tell you, if the people were silent, the stones would shout out."

Stones do speak. In western cultures we have this ancient tradition of erecting stones over the graves of those we love. Consider the epitaphs that are inscribed on the gravestones of some famous people. Winston Churchill's stone reads, "I am ready to meet my maker. Whether my Maker is ready for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter." And on the stone of Mel Blanc, the voice of Porky Pig and Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny: "That's all folks!" Benjamin Franklin's stone reads, "The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer (like the cover of an old book, its contents worn out, and stripped of its lettering and gilding) lies here, food for worms. Yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will, as he believed, appear once more In a new and more beautiful edition, corrected and amended by its Author."

If you have ever visited the memorial on the mall in Washington, DC to those killed in the Vietnam War, you have seen stones speak. As you descend the gentle slope that raises the wall above your head, you are overcome by the sheer number of the names inscribed on the black granite. The stones speak with the stories of 58,132 men and women who did not return from Vietnam. An overwhelmingly powerful experience of grief and gratitude.

Today is Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday, in our church calendar. On this day we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem, riding on the colt of a donkey, greeted by multitudes of people.

All four of the gospels tell the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, but there are some differences between the four accounts, and those differences have a story of their own to tell. For example, did you notice two prominent aspects of the story that are missing from today's reading from Luke? No palm leaves. No "hosannas." Not in Luke. The people spread their clothing on the road in front of Jesus, but not palm leaves. The people shout, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" If you remember the words of the angel to the shepherds when Jesus was born, those words will sound somewhat familiar. The angel says, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Luke here reminds his hearers and listeners of the angel's words. But he makes no mention of the Jerusalem crowd shouting "Hosanna," which means, simply "Save us!"

There is another difference between Luke's account of the triumphal entry, and the other three. Luke specifically mentions a multitude of disciples who praised God for all

the deeds of power they had seen. For Luke, the triumphal entry is not so much a gathering of all the people of Jerusalem, but primarily of those who had been following Jesus since the time his ministry began. There is indeed multitude, but they are a multitude of those who are more or less devoted to this teacher, preacher, healer, and miracle-worker from Galilee. That changes the way we understand the scene a few days later when the crowd outside Pilate's headquarters is shouting for him to crucify Jesus. It is likely a very different crowd than the one that joyously escorts him into the city. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' followers do not turn against him, although they surely do abandon him.

If these followers, these disciples, had been with Jesus from the beginning, what mighty "deeds of power" might they remember? Luke records many such deeds. The disciples would remember that Jesus had cast the demon out of a man in Capernaum who had cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are: the Holy One of God!" And later on, another man possessed by many demons, who called themselves "Legion" in the country of the Gerasenes. They identified Jesus as "Son of the Most High God." Jesus expelled the demons and they immediately entered a herd of pigs feeding nearby. Still later he drove out a demon from a young boy, a demon who would cause the boy to suffer seizures. Jesus's followers would remember his healing a leper who came to him and said, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean." And it was so.

His followers might remember Jesus healing a man paralyzed, who was let down through a hole in the roof of a house by his friends. The "multitude of disciples" who greeted Jesus that day would have remembered the day he healed the servant of a Roman centurion, without even entering the house where the servant lay. They would have remembered Jesus raising a young man, the son of a widow, who had died. Later, Jesus also raised a girl, only twelve years old, who had also died. His followers would remember him healing the woman who had suffered from a continuous hemorrhage for twelve years.

They would remember Jesus feeding five thousand men and their families with only a few loaves of bread and a few fish. Healing a woman whose back was bent and painful. A blind beggar near the city of Jericho. Ten people suffering from leprosy near Jerusalem.

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" the disciples shouted! And if they had been silent, the very stones would have taken up the song.

The disciples, more than just the twelve, also heard Jesus teach, of course. They heard him preach in his hometown at Nazareth. They heard him challenge, again and again, the purpose of the sabbath and its meaning for faithful Jews. They heard teachings about loving enemies and judging others, and good fruit and bad fruit, and a parable about a man sowing seeds, and what makes a person truly great in the eyes of God. A parable about a good Samaritan and a rich fool, teachings about persevering in prayer and rejecting continuous worrying. Teachings about being watchful and ready for his

return. Teachings about the need for repentance and how difficult it is to enter God's kingdom. Teachings about the need for humility and how costly it is to follow him. Parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin and a lost son; about a rich man and one called Lazarus. A parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector in the temple. And many, many more.

The followers of Jesus could not contain their joy and enthusiasm. If they had been silent, the very stones would have shouted!

We have to wonder what the disciples were expecting. In Luke's gospel, as we have said, they are indeed Jesus' disciples, not the general population of Judea who had come to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. These were people who knew, or should have known, what kind of king they were greeting. Jesus had even told them, three times, that he would be arrested, tortured, and executed. They still missed it.

Within four days, their king would be taken by force before the high priest, mocked, beaten, and insulted. An enraged crowd of those who did not know him would call for his crucifixion. He would carry the heavy cross on his bleeding shoulders. He would be stripped of his clothes, nailed to the cross, and lifted up in a blood, barren place called The Skull. And after some hours hanging there in inexpressible agony, he would die. Jesus' followers refused to see that this is how it would all end.

The psalm that accompanies this reading from Luke is a part of Psalm 118. That psalm echoes throughout this week in the Christian calendar. It is a recommended reading for today, for Maundy Thursday, and for Easter. It is certainly easy to see why it is recommended for Palm Sunday. If you read it with care you will see multiple references to various elements of this day in the Christian calendar, even though the psalm was probably written some 600 years earlier.

There is also contained in Psalm 118 that well-known statement about the stone that the builders have rejected, which becomes the chief cornerstone. In its own context the rejected stone probably referred to the nation of Israel itself, defeated by its enemies, overrun, its cities in ruins, its king carried off in chains, its temple left a smoking pile of rubble. But the psalmist exults that this rejected stone has become the chief cornerstone, once again standing among the nations of the world, if not powerful and feared, at least standing. Israel is the chief cornerstone, not because of what it has done for itself, but for what the LORD has done in and through it.

It has long been the precept of Christ's church that he is the rejected stone, the one who in just five days will be mocked, beaten, stripped, whipped, nailed to a cross, and dead. The rejected stone.

Some Pharisees in the crowd press Jesus to get his followers to be silent. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus replies, 'I tell you, if these people were silent, the very stones would shout out.'

Jesus knows what Friday is going to bring. He has predicted it very explicitly three times earlier, as recorded by Luke. He will be arrested, wrongly convicted, tortured and executed. But that is Friday, and this is Sunday.

The disciples praise God joyfully, with a loud voice, for all the deeds of power they had seen. 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'

Friday will come. But this is Sunday.