

The stony road to Jerusalem
Zechariah 9:9-10, 16-17, Luke 19:28-40

20 March 2016

'If my disciples are silent the stones will shout aloud' – said Jesus to the Pharisees. They objected to the disciples' exuberance singing praises to God as their Master rode into Jerusalem on that first for Palm Sunday. What a curious statement! How is the praise of God connected to stones? Is it about the stones or about the disciples? What is driving Jesus as Jerusalem, the 'holy' city comes into sight and he is making his descent from the Mount of Olives toward the place that will be the death of him.

The more we reflect on Palm Sunday and its place within the Passion narrative the more we find that it is littered with stones; stones real and stones metaphorical. In fact, it seems that it is possible to tell the whole story in terms of stones: the most common feature of 1st century Palestinian terrain. We are now approaching the end of the season of Lent, a period of 40 days commemorating Jesus' experience in the wilderness. And we can recall that the stones in that desert patch had a dangerous resemblance to loaves of bread and became a point of temptation to the fasting Jesus. We remember that our Lord did not go down that tempting route, he did not settle for using his powers on that particular human problem, the problem of hunger, however much we may think it would have been a useful thing to do. He must have known, just as we know that having all our material needs covered does not necessarily make us better people, sadly, sometimes, it can do the very opposite. So, *stones played an important part in helping to shape Jesus' burgeoning ministry, giving direction to understanding his call.* I wonder how we handled the stones of decision making just this past week.

Side-stepping the popular way, Jesus chose to draw attention to the larger picture, to a new possibility of living based on a new understanding of the nature of God, which he called the Kingdom of God. And the stones followed him around – as it were. In John's Gospel, we read about him teaching at the temple. Some religious leaders with important pedigrees bring a dishevelled woman to him saying that she was caught in the act of adultery. They remind him that according to the Law this woman should be stoned to death. There they all are with stones at the ready to do the

deed, waiting for Jesus to fall into their trap. Whatever he says he will either be discredited in front of his followers or condemned for breaking the Holy Law of Moses. But Jesus walks right through the challenge and says: "Whoever is without sin, should throw the first stone" (John 8:7). There is no trial, the stones drop to the ground one by one, the accusers disappear one by one. "Go and sin no more" is all Jesus says to the woman, metaphorically dropping his own stones. *In his presence the stones of judgement, condemnation and punishment become instruments of grace and forgiveness.* The world he envisages and embodies is not about judging others; it is about opening up the possibility for doing things differently, a future where old sins do not have to be repeated, where hurts can be forgiven and new beginnings made. These stones pose the question, are we in the business of judging or in the business of forgiving and acceptance?

Then we get to the Mount of Olives; Jesus rides into Jerusalem at the height of his popularity in a kind of orchestrated pageantry using OT prophetic images. A King coming to his people in the name of the Lord bringing good news not of battles but of reconciliation, indicating victory, but an unusual victory, one which does away with war-horses and chariots and warriors' weapons and spreads the peace of heaven here on earth. Everything is enrolled in this universal peace-offering, the cheering crowd; the humble beast carrying its precious cargo, the garments lining the road and the *stones crying out in their own way, giving voice to the praises of creation.* The crowds don't hear it, of course, but Jesus does. Someone once said that "nature is like a radio station, continually broadcasting God to us. All we need to do is tune into its frequency". (Trystan Owain Hughes: Finding hope and meaning in suffering, SPCK). Jesus is tuned into God's frequency. That's what gives him strength and determination to stay his course: the sparrows and the lilies of the fields and yes, *the stones of the dusty roads all exude the divine energy* and in their unconscious, glorious existence praise their Maker and fulfil their destiny. Jesus knows that it's not just us humans who are parts of God's enterprise therefore even if the disciples were to be silent God and God's messenger would not be left without witnesses. It is a hint of the absolutely indestructible nature of the amazing message and of the One, who brings it. Do we, at least sometimes, listen to nature broadcasting God to us?

As we know the message of Jesus wasn't and never is good news for those who like things as they are. The religious people of Jesus' time were no different from us, for, on the whole, we too prefer things as they are. And though the following few days will be still filled with some more inspired words and deeds from Jesus, they will also increasingly darken in tone, there will be secret negotiations, a Passover meal filled with foreboding but with a deep, new meaning too, there will be betrayal and denial and abandonment by friend and foe alike. And there will be judgement and torture and execution. In the words of Psalm 118 the builders do reject the stone, which, in their eyes, threatens the stability of the whole edifice, the religious institution, itself. Though he comes in peace and hailed as the long awaited saviour, within a few days *Jesus becomes the rejected stone*.

The sad reality is that one doesn't have to renounce the faith, or stop worshipping God in order to misunderstand or even reject the real message of Jesus. The entry into Jerusalem was an event of rejoicing and praise and for once the disciples of Jesus did get it right. They recognised something of the critical nature of the moment, the *kairos*; God's own chosen time. They helped to stage the event, with their praises they echoed the deepest yearnings of their nation for a Leader sent by God and up till that point Jesus so much fitted the bill. Surely, this was the time to come clean and take over the reins. Yet, going through the motions they still didn't quite understand what Jesus was about. They gave him the 'red carpet treatment', as we do with our celebrities. A King should have a smooth ride and he was a King in waiting, after all! They covered up the stony road with their cloaks; just as we do sometimes with our praises. It is easier to be in a Royal entourage than stumbling over the bare *stones of the road to Calvary*.

It is often debated whether the cheering Palm Sunday crowd was the same as the one crying 'Crucify him!' on Good Friday. I don't think we need to worry about this, all we need to do is recall what Jesus' closest friends and followers were doing; How with the exception of one or two women the rest "found other places to be" at the time of the Crucifixion – as we heard in Mary Magdalene's monologue recently. Very delicately put but we did understand what was meant. Yet, how could we condemn them when we know the fickle nature of our own commitment with our little betrayals and denials and our knack for "finding other places to be"?

Fortunately for us though, this is not the end of the elegy of the stones. There are some more pictures given to us in our readings today, which complete the story. In Psalm 118 the *stone the builders reject does become the main corner-stone*. The author of the Psalm senses the truth, which is visibly portrayed by Jesus. He had never lost the feeling of being God's beloved child, which set him on his journey and he keeps listening for that inner voice on God's frequency. He is setting his face against all that awaits him in Jerusalem, the condemnation he will receive and the disappointment he will cause. But even *the largest tomb stone* can not hold his message from walking out into the ends of the earth proclaiming God's peace and love and compassion and forgiveness.

And what of the disciples with their knowing and un-knowing, with their belief and un-belief? And what of us following more often in their footsteps rather than in Jesus'? Are they good enough? Are we good enough? The vision of the prophet Zechariah brings in our final picture: "On that day the Lord their God will save them, his own people...For they are like *precious stones in a crown, which sparkle all about his land*." In spite of everything the disciples were good enough, they were not silent on Palm Sunday, and they have found their lost voice on the day of Pentecost. And we are good enough for we are all designed to be precious stones in the divine crown with a calling to sparkle in our own particular way. May God's Spirit help us to fulfil our commission as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

