

Psalm Sunday: Enjoy the Moment

Sunday 5th April 2020

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 118:1-2,19-29, Matthew 21:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11

'Tis an unusual Palm Sunday. Normally, we look forward to some fun with the children, the palms and craft, the imagery of Jesus on a donkey (however that gets portrayed year by year!). Palm Sunday in some ways sets the scene for Easter, we know how difficult, dark and troubling the next week will be, what Jesus will suffer, but Palm Sunday encourages us that there is a plan in the world that God is working out. The more we ponder this particular event the more it reveals to us something wonderful about Jesus faith and life choices. Today as we gather in a different way, by phone, internet, by reading, we would love to be a crowd, we would love to be together. Physically we cannot be but spiritually we are as one. Jesus' Palm Sunday faith here is an inspiration for us in our won real-world situation right now.

Let's consider the event for a moment. We reflected last week that Jesus' disciples thought Jesus returning to the power base capital of His enemies as all but suicide. Now, having witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus and enjoying the rising acclamation of the mob, the confidence of the disciples had returned. With Passover fast approaching Jesus had determined to return to Jerusalem. There is so much symbolism here one can hardly ignore it, but we will try to do so this morning. News of what Jesus had done spread proverbially fast. As He moved towards Jerusalem the crowd surged and swayed as it grew, surrounding Him and travelling with Him pulsing, with a life of its own. Jesus was returning to Jerusalem at one of the most sacred of times in the Jewish Calendar. The passion in the annual celebration of God having saved the Hebrew the people from their Egyptian captors reflected the passion the people of Jesus' time had to be released from their servitude to Roman rule. Surely, here was the Messiah, attested to by the power of God in incredible miracles, once again they would see their cruel rulers suffer and the people would find new freedom in God.

As Jesus got nearer Jerusalem the city-folk saw Him coming and they too swarmed out of the city to celebrate His presence. The day was one of traditional celebration and rejoicing in the power and provision of God. A great procession saw the people come to the Temple raising palm branches as symbols of celebration, rejoicing and singing. Palm branches were kept for Sukkot later in the year, a celebration festival, but here they reflected the same palm imagery as was placed Jewish coins after release from captivity Egypt- palms were a symbol of nationalism and freedom – truly something to celebrate. Our God is One who saves, who draws us out of the pit, the One who is ever with His people. How appropriate it was then that, in this context, Jesus is the One who becomes the focus of this rejoicing. Before the Messiah, the True King it was appropriate to place palm branches and even clothing to comfort His path.

Two parties however would not have been so excited. The Romans and the Jewish religious leadership. Knowing that the Passover, with its million or more attendees, had the potential to become a power-keg of nationalism and revolt, the Roman garrison was rigorously expanded and trained for the Passover week with thousands of additional soldiers being brought in from afar. How was it that they were so absent in Jesus' journey? Why were they not there breaking up the crowd? Well, God has a sense of humour I feel. In Israel at this time of year it is a cool, even cold time. Daily highs are normally around 16 degrees Celsius with lows of around 7. Things don't start too early in the day and finish relatively early. For Jewish people celebrating Passover in families,

indoors, this was ideal. Jesus would have come up the road somewhere around late morning, in time to get settled in town or close by for the evening. Bemusingly, history records that the Roman garrison commander had determined this exact time to be the time to take the entire Roman garrison out to the other side of Jerusalem to practice policing and riding tactics. The governor, Pontius Pilate, was Caesar's representative in the region and while based normally in the Herodian port city of Caesarea Maritima, Pilate came to Jerusalem every year at Passover to ensure the patrols and forces were well prepared for anything that happened over Passover. At the time Jesus arrived only the barest skeleton crew of Romans was around because everyone else was doing exercises on the other side of town! We don't believe in coincidences do we! The Sanhedrin, or members of it, felt that they had to act as the Romans clearly weren't going to, or be able to.

The gospel writer Matthew, focussing on how Jesus humbly fitted into Jewish expectations, as would the apostle Paul writing to the Philippians later, saw Jesus' arrival as the clear fulfilment of prophecy, in particular Zechariah 9:9: **“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** Of course, Matthew doesn't mention the later part of Zechariah's prophecy which speaks of Jesus' second return and the reward enjoyed by God's people then. As Jesus travelled the crowds called “Hosanna, hosanna”. Save us, Save us. Save us humble king. Save us from the Romans, from the taxes, from the oppression. Hosanna.

Now the second group unlikely to be happy with events were the Jewish religious leadership. Without the Roman garrison to control the mob their own comparatively small Temple guard would be easily over-run if Jesus turned on them. In their own ineffective yet assertive way they attempted to stop Jesus and the crowd, with about as much success as a Brazilian President managing COVID-19. With authority all their own they commanded Jesus, **“Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”** But Jesus responded, **“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”** It was a moment, a kairos moment, a turning point. A moment that Jesus knew heralded the end and God's ultimate victory, the fulfilment of Scripture. Truly a time to celebrate and be glad, not just for humanity, but for all of the earth. Yes, in this moment the rocks, the stones, the trees, all of creation would cry out in celebration, salvation was at hand. In these quiet, noisy moments, Jesus was able to look beyond the immediate and celebrate that God is in charge and great good is coming. This was a moment of celebration.

Of course, Jesus knew what was to come. He'd been told on the Mount of Transfiguration. He knew what He had to go through and suffer. As He approached Jerusalem after facing off the stone-faced, blind, spiritual leaders, Jesus faced another moment and He wept. He knew what the people were needlessly going to suffer for their own rebellion. With divine foresight He saw the destruction of Israel and the Temple by Roman hand. Having rejected God's Son the people had also removed God's protection from their nation. The rest would be history.

Coming into Jerusalem Jesus went directly to the Temple. There He drove out the money changers, those selling and wheeling-dealing. Stating that while the House of God was to be a House of Prayer they had turned it into a 'den of robbers'. Scholars have seen this term as reflecting those who plotted and schemed against the Roman rule ... and probably quite rightly. There, for a few days, Jesus would stay and teach those who would listen. He was not swayed by Roman, by religious leader or by crowd adulation. Jesus lived in the moment with God and listened to His Father's voice.

So, what is it that we can celebrate and be thankful for right here, what or who do we listen to, right now, in this moment. On one hand we clearly want to hear God's small, calm, quiet voice in turbulent times. We need to make space to do this, to see His perspective. To respond to Him, like Jesus, and not to other pressures around us.

On the other hand we can certainly find things to be grateful for. Like the fact we are in NZ (for those that aren't, we do acknowledge that these videos and sermons are going to a wider world audience and we do want to take a moment to recognise our brother and sisters throughout the world. We bless you and pray for you where-ever you are. I have very much enjoyed the video conferences and calls with a number of you, old friends and new, that have called in.). But yes, if we are here in NZ we can be grateful that the government acted quickly, that we do have good resources and that, in general, people are responding appropriately. We can be grateful too that even in this period of lock-down, for many, it truly is, as my wife says, "a gift of time from God". A time to be with each other in families. A time to spend with each other, to share stories and experiences, hopes and fears, to draw closer in every positive way. A time to read and think. A time to enjoy that is so often stolen by a world of busyness. We can be grateful too for our technology. There is a positive irony in that NZ has almost completed a massive internet fibre rollout across the country. This has meant that the internet capacity is far greater than demand right now. It is not perfect but so much work, education and socialising can now smoothly operate from home that a couple of years ago would have been impossible. For many this has really been a blessing – especially where families have members stuck overseas. We can also be grateful that we have so many medically trained and support-capable people in NZ that are willing to sacrificially serve to keep us well and the resources to do so.

At a spiritual level we have a lot to give thanks for, to enjoy. The old saying "there are no atheists in foxholes" may be somewhat optimistic, it does hold some truth in this situation. When everything is so tossed on its head people question what is really important and so often they come back to basic spiritual questions: why am I here? What is life all about? The type of thing we address in Alpha course (quick add break – if you are interested in joining the next Alpha course will start online in a couple of weeks. Email us if you want to join.) People come back to God or find Him for the first time in such times. We have time to spend in reflection, in prayer, in meditation, in studying God's Word. If you haven't yet I'm sure you will have as the weeks stretch out. We can even learn to worship and pray in new ways, and sometimes with a deeper intensity than ever before. What we are doing is, I pray, reaching a newer, deeper, more real intimacy with God. This is the blessing of the moment. From it will come a deeper grasp of God's plan and that whatever is ahead, whatever we have to go through, we will know that Jesus is with us, is there already and is at the end waiting for us. We are not alone. Our Saviour and Lord is always with us. So, odd though it may seem, enjoy the moment, don't overthink the near future, put your trust in God. For, as the Scriptures say, Philippians 4:4-7, **"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** With this in mind, we can agree with the apostle Paul when he states, **"I can do all things who gives me strength"**, Philippians 4:13. See the beauty and opportunity in the moment.

So, as we picture Jesus humbly riding up to Jerusalem with all the pressures upon Him, we close with this blessing and prayer from Romans 15:13 as we seek to act like Jesus: **“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”** Amen.

Cease the moment, appreciate the small and look to the Lord in the large.

God bless and again, Amen.