

Luke 19:28-40

Even the stones cry out

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin our Easter celebrations with the joyous entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. There's a lot to be said about the paradoxical nature of entering like a triumphant king but riding on a lowly donkey. And then there's the deep meaning behind the specific shouts of praise from the crowds. But today I want to take us to the last verse of the reading:

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

The joyous welcome was probably drawing the attention of the Roman authorities, and the Pharisees were afraid. They didn't want to give the impression that the Jewish population was doing anything to upset the Roman rule. But Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was about so much more than the people of Judea and their Roman occupiers. If we don't look too closely it admittedly does look like Jesus is just mimicking the powers of this world. And his entry into Jerusalem was a statement of power. But just not in any way like the earthly powers liked to do.

The crowds were proclaiming, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" That's very much not a political statement, but something much bolder. And it echoes the chorus of the angels at the birth of Christ. The multitude of disciples welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem are just like the multitude of angels welcoming Jesus as the Word become flesh.

This gives us some insight into Jesus' statement about the stones crying out instead. We must start with the fact that it is right and good that Jesus is praised. He is our Lord, our God, and our saviour. His death and resurrection for our sake provided redemption for all of creation. And so all of creation in some way testifies to the redemption that is found in Christ Jesus. If the crowds weren't allowed to do this as Jesus entered Jerusalem, then God would make the truth known some other way, even if it was through miraculous means like the stones crying out. And Jesus saying the stones would cry out points us to a few other passages of scripture.

We might think of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, and the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Now Jesus is Lord of all creation. He commanded wind and waves to cease and could command stones to become bread. But that wasn't God's will, so it didn't happen.

We also could look forward to some of the events between this triumphal entry and Jesus' crucifixion. At one point some of the disciples were speaking about the temple and its magnificent construction from stone and other materials. And Jesus says, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." This would happen within a generation. The temple and most of Jerusalem were destroyed. Even the stones of the destroyed temple testify to Jesus, because Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world and so the temple no longer has a purpose. The new covenant has been written in Jesus' blood and he is the place we go to have access to the very presence of God. This is demonstrated at Jesus' crucifixion when at the moment of his death the temple curtain shutting off the holy of holies is torn in two from top to bottom. No longer is God's presence restricted.

So, the destroyed stones of the temple do, in their own way, cry out in praise for what Jesus has done. We should also recognise that all creation is praising God when it's doing what it was created to do. The start of Psalm 19 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1, NIV). The beauty of God's creation evident in the shifting colours of the sky is a proclamation of the glory of God.

Scripture doesn't just limit this praise to the physical realm of creation. When John was given a glimpse into the spiritual realm as recorded in the book of Revelation, what he saw was more praise of God. He writes:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

(Revelation 5:11-13, NIV)

The host of angels was proclaiming the praises of the Lamb who was slain. This is of course Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them praise Jesus because of this.

The prophet Isaiah records creation praising God also:

The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. (Isaiah 55:12-13, NIV)

Notice here that something special happens. Creation praises God by being restored to how things were before the fall. Juniper grows instead of thornbushes; myrtle grows instead of briers. This is all part of Jesus ushering the new creation by his death and resurrection. It's not just about our sins being forgiven, but all things being restored and redeemed. It's about all creation, us included, living how God created us to live.

In Psalm 65 the praises of creation follow this same pattern:

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy. (Psalm 65:12-13, ESV)

Creation praises God by being everything it was created to be. We praise God by being the people he has called us to be, living according to God's will, living as salt and light, as people who love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Sometimes it takes stones crying out in praise to remind us that this is what we are called to be and do.

So today as we celebrate Palm Sunday and shift our focus towards all that Jesus did for us at that first Easter, let us join all creation in endless praise of our Lord and Saviour. And when we forget, or get distracted, may creation itself cry out in praise and remind us that Jesus is truly worthy of our praise, both now and for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.