

The Stone's Cry

Psalm 118:19-29; Luke 19:28-40

Over the years my love of history has led to a fascination with the stones, the literal building-blocks, of which history is made up. I remember as a child putting my hands on the rock face of Edinburgh Castle that could be reached from Johnstone Terrace, and wondering what heroes and heroines and villains of history had been witnessed by the black rock.

I remember as a schoolboy being taken by the Latin Master on a trip to Hadrian's Wall, and eventually, having been chased by a farmer off his land as we'd been mistakenly following a dry-stone dyke which we thought was disappointing if this was all Hadrian had built, suddenly stumbling over some of the ramparts in the wild countryside, and putting my hands on the stones and wondering who had hewn and placed them all those millennia ago.

In the Holy Land, down by the sea of Galilee, in the warm November sunshine, reaching into the water and pulling out a white and a dark stone, and wondering if that was part of the inspiration Jesus had as He symbolised His ministry as being the power of light born to overcome the power of darkness.

In the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, running my hands along the great stone slabs of all that remained of the Temple, built and rebuilt over centuries, what is known as the Wailing or Western wall, and wondering if Jesus, Who had known those walls and passed them on many occasions, had reached out and touched them too.

If you are in the area around Jerusalem, you are struck by the barrenness and dryness of the land. Much of it is not far from desert. Pockmarked with a few date or olive trees and other scrubby shrubs, occasionally transformed by the rare occurrence of a river or stream that created a temporary oasis. This is a bleak landscape, and it is dominated by dust, and by stone. Stones that had seen the tide of history sweep over them century after century. Stones that had witnessed the tramp of soldiers feet, the scampering of shepherds, the steady tread of the merchant's caravan of camels and mules, the sandaled feet of pilgrims.

We have that saying, if only these stones, these walls could speak, what tales they would tell. Looking at the stones of this fine building, 125 years old now, witness the death of Queen Victoria and the final flourish of British Empire; witness to two world wars and the colossal losses sustained by this community, like many others, etched on the war memorials; witness to the births and deaths of Kings and Presidents and Prime Ministers; witness to the rise of cars, and the technology revolution; witness to a thousand baptisms, weddings funerals, a century of Christmases and Easters; the hymns and prayers and sermons and anthems soaked into these stones that enclose our worship and give us sanctuary today.

As Jesus left Bethany and rounded the Mount of Olives that lies beside Jerusalem, riding on His donkey, surrounded by crowds and critics, disciples and detractors alike, there would have been stones all around. Stones on the hillside. Stones in the little houses and in the great walls of Jerusalem and its Temple. Stones on the road and in the fields. Even one of the disciples, Simon Peter, got his nickname from Petra, meaning stone or rock.

As the Palm waving crowds around Jesus took up the cry 'Hosanna! Blessed is the King Who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.' Luke, in his gospel, doesn't mention palm branches, but he does mention the stones. If people hadn't been prepared to break into shouts about Jesus, the stones would have broken into song. It's an astonishing image.

It harkens back the Jewish idea that all of creation vibrates with the presence of God and is ready, at any moment, to burst out in joy. And also burst out in songs of sorrow. God's chosen one was here, but on that road to Jerusalem, that boulevard of broken dreams, the pain and the suffering of God's children, past, present, and future would mingle with the shouts for joy.

Stones play a part in Biblical faith. John the Baptist talked about God being able to raise up children to Abraham from the stones'. The prophet Habbakuk warns that the stones of the houses, built on corruption, would cry out against the inequality and hurt in the world. Jacob, at Bethel, where he wrestled with God, put up a stone upon a pillar to mark that encounter (that

stone, incidentally, is possibly here in Scotland, for it was said that the Stone of Destiny, upon which the Kings and Queens of Scots were crowned, as the same stone taken from Bethel).

In the New Testament, Peter in one of his letters calls for people of faith to be like 'living stones', built in the house of faith and witnessing to their love of Jesus. Peter, 'Petra', the rock-headed, stone-headed follower of Jesus who gets it right, gets it wrong, then gets it right again about Who Jesus is.

In Jewish tradition to this day, instead of putting flowers on a grave, mourners will place stones.

In bleak, arid lands, where winds would have blown flowers off the dry graves, stones remain.

On Palm Sunday, we focus on the joy and the welcome. We focus on the hosannas of the people waving their Palm branches – the clue is in the title of the day. But beneath their feet, and on the hillsides, and built into temple and palace and city walls, the stones were there, with their songs too. The stones of memory, crying out. The stones of foundation upon which things are built, crying out. The stones of beauty, shaped and carved and placed as cornerstones, crying out. The stones of violence, thrown in anger, or defence, or persecution, crying out. The stones of faith and witness, still there and enduring after the long centuries have rolled by and palm branches and people have long since gone.

If you go to Jerusalem today and visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, legend has it that it is built on the site of Calvary and the Garden Tomb. As you climb up a narrow staircase, and look under one of the far too lavish Greek Orthodox altars, you can kneel down and touch, it is said, the stone hill top of Calvary, where the cross of Jesus was driven into the rock to keep it secure. There is certainly stone there, surviving long after the wooden cross of Jesus had gone. What would have been the cry of that stone as the blood of the Saviour of the world fell upon it?

As we enter this Holy Week, there are many things to attend in the story. Some shout out, some remain quiet; some need careful thought, others are plain to understand. As the story of Jesus weaves its way from Bethlehem and Nazareth to Galilee and Bethany and Jerusalem, the stones remain, witnesses to this most extraordinary human. Reminding us that the whole world

bears witness to the One Who comes to save and heal and forgive. We watch, we listen, we wait as the story unfolds.

Richard Wilbur, an American poet, wrote a poem that brings together the birth and the death of Jesus, and places the stones that cry at its heart. With this I finish.

1. A stable lamp is lighted
whose glow shall wake the sky;
the stars shall bend their voices,
and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
and straw like gold shall shine;
a barn shall harbour heaven,
a stall become a shrine.

2. This child through David's city
shall ride in triumph by;
the palm shall strew its branches,
and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
though heavy, dull and dumb,
and lie within the roadway
to pave his kingdom come.

3. Yet he shall be forsaken,
and yielded up to die;
the sky shall groan and darken,
and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
for gifts of love abused;
God's blood upon the spearhead,
God's blood again refused.

4. But now, as at the ending,
the low is lifted high;
the stars shall bend their voices,
and every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
in praises of the child
by whose descent among us
the worlds are reconciled.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen