

Palm Sunday (C)  
*Luke 19.28-40/Isaiah 50.4-9/Philippians 2.5-11/Luke 23.1-49*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
1 April 2007

**“KENOSIS OR TRUE EMPTINESS”**

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. This morning we have re-enacted that first 'day of the palms', two thousand years ago, the day recalled in all four of our Gospels, a day never to be forgotten by the Christian community. It was the very first 'March for Jesus' as Palm Sunday processions might be called.

And we have sung out as we have marched. We have sung out praises of God's mighty acts for the poor. But we have sung them out in full knowledge that if we were silent the stones we have walked on would cry out in our place, because the world and everything in it cannot help but echo ancient Hosannas as well as Hosannas from around the world this Palm Sunday morning.

On that first day, Jesus made his 'triumphal entry' as it has long been called. But he did not come with placards saying 'We demand our Religious Rights!' He did not come with a security team, or with a publicist. He did not come with a strategic plan to cash in on the 'political capital' of the event to establish a limited-liability organization to be called the 'church'. There was no political plan.

Jesus rode to his certain death in Jerusalem on a humble donkey surrounded by peasants and children; he made his 'triumphal entry' as it has long been called, amidst the messy, fickle masses of humanity.

Jesus was returning to the city of the great temple, the city of the ancient King David, the centre of the faith, the centre of the world. It was this Jesus who had for three years preached the coming of the Kingdom of God, who had now been proclaimed King by the crowds.

Isaiah, the prophet, said: 'The Lord awakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.' To what news has God awakened us this morning? What do we hear this morning?

Part of the challenge for us this morning is to hear God's voice between the sounds of our two gospels, the Palm Gospel and the Passion Gospel.

In the Palm Gospel, that launched our worship out of doors, and our feet around the Grand Parade, we have echoed what St. Luke called the 'loud and joyful' praise of the crowds who thronged the road into Jerusalem.

‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven’—this is what they sang.

According to St. Luke this was very much like what Mary sang out, and Zechariah sang out, and Simeon and Anna too in the first two chapters of his Gospel.<sup>1</sup> And above all the angels sang this out to the Shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours.’<sup>2</sup>

This was a lovely chant, a powerful, emotional piece of singing. And it told the truth. Jesus was the king.

Is this what we are to hear this Palm Sunday morning?

There is not doubt that we are to hear the voices of the disciples, and the crowds with their families, all calling out their Hosannas. There is no doubt that Jesus did right when he refused to silence their voices. They saw that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, thought they didn’t really know how it would arrive, or what it would look like.

Jesus could not silence such joy they made that day any more than Jesus would silence our songs this day. Is that what we are meant to hear this morning?

Yes! Or we wouldn’t have imitated the crowds who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem. But there is more to hear this morning, not less. The Passion Gospel we have read, together, carries the voice of the Lord too, and the Prophet asks us to turn our heads and hear it with our other ear.

For Isaiah the prophet sang out the third of his five ‘servant songs’ in this morning’s lesson: ‘I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard.’<sup>3</sup> He knew that the truth spoken could ‘sustain the weary’, but that just as easily it could rouse hostility. It is not deep truth that changes, but us human beings who sometimes welcome it with joy and sometimes fiercely refuse it.

For if the crowd before Pilate wasn’t quite the same crowd that welcomed into Jerusalem, the two crowds could not help but overlap. And human crowds are famously fickle.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke* 1.46-55; 1.68-79; 2.29-32; 2.38.

<sup>2</sup> *Luke* 2.14. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless noted.

<sup>3</sup> The five songs have long been considered to be the following: *Isaiah* 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12; 61.1-11. They have been interpreted to refer to one character, or to the nation of Israel as a whole, or to refer to both. Christians have understood the ‘servant’ to be a prophetic anticipation of the ‘Messiah’—whose ‘body’, of course, the church has become in the teaching of St. Paul’s *Eistles*.

We know the comedy of our unstable minds at election time in our own country...the comedy of little charts and graphs on the evening news that tell us that who we praised two years ago now deserve a rude dismissal. We know the tragedy of our crowd behaviour when it comes to the sudden destruction of one neighbour by another, neighbours who once lived together in harmony in Rwanda, or Yugoslavia, or Berlin.

And so with our other ear this morning we hear something else the prophet and his God wants us to hear, the voice of the crowd a few days later, the Good Friday crowd: 'Away with this fellow...release Barabbas the mercenary warrior...crucify this so called king.'

And so we, the crowd, have shouted out our lines.

And it wasn't just the crowd that abandoned their fascination with King Jesus, it was almost the whole cast of characters in the Passion Gospel. The Gospel certainly doesn't teach us to blame those who were labelled 'the Jews' by the Christian civilization of medieval Europe.

Who was complicit in the condemnation of Jesus? Who was it beyond the mob, the crowd? Listen to the list in the Passion Gospel—Pilate, Herod, Barabbas, the chief priests, the scribes, the soldiers. What a motley crew at odd with each other on just about everything but a burning anger at the man swept into the city in glory a few days before.

The disciples have disappeared, complicit in Jesus' abandonment. Only a few stand by helplessly and still hear the echo of the Palm Sunday chorus: a few women, deep in ritual mourning, a convicted criminal, and a single Roman officer, who owed his position to a brutal, foreign police state. This is all that is left of the Palm Sunday chorus of praise.

So we need to have both our ears open this morning.

But it is not just to hear the double-barrelled truth of Palm Sunday and Good Friday. We also need to hear the most important voice of all, the voice of the creator in St. Paul's *Epistle to the Philippians*—the voice that carries us between the glorious songs of Palm Sunday and the ugly shouts of Good Friday.

The primitive church, our ancestors in the faith, sang about what was most important, and this song was the most important of all, at least the most important for our Holy Week.<sup>4</sup> The Philippian song we heard this morning

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<sup>4</sup> For a full list of New Testament citations of what were almost certainly primitive Christian hymns, please see the list provided by R.P. Martin in *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p.19. Hymns or 'hymn bits' can be found

might have been chanted to tunes that one belonged to the worship of the gods of the Greek pantheon. The Philippian song might have been sung to ancient Jewish liturgical chant. But it was sung by the early church.

In between the voices we hear the way of Jesus: ‘He emptied himself, being born in human likeness...he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.’

This is what the church first called *kenosis*, the Greek word used by Paul in his Epistle to describe the action of Jesus in ‘emptying himself’—*kenosis*.

How did Jesus hear the voice of God between the exalted Palm Sunday praises and the vengeful shouts of the crowds as he neared the cross? This is the mystery of the Incarnation we confess: ‘We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ...For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:’ *kenosis*. This one word is worth of our repetition.

To ‘empty oneself’ is ancient advice in several old religions. But here Christians part ways with venerable Eastern philosophies. We confess that Jesus emptied himself of what was by nature his, the nature of the Creator of the universe—but he did not empty himself to shake off his mortal body, not to escape the brutality of physical life which was in fact created good—very good.

Jesus emptied himself that we, the creator’s children, we the fickle crowd might be filled with life—with ‘abundant life’ as St. John told us. And so we Christians confess: ‘For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.’

Near the beginning of the Philippian song we are told the great mystery, which we cannot explain, but which as we confess it we can begin to know: ‘Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be [grasped].’

It was Jesus’ life among us, Jesus life for us, Jesus’ *kenosis* that opened the doors of abundant life for us.

This was the mission, the passion, the love that carried Jesus between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, that led him from acclamations of his Kingship to the jeers of the bloodthirsty crowd hurled at him as he upon that Roman cross, the execution engineered by what we call the greatest of the world’s civilizations.

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in the *Gospels of Luke and John, The Book of Revelation, Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Corinthians, I and II Timothy, Titus, Hebrews, and I Peter.*

It is Jesus' *kenosis* that brought us life. But it is also Jesus *kenosis*, his self-emptying that is meant to become ours. For as surely as St. Paul quoted that great hymn he introduced it to the Philippians: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God...emptied himself.'

The 'same mind'. Because if we think we are full, if we strive to be filled by less than Jesus' love and passion, we will have no room in us to be filled by Jesus' love, by his passion.

Do we think we are full already? 'Already you think you are Kings?' said St. Paul to the Corinthians, 'already you think you are full?'

What will carry us from the cradle, through the grave? What will carry this, our parish, our congregation, from where it is to what it is meant to become? Is it the right education, the proper friends, the right house, the perfect career, the ideal spouse, model children, the coolest parents, abundant RRSPs, the right five year plan? What will carry us—the best technology, ideal staff, terrific volunteers, a perfect building, praiseworthy programmes, the best website?

Is this what it is all about? No said Jesus: it is *kenosis* we need.

Are our lives so full, our circle of friends so right, our food so good, that God's blessings roll off us, instead of soak into our thirsty souls and needy bodies? Do we need those who come through our doors, or do we turn politely away and say: Sorry, we're full!

'Have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus.' We are to empty ourselves, not just as an exercise in Lent, but as a mood in our lives. We are encouraged by none less than Jesus himself to hold more lightly those things we think we need to fill us or fulfill us so that we can be truly filled with the grace of God that will bring God's mercies—in the shape of a person, or an experience, or a dream. Will we let them remind us that we need to empty ourselves?

This is what will carry us through Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Good Friday—this is what will empty us so we might be filled by the wonder of the resurrection of Christ. This is the voice of the ancient biblical hymn that we need to hear between the songs of the Palm Gospel and the hard and heartless shouts of the Passion Gospel.

May the voice of the prophets, the voice of the apostle, and above all the incarnation of Jesus Christ open our ears this morning.

*Amen.*