

SACRIFICING OUR FEAR

PALM SUNDAY

Sermon given at CAROLINE VALLEY COMMUNITY CHURCH

on 17 April 2011 by Dan Phillips

texts: Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; Matthew 21:1-11

We are in the season of Lent, and have been focusing on the concept of sacrifice. We talked about the two meanings that it has for us as Christians: giving up something important, and making something holy. Today, we will look at the well-know story of the ‘triumphal entry’ in light of the idea of sacrifice.

Do you celebrate? Some of you may say “I'm Baptist. I don't celebrate!” Well, supposing that you did: what would it be like? Would you sit in the dark, quietly, alone, doing nothing? Or would you go outside, join a crowd, make lots of noise, eat a lot of good food, and laugh? How we celebrate says a lot about us as people. And whether or not we see a need to celebrate says even more.

In our text today, we see Jesus celebrating. We see Jesus participating in a large, outrageous, raucous, party. And when some want to shut down the party, Jesus says that it must go on. The party is so important, that if the people were to be silent, the stones themselves would cry

out. And not only did Jesus participate, he actually did some planning for this party. He sent his disciples for a donkey so he could ride, rather than walk, into Jerusalem.

And what kind of party was this? Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, and the people threw palm branches and coats before him, shouting “Hosannah”. What did all this mean? Why was this important? And why were some people trying to stop this party? These are the questions we will examine this morning.

First of all, we must understand that Jesus went to Jerusalem knowing what would happen to him there. Matthew 16 verse 21 says “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Going to Jerusalem was not an accident, or a mistake, or just another trip. It was a deliberate march to death, an intentional journey to the cross. If we as Christians don't understand this, then we have not appreciated what Christ did for us. The story of Jesus is the story of deliberate sacrifice.

Going to Jerusalem to die, Jesus plans for a celebration,

a party! What was this? Well, we need to understand the customs of that day and time. An important part of public life in older times was something called the “triumphal entry”. This was where someone who has been successful militarily enters a city. The city may be the city that has surrendered to the victor, or it may be the home city of the victor. The Romans in particular liked to have a 'triumph' celebration for its winning generals. For them, it was considered the greatest point of military recognition to be given a triumph in Rome.

And it was a very personal thing. The triumph was not given to a group, or an army. It was always given to a person. And this person often was recognized as the most important political and military figure of his time. To be given a triumph was to be recognized as a very important person.

Now the person celebrating a Triumph always had to ride into the city. He never walked. It was a part of the honor being shown to the person that they rode into the city in comfort, welcomed by all. This was the reason that Jesus arranged for a donkey so he could ride into Jerusalem.

For the Jews in Jerusalem, the triumphal entry ritual

had another, religious meaning. A great victor who entered Jerusalem was always looked at as a possible Messiah. The popular Jewish belief was that the Messiah would come and restore the military and political might of Jerusalem, of the Jewish people. So each person who entered Jerusalem like this was viewed as a possible Messiah.

We can see this religious element to Jesus' entry when we listen to what the people were saying. They shouted "Hosannah". This was a Hebrew word that meant "save me, I pray". It had become a religious word, much like the phrase "born again" has become a religious phrase. People of that time would only use this word when addressing God or God's anointed: the Messiah. So the people of the crowd are acclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah, and asking Jesus to take power.

When we understand that, we understand why the Pharisees wanted Jesus to tell the people to shut up. They, the Pharisees, understood perfectly what was happening. And they did not like it. They did not consider Jesus to be the Messiah, and they did not want anyone else thinking this or saying this. They wanted Jesus to renounce this role.

But Jesus refused to shut up the crowd. Jesus in fact

said that it was necessary for the crowd to celebrate. If they did not shout, the very rocks themselves would shout it out. It was that necessary for this celebration to happen.

We must ask today: why was that celebration necessary, and what does all of this have to say to us? We view this today in the shadow of the Cross, as did Jesus. At this point in our journey through the annual Christian calendar, we know what is going to happen. We know that Jesus has to die on Friday to rise on Sunday. And as we continue to prepare ourselves for this most dramatic event in the history of the world, we have to ask what there is to celebrate now. Sure, we will celebrate next Sunday, after the Resurrection. We will rejoice in the stories of Christ's appearance to Mary, to the women, to the disciples traveling to Emmaus. But now? Before the cross? Why is it so important to celebrate ahead of time?

It is important to celebrate before the Cross, because it is an act of faith. We live in a world dominated by the desire to prove things, to have the evidence shown to us. Yet, we live also in a world that demands faith. We must believe that all the machines that surround us will work when they are needed. Sometimes our car breaks down, or we have a

computer virus, and then we understand that things are not automatic. More recently, we have become aware that the economic realities that we have depended on are not always certain either. Houses may fall in value as fast as they increased in value. Companies may fail as spectacularly as they succeeded. Tomorrow is not certain, and the next day is totally unknown. And this is the world we live in now.

As Christians, how do we navigate this world? How are we to live our lives in a world that has serial killers like Ted Bundy or master thieves like Bernard Madoff or rulers like Kim Jong-Il who starves his own people to death while developing nuclear weapons? In the midst of this world of sin and suffering, what is our response to be?

I believe a part of that response is modeled by Jesus in the story we study today. I believe that Jesus wants us to celebrate, to rejoice. We have a party and laugh because we believe that Jesus will come again for us. We do not despair because we believe that we will live eternally with Jesus. We enjoy ourselves now because we have faith that Jesus has conquered sin and death and suffering. Like Jesus during Palm Sunday, we celebrate early, before the pain, because we believe that Jesus has overcome all for us, and that as

his people, we share in his victory. Jesus faced the cross, we face this world and its sin, and our own death, but together we are called to rejoice, to celebrate, and to show our faith in him.

And we are not to do this because one day we feel good. We are to do this deliberately, through planning. We are to laugh in the face of this sinful world. We are to say: yes, we know it's a lousy place at times, a place of pain and fear. But we WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WE WILL NOT FEAR, BUT REJOICE. We will plan celebrations for remembering our Jesus, for remembering God loves us. We will celebrate when the world finds it crazy to do so, or sees nothing to celebrate.

Not only is celebrating hosannah an act of faith, not only will we plan for it; it is also a necessary act. We must do this. We must do it not only because Jesus modeled it for us. We must do it not only because we are commanded to do it. We must celebrate because it is the only right way to live. Laughter and happiness, joy and rejoicing, these are important psychological parts of human existence. We cannot live well without these. There are statistics that show that people who go to church live longer, happier lives.

This is what we're talking about here. We cannot live as Jesus wants us to live without these. We cannot live as God created us without celebration.

But it's not just celebrating: it is celebrating Jesus. As Christians, we cannot live our lives without an awareness of the sacrifice of Jesus, without an awareness of the presence of Jesus in us. The Holy Spirit was sent by Jesus to help us with our lives, and the Spirit lives and works in us. God's presence inside us helps us to rejoice in pain, and celebrate despite the possible, even probable, bad future. As Christians, we must live out the joy of Jesus as God works in us. We have no choice if we are to live as Christians should live. The celebration is necessary, is required. In our text today, Jesus says that if the people were to be quiet, the stones themselves would begin to shout. That's how necessary this celebration was. All nature responds to the Christian message; all of creation knows who the creator is.

But what about the people celebrating? Notice that most of the crowd that day had no real understanding what Jesus was about to do. They thought Jesus was going to proclaim himself king, and kick out the Romans. They hoped that a new day politically was about to happen. Even the disciples

did not fully understand. And that's a feature of celebration: we don't have to know everything, we don't need to understand all of God's plan, we just need to be willing to claim Jesus as our savior. The crowd that day shouted 'hosannah' meaning 'You are our savior'. They acclaimed Jesus, and that was enough for that day.

What about the others there? There were some who wanted to stop the celebration. They did not want Jesus hailed as savior. They did not want people celebrating Jesus. They asked Jesus to stop it. They did not celebrate. They are alive today. Some of them are even in the church. The people who tried to stop the party were religious leaders. They opposed Jesus, and this loud party. And today some are trying to stop us from celebrating. They want us to be afraid, or angry, not happy. They want us to run and hide, not gather. They want us to put down our palm branches, and pick up guns. But we will celebrate anyway.

So as we approach the Cross, and Easter, which group are you in? Are you a disciple, going to get the donkey, helping to prepare for the party? Are you a member of the crowd, proclaiming Jesus as savior, even when you don't understand? Or are you like the Pharisees, trying to keep

people from shouting 'hosannah'. Make no mistake: this story is important because we are like the people of Jerusalem. We are asked to welcome Jesus in today. How will we respond?