

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Psalm 31: 9-16

Palm Sunday 2022.

Philippians 2: 5-11

St. Luke 23: 1-49 (Procession: Psalm 118: 1-2; Luke 19: 28-40)

“Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” St. Luke 19: 38

There are times of anticipation which are so great, we’re almost ready to burst: When we are waiting in the Church building for the marriage service to start, and the bridal procession will begin in a moment or two; when the professional running athlete is at the starting blocks, and the signal gun is about ready to fire; or, when the new baby is just about to be delivered into the world... There is a pent-up sense of anticipation...

This sense of anticipation is in the air during the unlikely scene outside Jerusalem... To an observer unaware of current events, the scene might look unremarkable: A young man is riding a donkey toward the city. We would guess that this young man is a rabbi, a teacher – because teachers would customarily ride donkeys in ancient Palestine. If we look carefully, we might deduce that the small throng travelling alongside the rabbi are mostly working-class people. If we look very carefully, we might even wonder if a couple of them look a bit sketchy... If we hear them speaking, we could deduce that they are northerners from Galilee, by their accents... But this young rabbi and his group don’t look that much different from so many pious pilgrims who come to worship at the Temple – where we are all confident that we encounter the Lord God...

But to those who know the scene, we know that all the people are oppressed by the Roman occupiers, and they are longing for the blessed Messiah to come... Even the people who are skeptical of this young man have heard the strange, wonderful rumours of healings and teachings and transformed lives... “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” this Jesus says. “God is doing a new thing among us...” A sense of anticipation has been building among the crowd for years – for generations... The rumours seem more and more credible: This is the long-awaited Servant of God, who will free his people for ever! A new age has begun by his very presence!... He comes within sight, this Jesus... The rumours and the anticipation reach a fever pitch: A few shouts. Someone cries, “Hosanna!” – that ancient cry of praise to God. More and more people take up the call, and people nearby begin to run, to come to see the commotion... Like a champagne bottle bursting its cork, there is a groundswell of praise!... Some in the crowd begin to cut branches off nearby trees, and throw them before this donkey carrying the Lord Jesus. The crowd becomes ecstatic; joyful! *This is it! He is the One! Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!...*

A few religious leaders try to silence the crowd. They don’t trust this young man with his claims of intimacy with God, who both claims to fulfil the Law, and yet seems so casual about observing parts of it...

The Lord Jesus addresses the Pharisees directly: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” – that is, even if the people could be silenced, the very stones of the earth would shout out God’s praise!...

We are designed to praise God – to acknowledge his honour and glory and magnificence and power. Above everything else, our ultimate purpose is to bring glory to God... The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

Bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.’ (43: 6-7)

As the ancient people of Judah gave praise to God. So too, you and I, and all people, are designed to erupt in praise to God – to have unabashed joy and delight in God’s goodness and mercy shown supremely in Christ...

In some spiritual quarters, enthusiastic Christians are regarded with a degree of skepticism – even suspicion! Unfortunately, praise is sometimes regarded as a bit *déclassé* – unseemly, somehow... For those who disapprove of expressions of praise, I remain concerned if they have considered the depth of their own need for God, and the amazing gift which God has provided through his Son’s incarnation, death, resurrection – and all that goes with it...

Do we remember one of the ancient stories of the faith, when the Ark of the Covenant was carried around by the people of Israel, and the enemy Philistines stole the Ark during a battle raid?... The Ark of the Covenant was a potent symbol of God’s presence and saving work. (After the Temple was built, the Ark of the Covenant was placed inside the holy of holies...) But the Ark was stolen once by the Philistines... God’s people eventually get the Ark back, and David is full of praise to God, and dances before the Lord, as the Ark is being brought back to Jerusalem... Second Samuel 6 records it this way:

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

Now David’s first wife Michal looks out her window and see David dancing around in praise, and she regards his behaviour as unworthy of a king:

As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.

Michael later confronts David, saying,

‘How the king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants’ maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!’

It seems that, in his joy and praise, David was showing his ankles and his knees (maybe even his thighs!) as he was jumping and dancing in praise before the Lord... David replies to Michal,

‘It was before the Lord, who chose me in place of your father [Saul] and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honour.’

David didn’t care how he looked. His focus was on the Lord... The unknown author of Samuel indicates that there is a judgement against Michal, because she objected to David praising God: “And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death...”

Surrender is core to a life of faith. In the end, it doesn’t matter what other people think about us. What matters is what *God* thinks of us. It is *to God* that all the glory and honour belong. It is most appropriate that we offer our gratitude and our praise...

God does not need praise – but *we* need to praise. Praise is the natural outcome from recognizing who God is, and the mercy he has shown to us. Now, at the beginning of Holy Week, we join with the ancient people in praising God because of the presence of the Lord Jesus...

The Church’s highest purpose is to praise God... For example, St. Paul puts it this way: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts [notice the plural: “*our* hearts] to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Collectively, the Church’s highest purpose is to praise God...

As well, as individuals, we are called to praise God!... In our hearts, it’s appropriate that we are full of gratitude to God... For many of us, this inward deep appreciation expresses itself outwardly in expressions of praise: “Glory be to God,” we might cry; or “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” We might offer the ancient Anglican

Te Deum, beginning, “We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord...”
Some of us may be led to raise our hands, or to dance before the Lord...

The outward expressions may or may not be shown. What matters fundamentally, however, is the joyful conviction of gratitude in our hearts...

Thanks be to God for his goodness and grace, shown supremely in Jesus Christ. As this Holy Week begins, may we give God *all* the praise, and *all* the glory; and live for him, now and for ever. Amen.