

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

IF STONES COULD SPEAK

"I tell you, if these were silent,
the very stones would cry out."


Luke 19:40

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THE RIVERSIDE
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(Lk 19:40)

Professional hockey enthusiasts are well acquainted with the name of Maurice "The Rocket" Richard. What Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays have been to American baseball, Richard has been to the national sport of Canada. Fifteen years ago this month, this man performed the incredible feat of scoring four goals in a Stanley Cup play-off game. In the stands that night was a stretcher-borne patient from Royal Edward Institute. This man had lost his speech through a stroke. When "The Rocket" singed the cords and put on the light for his fourth goal this man broke out in a giant yell. He began to speak again and has been speaking ever since.

Does this help us in some small way to appreciate the unbounded exuberance of that first Palm Sunday? As our Lord approached the Holy City from the east, throats long held in silence by a stiffling legalism broke out in rapturous praise.

Earlier, in the region of Decapolis, it had been said of Jesus, "He hath done all things well, He maketh both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak." (Mk 7:37) So now as he draws near to Jerusalem he does so to the accompaniment of unrestrained adulation expressed in a surging sea of sound.

All of this was too much for the Pharisees who were never quite sure of their ground or his going. Obviously perturbed, they approached Jesus saying, "Master, rebuke Thy disciples." (Lk 19:39) Jesus responded, "I tell you if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." (Lk 19:40)

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What did Jesus mean? Was he alluding to a proverb here? Was he saying in effect, it is as unlikely that they should cease as that these stones should speak? The joy that Jesus Christ imparts is a contagious and irrepressible joy. "Streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise."

Or is Jesus suggesting here that the universe itself is sacramental. The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth forth his handiwork. The rainbow speaks of His grace and the sparrow of His care. The Bible is insistent that nature is included in redemption. Paul writes in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome, "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." (Rm 8:22) On the day of our Lord's crucifixion the sun hid its face and the earth quaked as in convulsive grief. Jesus said of the Scriptures, "These are they that testify of me," (Jn 5:39) but stones too bear their witness.

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Think of the stones that figured in our Lord's temptation. For forty days and forty nights he had been there in the wilderness. This was real temptation. This was more than simply gesturing for the sake of posterity. Unless his temptation was authentic he is not bone of my bone or flesh of my flesh. Having reached the state where he was both hungry and exhausted, the tempter came to Him saying, "If Thou be the son of God, command that these stones be made bread." (Mat 4:3) The probability is strong that those stones, especially under such conditions, began to look like little loaves of bread.

But Jesus refused. "It is written" he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone." (Mat 4:4) We who have a flare for compromise find it hard to understand this. After all a fellow's got to live! Why did he refuse? He refused because it was central to His mission that He be identified with us, that he not resort to means that are not at our disposal. In the River Jordan He

becomes one with us in baptism. He was tempted as the Scripture says, "In all points like as we, yet without sin." (Heb 4:15)

John Sutherland Bonnell tells of an experience in which he was called rather suddenly to a hospital to visit a man who had suffered his first heart attack. The patient had been placed within an oxygen tent to ease the stress on his heart. But, like many of us, this man was frightened by the tent and all that it suggested. Dr. Bonnell at the proper moment zipped down the side of the oxygen tent, put his head in, and spoke calmly to his friend; "Let's breathe it together, now that we are both here inside the tent."

Ecce Homo: Behold the man. Those stones lying there in the wilderness eloquently attest the lengths to which the son of man would go to become one with us.

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Leave that wilderness scene and come to the temple in Jerusalem, a building of unsurpassed beauty. Our Lord has spent the night in prayer on the Mount of Olives. Now he enters the temple and begins to teach. Presently he is interrupted. There is commotion at the rear. Angry voices cut the quiet. A woman is thrust in front of him shivering in shame, trembling like a deer at the mercy of the hounds. Those who had brought her there had stones in their hands, stones readily available since the temple was still in building. "Master, this woman was taken in adultery in the very act. Moses in the law commands that she should be stoned, but what sayest thou?" (Jn 8:5) Jesus responds in words that have become classic: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast the stone at her." (Jn 8:7) With that word those white-knuckled fists began to relax. One by one the stones began to fall with a thud to the temple floor. One by one the accusers began to slink out, from the eldest to the youngest. The only one who could have thrown a stone did not.

Let us be careful how we interpret this scene. We are not right in concluding that Jesus was not one to judge. Actually, this woman was being judged now as she had never been judged before. Hitherto she could always say of those who would judge her, "They are as bad as I." But now in the white light of His presence even with no word being uttered she stood adjudged. The perfect always renders judgment on the imperfect.

We are not to conclude that Jesus is here glossing over the sin of adultery, which from the very beginning has been at odds with God's ambition for the human family. He called it for what it was, "Go and do not sin again." (Jn 8:11b)

Those stones speak of a judgment that is mingled with mercy and understanding. It is a judgment that is delivered in love and thus a judgment that creates in the one being judged a desire to be better than she is. "He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust." (Ps 103:14) "The law was given by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." (Jn 1:17) "For God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." (Jn 3:17)

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Jesus had other run-ins in the temple. On that very same day His enemies pressed him closely and ringed him round. They sought answers to questions that his teaching had raised. Jesus turned to them and said. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad." (Jn 8:56) Then said the Jews unto him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?" (Jn 8:57) Jesus said unto them, "Truly, truly I say unto you before Abraham was I am." (Jn 8:58) Then took they stones to destroy Him.

He returned to the temple around the 25th of December that same year, the time of the Feast of Dedication. This was a time when nationalism was high and

surging. This was the feast in which the Jews remembered the dedication of the temple under Judas Maccabeus after the unspeakable atrocities committed by Antiochus Epiphanes. So they came to Him again insistently, "If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly." (Jn 10:24b) He answered in part, "I and the Father are one." The record goes on to say "Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him." (Jn 10:31)

Presently he left the temple, disappearing from their midst, and went to the other side of the Jordan where he learned the sad news that his friend Lazarus had died. His response, "Let us go to Judea again." But his disciples said unto Him, "Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee there, goest thou there again?" (Jn 11:8) And he went! Those stones picked up by men who judged themselves to be His enemies, speak to a side of Jesus that we often miss. The common assumption, and I would hope that our young people in this Communicant's Class would not hold it, is that Jesus, though bearded was a somewhat effeminate type, resembling Casper Milquetoast, who spent his days going up and down the land whispering kindnesses into the ears of little children and old ladies. One wonders how such a life could ever have found its way to a cross! No, he spoke bluntly. Those were real stones and there was real anger behind the desire to throw them. He knew he was risking his very life in going back, but he went!

Christ was brave. There is no better word for it than this. "He set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem." (Lk 9:51) Studdert Kennedy, that brilliant and brave British chaplain in World War I, wrote home out of the front line trenches and said, "The first prayer I want my son to make is not, 'God keep Daddy safe;' but 'Keep Daddy brave and if he has hard things to do, make him strong to do them.' Life and death don't matter, Pat, my son; right and wrong do. Daddy dead is Daddy still; but Daddy dishonored before God is something awful." 1 Stephen, his body a welter of crimson, cries out in the moment of his martyrdom,

"Lord receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59) What is this but a brave believer going home to his even braver Lord.

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Speaking of Lazarus, Jesus got there. His first response was tears. "Jesus wept." (Jn 11:35) This is the shortest verse in Scripture yet it carries meaning worthy of profound search and meditation. In such an hour the family of Lazarus would welcome his consolation. But is this all He brings in the time of death? No, He speaks. And He speaks in power. He speaks to the living: "Take ye away the stone" and to the dead, "Lazarus come forth." (Jn 11:43) And Lazarus comes. Thus was foreshadowed that morning soon to follow when Mary Magdalene in the early hours of the dawn would make her way to another sepulcher and find that the stone had been rolled away.

Here is more than a philosophy about death, more than speculative ideas about the world to come. This is power over death. Here, as in many other places, we do not believe like Jesus, we believe in Jesus. This is why "The last low whispers of our dead are burdened with His name."

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"I tell you if these were silent the very stones would cry out." The stones in the wilderness testify that He is our elder brother; the stones dropped to the temple floor that His judgment is tempered by mercy; the stones from which He would not flee, that His was a brave spirit; the stone rolled from Lazarus' tomb, that He is Lord of life and death.

Still the most convincing speech of all is a life surrendered to His will. And to this we are called by Peter, a man whose name means rock, who in his first letter said, "Ye also as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ."
(I Peter 2:5)

Doubtless that word helped in part to inspire the legend inscribed on the grave of David Livingstone in Westminster Abbey. The epitaph reads,

"He needs no epitaph to guard
a name which men shall prize
while worthy work is known:
He lived and died for good -
be that his fame:
Let marble crumble:
This is Living-Stone."

FOOTNOTE:

1. "By What Are You Controlled?", a sermon by Dr. W. Taliaferro Thompson of Union Theological Seminary, August 31, 1952, p. 11

