

“There Must Be A Place”

A Palm Sunday Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—April 5, 2020

He answered and said to them, “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.” (Luke 19:40)

Crying out. So familiar on Palm Sunday is the account of people crying out in praise of the Lord. We spoke the familiar refrain in our recitation, “Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (John 12:12). We heard a different version in our reading: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest” (Luke 19:38). I invite you today, not only to consider anew the words themselves, but to pay special attention to the emotion behind them, and the people expressing that emotion.

All of us have witnessed someone who’s joy cannot be contained. Picture the immediate response to the long-awaited news of the engagement of a daughter—the loud exclamations of love and excitement, the laughter, the rising up to share a hug.

We talk of someone who “bursts into tears”—who had been holding something sad inside, until they simply couldn’t any longer, and out it comes. We recall Joseph serving as a ruler in Egypt who “could no longer restrain himself” but had to reveal himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:1). We get it, because we’ve been there ourselves.

So it was with the people at the first experience of Palm Sunday, as they witnessed Jesus riding into Jerusalem. Something inside was unleashed. A celebration of a Miracle Worker and Teacher who had come to set things right; the prospect of a new and better existence. All that pent-up hope came gushing out in the cries, palm branches, and clothing strewn on the way.

We can therefore understand the Lord’s response to the Pharisees who said to Him, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples” (Luke 19:39). “I tell you,” He said, “if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19:40). There is no way to contain that level of emotion and belief once it was kindled in the human heart. It would be as impossible as telling those parents not to react with joy to their daughter’s engagement news, or telling the person who bursts into tears, “You can’t do that.” It simply wouldn’t work.

Our need to worship. Today let’s bring that forward into the context of worship, because that’s really what Palm Sunday is about—the Lord reestablishing His church and underscoring its use as a place where people could devote themselves to Him. There is the Lord’s part in that. Right after He rode into Jerusalem He expressed His zeal for the church by casting out the moneychangers, saying “My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves” (Luke 19:46). A little later that week He sat down with His disciples at the Passover, saying, “With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you (Luke 22:15). And in Isaiah we read, “For Zion’s sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a lamp that burns” (Isaiah 62:1).

But what of our part—our zeal for the church? We hold in mind the people lining the way with their palms, their clothing, and their shouts. Demonstrated there is the human need for the church—the unstoppable desire within us to have a place where we can turn to our God. We read in the Heavenly Doctrines, “A church is a church from this, that the Lord is adored

and that the Word is read” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1069). We have the opportunity in the church to adore the Lord—to acknowledge in our worshipful actions that He is the Savior and we are those seeking salvation; to praise Him for the ways He cares for us and blesses us; to ask for His guidance in our struggles and His mercy on our sins. Seen in this light, we must have a place, an outlet, for those deeply held human needs.

Imagine for a moment if we did not. Sometimes we recognize the value of something when we consider what it would be like if we didn’t have it. Imagine if there was no church for us to go to on Sunday—no beautiful cathedral, or other house of worship that has stood as sacred space for us, no place to seek solace in the presence of the Lord when a loved one has left us for the other world, no isle to walk down as a bride and groom to be married in the presence of the Lord, no congregation with whom we can celebrate the baptism of a beautiful child born to us, no opportunity to be joined to the Lord in the powerful sacrament of the Holy Supper. What if there were no pastors to turn to in times of need, or to answer questions about spiritual life?

It would be untenable to most of us if that was the reality. Fortunately, it is not. But how often do we intentionally value that fact? How can we use the emotion displayed on that first Palm Sunday to inspire our own love for the church? Today I would like to offer three things that we can do to cultivate that love for the church that spring from the Palm Sunday story itself.

“The stones would immediately cry out.” It starts with those stones. “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.” Stones represent “the Word’s truths” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1298). In another place they are identified as “truths in their proper order” (*Arcana Caelestia* 9863). Stones *crying out* means that those truths are declared for all to hear—joyfully so. A fundamental use of the church is to see to it that the Word is indeed taught, in all its fullness. Can we celebrate that declaration?

Perhaps this teaching in the Heavenly Doctrines will help. We read, “No connection to heaven is possible unless somewhere on earth there is a church where the Word exists and where the Lord is known through that Word” (*True Christian Religion* 267). It is also the second half of the passage quoted earlier that “the church is a church from this, that the Lord is adored and that the Word is read” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1069).

There must be a place where all of that truth is known, and taught, and declared, and fostered. There has to be somewhere where people can come to know the Lord’s vision for marriage, and that men and women are created for each other in marriage. Do we not want to protect the space and the mandate of the church to teach what works in relation to marriage, despite many opposing messages in the world around us?

Where else will people turn to discover the presence and providence of the Lord when a loved one dies, or as we say it, transitions to the life to come? Is it not a supreme blessing to hear declared the vision of life after death that the Lord has given us, so that we can be comforted by the continuance of life for those we love?

How else are people to arrive at an abiding trust in the Lord without a proper understanding of His love and wisdom, and how He is at work in even the hardest

experiences of our lives? How else can people align themselves with the Lord's will for their lives without knowing what that will is?

There has to be a place where the Word is declared, where the stones cry out. Can we celebrate the church's efforts to teach the truths—even the hard ones?

"If you had known..." Nowhere is that more true than in terms of hearing from the Lord wherein lies true happiness. As the Lord rode into Jerusalem—in fact immediately after He said those words to the Pharisees about the stones crying out—it says,

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Luke 19:41-42)

Our souls long for peace. They long for happiness, meaning, belonging, a sense of purpose and self-worth, a way to contribute that brings fulfillment. Isn't it true that the Word has answers to all these things? Speaking again of the church, there must be an opportunity for people to hear from the mouth of the Lord what leads to true and lasting happiness. How else will people know what of our culture is good and reflective of heaven and what is contrary to the order that the Lord can bless?

Consider one contrasting perspective that comes from the Word. We're all familiar with the saying, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). Of this challenge we read in the Heavenly Doctrines:

While living in the world people calls those things a blessing which make them blessed and happy temporally, that is, wealth and important positions.... 'A blessing' in the spiritual sense, [however,] is those things which constitute eternal life, consequently things which are of charity and faith. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8939)

The church is here to champion the treasures of heaven.

Consider a couple of other examples. The Word says that people find happiness "in use, from use, and in accordance with use" (*Heaven and Hell* 403). In contrast we know that much in our world sends messages that happiness comes from a life of ease, when we no longer have to apply ourselves in any meaningful direction.

Harder still are the moral standards of the day. Perhaps we'd agree it is much more acceptable today, than in days gone by, to forego marriage, or if not, to forego waiting till marriage to experience intimacy with others. Can we hear the Lord weeping over the hurt that can come to good-hearted people in that context, who believe they are living a life free of unnecessary bonds, but fail to experience the true freedom that comes from living within the bounds of the Lord's order?

So it is that there must be a church—there must be a place where we can turn to discover and be strengthened in what actually leads to lasting contentment. Can we support the church in its efforts to teach the truth about happiness? We do so when we cultivate an affection for the truth that springs from our version of the affirmation of the Israelites, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8; *Arcana Caelestia* 4449).

“A house of prayer.” Finally, we come back to the powerful episode of cleansing the Temple. We hear the Lord declaring at the end of His ride into Jerusalem, “My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves” (Luke 19:46). What’s going on there, spiritually speaking?

As with so many other things we have talked about today, the Lord drew a stark contrast. The church is not intended to be a place where some capitalize on the vulnerability of others. The church is also not a place to go through the motions—merely showing up and doing the ritual, but not allowing it to go any deeper than that.

It is about prayer. It’s about people’s worship. It is about connecting with the Lord in the worship services we are privileged to experience. It is about fostering praise, humility, and reverence by the rituals we go through. It is about absorbing messages from the Word. It is about obeying the Sabbath in its most literal form.

It’s also about “worship in life” that extends beyond Sunday—about the gratitude in our hearts that causes us to thank the Lord for the blessings we have; about carrying a message explored in church into discussion with friends and committing to do something about it; about lifting our perspective up to consider how the Lord would wish us to act in the situations that come before us. To the extent that we can orient ourselves to the many *internal* forms of worship, to the same extent we will find joy in opportunities to participate in *external* forms of worship (*Apocalypse Explained* 696:11).

Let the stones cry out. When the Pharisees saw the multitudes proclaiming their Hosannas, they asked Jesus to make them stop. He replied, “I tell you that if these should remain silent, the stones would immediately cry out.”

Shown for us on that day is the power of the Lord to touch the human heart with an ardent desire to worship. We can open ourselves to that touch. We can cultivate a place in our lives that *loves* the opportunity to praise the Lord. It comes to us when we become convinced that there must be a church—there must be a place where the Word is declared—all of its truths; there must be a place where people can turn in their times of need, and their times of great happiness; there must be a place where we can discover the path to the lasting happiness that our souls long for; there must be a place where we can go for counsel on the struggles of life, and for a sense of the Lord’s mercy when we have failed.

“A church is a church from this, that the Lord is adored and the Word is read” (*Apocalypse Explained* 267). “A church is a church by virtue of its affection for the truth” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4449). Most of all a church is a church because its people have an unstoppable desire to turn to their God. As we read in the Psalms,

“My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God... Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You” (Psalm 84:2,4). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Luke 19:29-40, Psalm 84:1-4, *True Christian Religion* 267, *Apocalypse Explained* 1069.

Luke 19

²⁹ And it came to pass, when He drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mountain called Olivet, that He sent two of His disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village opposite you, where as you enter you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Loose it and bring it here. ³¹ And if anyone asks you, 'Why are you loosing it?' thus you shall say to him, 'Because the Lord has need of it.'"

³² So those who were sent went their way and found it just as He had said to them....

³⁵ Then they brought him to Jesus. And they threw their own clothes on the colt, and they set Jesus on him. ³⁶ And as He went, many spread their clothes on the road.

³⁷ Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, ³⁸ saying:

"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

³⁹ And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples."

⁴⁰ But He answered and said to them, "I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."

Psalm 84

- 1 How lovely is Your tabernacle,
O LORD of hosts!
- 2 My soul longs, yes, even faints
For the courts of the LORD;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
- 3 Even the sparrow has found a home,
And the swallow a nest for herself,
Where she may lay her young—
Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts,
My King and my God.
- 4 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;
They will still be praising You. Selah

True Christian Religion 267

No connection to heaven is possible unless somewhere on earth there is a church where the Word exists and where the Lord is known through that Word. This is because the Lord is the God of heaven and earth [and] without the Lord there is no salvation. It is enough if there is one church where the Word exists. Even if this church consists of comparatively few people, still the Lord is present throughout the world by means of the Word, since heaven is connected to the human race through the Word.

Apocalypse Explained 1069

The church is a church from this that the Lord is adored and that the Word is read. For the Lord reforms [His] people, and the Word teaches how they must live that they may be reformed by the Lord; therefore, if these two truths are not acknowledged and received the church itself perishes, for upon these two truths the church is founded.