

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### "The Stones Would Shout for Joy"

Jesus has the remarkable ability to use language in ways that astonish and delight. Nowhere is that skill more evident than in the familiar story of Palm Sunday—the so-called Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples are entering the holy city during a time of high expectation and excitement. The news that Jesus is approaching the city has been spreading for weeks. Everywhere in the city people are passing along the stories of this amazing new prophet that everyone's talking about—this fellow Jesus. There are stories about his teachings—insights and concepts that go beyond the simplistic rules and rituals of the priests and rabbis of the day—, about how he has constantly outsmarted the authorities who are out to get him, about how he seems to meet all the requirements that fulfill the scriptural references to the One called "the Messiah," about his family background with its direct connections to the ancient kings of Israel, about all sorts of miraculous healings—even, 'if you can imagine!—the raising of a man who had died. The crowds were growing, the noise of excitement was increasing, the great moment was at-hand! Expectations were sky-high; People couldn't wait to catch sight of Jesus, couldn't wait to find out if this was really the Promised One for whom they had awaited for centuries of time.

Suddenly, the milling crowd separates and into the city comes the Chosen One. But wait—there must be some mistake. A hush falls over the stunned multitude. It's not a king at all; just a guy on a small horse with no saddle, surrounded by a bunch of rough-looking followers who are whooping it up like this is some kind of big deal. What a letdown!... all this commotion over nothing very special. One of the local authorities (probably the person in charge of parade permits, don't you think?) suggests to the Jesus that he needs to get his followers under control—you know, cut down on the noise a bit. Now listen carefully, because here comes the response of Jesus—a one sentence "zinger" that I really love. It's one of my all-time favorite biblical texts:

**"If these people weren't excited enough to make a noise of praise this day, the very stones of this street would shout with joy."**

Isn't that a wonderful image? Just imagine, stones TALKING. I don't know about you but when I think of a stone I picture something that's completely inanimate, a solid, hard, cold and dead material that nothing can penetrate. That's what's so great about this comment from Jesus. He's contrasting us human beings with all our sophisticated tools for receiving and responding to what's going on around us with inert, apparently senseless pieces of rock. He's saying that even a box of rocks is smarter and more articulate than the majority of human beings when it comes to recognizing and praising the one who created them! He's saying that if we had a clue about who he is, we would all be singing and shouting with joy because we know ourselves to be in the presence of God. He's saying that if his disciples weren't shouting their excitement, then the whole creation—even the stones—would find a voice to welcome him.

I love the irony of this observation by Jesus. It reveals how blissfully unaware we tend to be about anything that is the least bit off the radar screen of our own personal agenda. Unless something affects us in a very direct way—our safety, comfort, and convenience—we just pay no attention at all. We think that

paying attention to God's presence in our world is a matter of choice, an option, that doesn't make much real difference. Oh, sure, maybe religion is important to some lonely and needy people who find its reassurance helpful but it's certainly not a top priority for most of us..... not for those who are in control of their lives and have the resources to live with confidence in whatever the future may hold. We tend to see the so-called "vertical dimension" of our being as something "extra," on the periphery of what really matters. Our attitude is that you can believe in anything or nothing and it really doesn't matter. Pick a life-goal and pursue it. We take a sort of "worship the God of your choice" attitude. The God who actually is the creator and source of everything that is or ever will be could be right before our very eyes and we wouldn't have a clue. God could be (and is) present everyday—in the person of someone in need of our help, in the person of someone who has an important lesson to teach us, in the harmony and unity of the natural world—and we completely fail to be aware of that reality.

But, here's the other side of this wonderful observation from Jesus: our own denseness of spirit is challenged by the constant celebration of God's natural world. Even those seemingly dumb and lifeless things called stones recognize and speak out in love for their creator.

Do you doubt what I'm saying? Do you think that Jesus is just speaking metaphorically? Well, we happen to be in a perfect place to test the validity of the assertion that the natural world is more faithful in its witness to the Creator than you and I. Look around you. Consider the incredible forms of flowers, plants, and trees that burst forth year-round with blossoms and fragrances that go beyond our wildest imagination. The shoreline waves practically roar a daily song of celebration. The egrets and pelicans swoop through the air in a dance of life's fullness. The local waters literally teem with fish, swimming a pattern of order and harmony, completely in tune with the forces and currents of God's own splendor. Seashells of every shape, color, and size offer up a vast array of creativity to reveal the artistic hand of the one who made them.

Just the other day, while walking our dogs, I found myself paying special attention to the stones along the roadside. I stooped to pick up a few rocks. They turned out to be filled with fossils—beautiful signs of ancient life. They spoke to me of their endurance over centuries of time and their voice was rich with messages of their place in the ongoing process of life—the gift of a loving Creator.

Now, in light of all that communication, that world-wide chorus of joyous praise, where do we human beings rank? I think you'd have to conclude that we would have a hard time surviving the audition. That choir is too talented for us to even "make the cut." Even the stones of the street pavements provide a greater witness to their Creator than most of us. Our denseness is more solid and impenetrable than any stone ever thought of being.

Palm Sunday challenges you. Jesus challenges you. What is the message of your own being—the way that your own life speaks—your song of witness to your Creator? Are you finding ways to show to the whole world that you know WHOSE you are and that you're grateful for all that God has given to you?  
**Surely you can do as well as a stone!**

**Think about it.**