

“The Word Cannot Be Silenced”

“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

The arrival of warmer weather means that we will soon be able to open our windows and welcome fresh air into our homes. It also means that we will be inviting in all the sounds of the season – both welcome and unwelcome. Along with the beautiful sounds of birds singing and children playing will come the annoying sounds from loud parties, drag racing, firecrackers, and other sounds that can become an annoyance. Some sounds have been deemed so unacceptable that many cities – including Stratford – have established noise bylaws to deal with such disturbances to the public peace:

- Squealing tires
- Cause or permit loudspeakers or other device for amplification in a residential zone
- Cause or permit fireworks or explosives
- Cause or permit persistent barking in a residential zone
- Cause or permit yelling, shouting, hooting, whistling, or singing in a residential zone
- Cause or permit operation of musical instrument or noise making equipment in a residential zone

With each of these infractions carrying a fine of \$115, our city is attempting to “*safeguard the residents of Stratford against unnecessary and bothersome noise.*”

We are not informed by Luke as to whether or not the city of Jerusalem had such bylaws against excessive noise when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but the Pharisees appear to be enforcing their own laws against “unnecessary and bothersome noise” when they demand that Jesus “*order your disciples to stop.*” (Luke 19:39). They are responded to the noise of the crowds that welcome Jesus into the city on this day we call Palm Sunday, when “*the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’*” (19:37-38). Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem followed to pattern of the ceremony for welcoming a conquering king, which would have been a familiar sight with the Romans reinforcing their power over their conquered subjects:

- “Imagine the imperial procession’s arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.” – Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week.*

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem differs not only because it lacks the trappings of Roman imperial power but in its allusions to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of the one who comes to bring peace:

- “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.” – Zechariah 9:9.

- “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.” – Psalm 118:26.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem “*serves to confirm his kingship while setting Jesus apart from any earthly king.*” (Alan Culpepper).

The first sign of opposition to Jesus in Jerusalem arises in the response of the Pharisees to the spectacle of Jesus’ approach to the city. Luke does not tell us why they do this; they may have been wary of a negative response from the Romans, and they even may have been genuinely concerned for Jesus’ safety. Whatever their reasons, they order Jesus to rebuke his disciples, demanding that he “*order your disciples to stop*” – and thereby reject their accolades. Jesus, however, responds with an allusion to the words of judgment proclaimed by the prophet Habakkuk:

- “Alas for you who get evil gain for your house, setting your nest on high to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.” – Habakkuk 2:9-11.

Jesus’ response also echoes John the Baptist’s warning that “*God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham*” (3:8) and prepares us for the full import of his announcement as Jesus weeps over Jerusalem: “*They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.*” (19:44).

- “... some things simply must be said; the disciples are expressing what is ultimately and finally true; God will provide a witness though every mouth be stopped; opposition to Christian witness cannot succeed; and the truth will come out, it cannot long be silenced.” – Fred Craddock.

Jesus’ opponents thought that they had silenced him for good when on the Cross he cried out with a loud voice, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.*” (23:46). But not even death could silence the Word that is incarnate in Jesus, because by his death Jesus destroyed the power of death, and rose again so that nothing can silence the Word of God, which God declares “*shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*” (Isaiah 55:11). The Word of God was not silenced when the opponents of the apostles “*ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus*” (Acts 5:40); instead, “*every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.*” (5:42). The Word of God was not silenced when the mob responded to Stephen’s sermon by stoning him to death; even in his final moments, this martyr was able to cry out “*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit*” and prayed to the Lord to “*not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:59-60). The Word of God was not silenced even through the suffering and persecution that Paul experienced:

- “Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked... [but] I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” – 2 Corinthians 11:25-27; 12:10.

Even though Paul was often bound in chains in an attempt to silence the Word of God that he proclaimed, he knew with certainty that “*the word of God is not chained.*” (2 Timothy 2:9). The Apostle shared the confidence of the prophet Isaiah that even though “*the grass withers [and] the flower fades ... the word of our God will stand forever.*” (Isaiah 40:8).

- “For just as it is not possible to bind a sunbeam, or to shut it up within the house, so neither is the preaching of the word; and what was much more, the teacher was bound, and yet the word flew abroad; he inhabited the prison, and yet his doctrine rapidly winged its way everywhere throughout the world!” – St. John Chrysostom.

In the Holy Week, we are invited to walk with Jesus in the way of the Cross, the way that led to the Upper Room where he gave us the gift of Holy Communion; to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he gave himself to the arresting soldiers; and to the Place of the Skull called Golgotha, where he gave his very life for the sake of all humanity. When the stone was rolled into the entry of his tomb, it may have appeared that the word he proclaimed was silenced forever; but that same stone would serve as one of the first witnesses to the Resurrection when it was rolled to the side so that the first witnesses at the tomb could see that “*he is not here, but has risen.*” (Luke 24:5). The stone that no longer sealed the tomb was the stone of which Jesus spoke on Palm Sunday; it is the stone that cries out the good news that nothing can silence the Word of the Lord, the good news that *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.*

- “Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and he is able to make a way out of no way, and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This our hope for becoming better men. This is our mandate to make a better world.” – Martin Luther King, Jr., “Our God is Able.”

We may not welcome all the noises that drift into our open windows, and we may be thankful that the city has ways of silencing these sounds of annoyance. But as Christians, we are thankful that although many have and will continue to try, nothing can silence the Word of the Lord, the joyful noise that “*the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*” (Psalm 100:5). Amen.