

This Is Not A Time To Keep Quiet

On the day of the invasion of Europe, 6th June 1944, The President of the United States asked the nation to pray, and then led a prayer himself on public radio that was carried across the nation. That afternoon, the prayer was printed in the newspapers. All across America, church bells rang, and the churches were packed with people at prayer. Some businesses closed for the day so that their employees could pray. At the same time in the United Kingdom, King George 6th called on his subjects to pray. He said "At this historic moment surely not one of us is too busy, too young, or too old to play a part in a nationwide, perchance worldwide, vigil of prayer as the great crusade sets forth." In the space of just 70 years, Christian prayer in a public place is now an offensive thing to many people. It's pretty hard to imagine any President or King leading their nation in public prayer these days. In many countries, the Christian faith has been taken out of the public square, and relegated to the sidelines of society.

Yet occasionally, at times of national crisis, people show a need to turn to God for help when events are beyond their control. After the September 11th World Trade Centre attacks, the churches were full of people at prayer. People were feeling vulnerable. A week after 911, Max Lucado wrote, "This is a different country than it was a week ago. We're not as self-centered as we were. We're not as self-reliant as we were. Hands are out. Knees are bent. This is not normal. And I have to ask the question, 'Do we want to go back to normal?' Perhaps the best response to this tragedy is to refuse to go back to normal." New Zealand has experienced the same thing after the Christchurch earthquake. The mayor of the city called the people to pray, and the Sunday after the quake the churches were packed. Recently, 110,000 people filled the biggest park in Christchurch for a memorial service to remember the dead and to comfort one another. But here's the thing. As a result of the earthquake, Christians from Christchurch, and all around the country are getting out into their communities, helping people, serving them, and in some cases, telling them about Jesus. Some of them are out of their buildings because they no longer have a building to meet in. It took an earthquake to get churches out of their buildings and into the public square.

Now most of us would probably be OK about getting out into the public arena to serve people after some tragic event. But how do you feel about being out in the public square, praising God? The Palm Sunday story is a description of the followers of Jesus out in the public square praising God and exulting Jesus. If you had been there on the road to Jerusalem that day, would you have been shouting "Hosanna?" When was the last time you were told to shut up because you were praising God too much in public?

Here's how Luke describes that day. ***"They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes."* (Luke 19:35-42 NIV)**

As I read this scripture recently, what struck me was that the followers of Jesus were exuberantly and joyfully praising Jesus in public. This wasn't inside a building amongst fellow Christians. They were letting their hair down in extravagant praise in front of some very sceptical onlookers. And it was the real deal. Shouting out praise to God. Laying down their cloaks on the path for the donkey. Waving palm branches. This was exuberant praise in public. This was worship of God in the marketplace. And Jesus isn't at all embarrassed by this.

When the Pharisees criticise him for allowing his followers to get all carried away, Jesus sticks up for his disciples and says **"if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."** If the people of God don't praise him, then creation will. Jesus is saying that this is not a time to keep quiet.

Public Praise Creates Embarrassment.

Why do we get embarrassed by public acts of worship? Muslims will kneel down anywhere, face Mecca, and pray. Hare Krishna followers will dance through the streets chanting and tinkling their bells. Ultra Orthodox Jews will pray in public no matter where they are or who they are with. But put some Christians in a restaurant and ask them to give thanks to God for the food, and they will scratch their eyebrows and hope that no one is watching. Remember King David of Israel? When the ark of the Lord was brought to Jerusalem, it was preceded by a whole bunch of musicians, and at the head of them was David, the King of Israel. And what was the King doing? Dancing before the Lord with all his might. Boy, didn't that get a reaction!

"Then it happened as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David that Michal the 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. But when David returned to bless his household, Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants' maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!" So David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the LORD, over Israel; therefore I will celebrate before the LORD"
(2 Samuel 6: 16 & 20-21)

Remember when Jesus was invited to dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee? The custom in those days was that when your guest arrived, they would be greeted with a kiss, their head would be anointed with oil, and their feet washed. This was a common courtesy for any guest, but especially for a Rabbi like Jesus. I don't know if Simon was embarrassed that so many people had seen Jesus come into his house, or whether Simon was deliberately trying to humiliate Jesus, but whatever his motive, he didn't greet Jesus in the courteous way he should have. Everyone watching saw it. All the dinner guests and all the crowd of bystanders as well. What was even more embarrassing for Simon was that a sinful woman did what he should have done. She washed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, and anointed his feet with perfume. It was an act of worship in a very public place with lots of people looking on. That public act of worship by a sinful woman humiliated Simon and exulted Jesus at the same time. And Jesus commended the woman for what she did. Her public act of worship was pleasing to him and pleasing to God.

If I'm going to take this scripture about Palm Sunday seriously, I have to ask myself a couple of questions. I think you might have to ask them too.

1. How Public Is My Worship Of Jesus?

I'm prepared to identify myself with Jesus among other followers of Christ on Sundays at church, but how much am I willing to declare that in public? In one church I where I was Pastor, we used to have a public procession on Good Friday, carrying the Cross through the streets of our town as we made our way to the church building. If you were part of that procession, there was no hiding the fact from your neighbours that you were a Christian. When new believers were baptised, we always encouraged them to invite all their unbelieving friends along to their baptism and to declare their faith in Christ publicly. The best thing a person can do when they choose to follow Jesus is to tell their family and friends of their decision. When Jesus healed the demonised man at Gerasa, the man wanted to go with Jesus. But Jesus wouldn't let him. He said, **"Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you"** (Mark 5:19 NIV)

I once had a Christian businessman tell me his story. He had one of his young employees come to work one morning who told all his workmates that over the weekend he had decided to follow Jesus. The Christian boss called the young man into his office, and asked him to tell him what had happened. Then, when the young man had finished, he said "I want you to know

I'm a Christian too". He thought the young man would be pleased to hear that, but in fact he was quite upset. He said to his Boss "Do you know why it's taken me so long to decide to follow Jesus? It's because of you. I didn't know you were a Christian, and I thought that if a person could live a life as good as yours without being a Christian, then there was no need for me to be one." That man's silence about his faith actually kept someone from following Jesus. How public are we about our faith in Christ?

2. How Exuberant Is My Worship Of Jesus?

The second thing about this scripture is that the disciples were extravagant in their praise of Jesus. Some of us here today are Lutherans, who were taught to worship with a printed liturgy. Exuberant worship wasn't part of their upbringing. Some of us here today are from Pentecostal backgrounds, and you struggle to understand why everyone isn't dancing around the church and shouting out hallelujah! Some of us grew up in churches where we were made to shut up and sit still, and the church service consisted of a four hymn sandwich. The only entertainment we had in church was to add up the numbers on the hymn board and count the bricks on the front wall of the church. For us , worship was more like an endurance test. For numbers of us, exuberant praise was not part of the menu we were brought up with. Add to that all our different cultural backgrounds. You Africans are born with rhythm in your bones. You don't know how much uncoordinated people like me envy you! This time last year I heard a Swedish theologian taking a poke at the Swedes. He talked about how stiff and starchy they are, and how when the Americans talk about the joy of the Lord, the Swedes understand that as a concept, but the concept hasn't reached their face. I know a Pastor from Brazil, and his wife tells me how much they love to clap and sing and dance. I know these are huge generalisations, but you get the point. We are all so different. Different in our cultural upbringing. Different in our personalities. Different in our understanding of what exuberant praise is. I remember what a huge struggle I went through when I first encountered Christians raising their hands to worship God. I thought it might be safe to raise them as far as my ears. And when I did, I wondered what people might think of me. Was that going to classify me as one of those crazy makers? Do you know what the word of the Lord is from this passage of scripture? "Loosen up!" "Become like little children!" "Indulge in a little extravagant praise!" "Enjoy God!"

The Easter season is a time calling for praise and rejoicing, especially Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday is the victory celebration - victory over sin, death and the devil. Easter Sunday is the big celebration day of the Christian year. It's a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. On Easter Sunday, we are going to have a celebratory party. The children will be involved. We are going to decorate the church. I want to encourage you to wear your brightest colours, and come prepared for exuberant worship. Like Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday is not a time to be quiet. Palm Sunday is not a time to keep quiet. It's a time to express the joy of knowing that Jesus is alive.

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