

When Stones Cry Out

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 14 April, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Simon Hansford

Palm Sunday C

Isaiah 50, 4-9a; Luke 19, 28-40; Contemporary Reading: *“The Paschal Way”*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghmvzmNw-I>

The Lord be with you.

I bring you the greetings of the Synod. It's great to be here again. I was here 12 months ago, last Palm Sunday - and it's great to be part of the celebrations here in this place. And I look forward to the March later on, though I hear it might rain, so I'm hoping the rain goes west and we stay dry but we'll see how we go.

Our daughters' primary school in Queanbeyan had this breakfast called the “Eminent Persons Breakfast” and because I was a minister in the community I was regarded in some capacity as being eminent - and each year I was invited, I scored a really good mug, but I think they have now joined the choir invisible as my daughters didn't like them too much.

At the Eminent Persons breakfast the first year I went, I sat with this young boy. His name was Toby and he was in Year 3 and he was about this big and I remain the size that I am. He looked up at me and he said *“what's your name?”* And I said my name's Simon Hansford, it's great to be here, and we had great big name tags on our shirts and we sat there and we had breakfast together and we talked about what he did at school and about my daughters being a year and two or three older than him and all that sort of stuff. And his big sister was in my daughter's class and all that, you know, the conversation that you have. It was a child at our breakfast and trying to find their way.

Toby's big job, you see, was to introduce me as the eminent person with whom he was seated at the breakfast, so he was frantically - well not frantically but casually - taking notes in year 3 hand on a bit of paper and then it was his turn to introduce me. He said: *“I'd like to introduce you to my guest Samson hand patch”*.

Suitably deflated, I shared the rest of the day.

There's this sense for me, in reading this Gospel story, that if you read it in a certain kind of way, Jesus is deflating all the eminent stories that are around. When you hear stories of Caesar's triumph as he drags prisoners and slaves in behind him, having conquered them in battle, here's this country hick from the backblocks riding a donkey into town on some borrowed clothes.

There's a sense here that all stories of eminence and power are not just being surprised, but perhaps mocked and perhaps even ridiculed - as this bloke rides into town on a borrowed donkey.

The crowd is shouting and cheering and there's this question always in the story: is this prescience - is this some sort of Godly knowledge that Jesus has about donkeys to hand etcetera, or had he set it up beforehand because he knew somebody who knew somebody who had a donkey and he had a bit of cash and just did that.

What's it matter? The story isn't here.

The story's as he rode and arrived.

This human installation, this artwork, this protest, this moment, this ridicule, this story, this prophecy as Jesus arrives - surprises and doesn't; and calls something out and doesn't; and in his presence, he says something about the world around him, the empire that seeks to control him and the community in which he lives and the world for which he seeks to act.

The offense of what he does, we sort of miss, 2000 years later. Perhaps it's like one of those astonishing Banksy portraits in the streets that call into question things we think we know or understand, or powers we think we criticize but aren't too clear about, those large prophetic words that say something about our world and ask a different question: is it a challenge or confrontation? Yes.

Is it the wrong triumph? Yes.

Is it a foolish image? Yes.

As this one seeks to challenge and critique, to speak against and to ask questions of empire and power and the ones who would seek to say: this is how we live! This is how we are; this is who we are; and you will not only listen, but you will obey!

And whether it's church or culture, society or empire, this donkey riding carpenter's son asks questions of us all.

There's a moment for me almost of Don Quixote, perhaps dreaming over larger things but simply appearing as smaller things and Sancho on his donkey toddling along beside.

An eminence fails - and something else rises as we tell this story now, because we tell the story differently to 2000 years ago when it first happened - because we know the end; we know the spoilers. We're in the later chapters already by our lives.

So here we are, attending to this story knowing the days that wait for him, into which he rides; which he has chosen; and which he understands.

Eminence fails and something else rises.

Protests and wisdom and inconvenience.

Inconvenience because the voice is saying something that ruffles our feathers, or gets under the carpet or something like those blessedly painful students complaining about climate change and taking the day off school. How dare they.

They'll miss maths and science and stuff!

And what a protest the "powers that be" made about thousands of children saying; *we want a better world.*

What a mess they got into? What a kerfuffle there was about students saying: *we hope for something more!* How dare they!

The inconvenience of prophecy, the disruption of protest, the challenge of a new wisdom.

When farmers in Albury the other day, parked their trucks in the main street to block things in order to say: *this story about water is not good enough!* Deliberately inconvenient; blocking the cross roads and saying: *we want a larger, better, more honest story than the one we keep on being told in fragments and pieces and saying we want this story told. We're at the bottom of the hill; we want more from Queensland and South Australia and Victoria and New South Wales. We want more from the federal government!*

How dare they seek to act for the best interest of the community and their climate and the world in which they live and work and have their being!

You see, it's when the stones cry out we begin to pay attention.

It's when the stones have voices for themselves we begin to grasp what's happening.

It's when a woman, perhaps of no account, or some account, or has a name in all your different gospels - comes and anoints Jesus - and doesn't just act in such a loving intimate extraordinary way but proclaims and prophesies about what power and death and life and service and intimacy and love are.

It's when the men want to brush her aside and lock her outside; and Jesus says: *leave her. What she is doing will be the story of the Gospel told forever and for always.*

It's a woman, perhaps old, taking her tuppence and throwing them in the temple treasury - not because she's struggling but because she says: this is everything.

This is everything and by giving her everything Jesus' voice says: *how can we be part of a system that says God takes everything from you and gives you nothing back?*

This woman who proclaims in her action that she will defy the story, that will say *we will control you* - and chooses a new path for herself. And Jesus gives her action voice. And we have heard it and heard it and heard it.

With tuppence!

Jesus chooses this consequence for himself.

This is a step he knows will cost him everything. This is an action he knows that, despite the cheering for this moment, will in a moment again - turn to death for him. He knows this story.

A prophetic voice. Perhaps the risk of a stone crying him out to the church, to the Empire, to those who name themselves as eminent and expect to be named as such.

Confronting a system with everything he has, already knowing the cost of what he does.

When we confront this system. When we challenge the power. When we speak to those who seek to control and contrive – where does discipleship take us?

Where does this Jesus lead us?

And there are some who would say this is how you will read scripture! This is how you will understand it and do not dare step outside for what God might do to you.

Does this sound like Jesus Christ?

Does this sound like the breadth of the cross and the mercy of resurrection?

Does that sound like the Jesus we know and worship who calls us and forgives us and gives us life?

So when we ask our question about the refugee, or the world around us. About people's sexuality, your identity, how they are and who they are and how they live their lives - does it sound like the justice we know from the Jesus Christ we follow?

What do we invest and investigate what it means, that Scripture might speak to us again in this place, in this way?

I met with some phenomenal young people yesterday, young leaders in our church, many of whom are Pacific Islanders, now talking about trying to understand how we read culture and how we read the Gospel, how we hear about Jesus Christ - when for so long they've been told these are all intertwined and cannot be separated.

How, they said, do we critique culture and remain faithful. How do we hear the Gospel and ask questions of the world in which we live - and our parents and grandparents and those we love and honour part themselves? How do we do that? And turned to me for the answer!

When we're told there is only one frame in which to work; there is only one way to read this story or hear this word, we are trapped and locked in.

And the Gospel story of this week particularly says to us *God refuses to be nailed down and locked in.*

Where is Jesus in the story that we tell? Where is Jesus in the world in which we live - and the lives we seek to live.

And we use the word about the church's mission. And it's not the church's mission. It's God's mission in the world.

The minute we lay claim to it for ourselves and try to make it only ours, the gift of God's gift to us becomes possessed and eventually a sickly astringent thing and fades away to nothing - or simply a nut in our pocket that bears no fruit.

God's mission though, catches people's eyes and hearts. Catches people's hopes and invites them into a story that is larger than themselves and is saving and merciful.

And it turns things upside down like a carpenter's son riding a donkey into the biggest city.

What does this week declare?

That God is reframing the story and not just then but always. Not just then, but now!

God in Christ is reframing the story in which we live, in which we seek to tell.

What do you think it means?

That when the Pharisees want to shut the whole thing down, and Jesus says if you stop this the stones themselves will cry aloud.

And in just a week's time a stone yells out the story of a God who cannot be contained; who is sings and speaks of life not just for a moment but for eternity.

This is the one we follow to Jerusalem.

This is the one we follow to the cross.

This is the one with whom we wait and watch and weep and hope.

And this is the one who in resurrection life calls us into God's future.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen