

ROCKS AND WORDS

Seven years ago I took a “nostalgia trip” back to Ames, Iowa where I had gone to college. I hadn’t been back to Ames for over thirty years and I was anxious to visit some people I had known there and to see what had happened to the campus and the town. Well, the trip was a disappointment. Almost all of my old friends were gone and the campus and the town were almost unrecognizable. I might as well have been in another city. Things had changed utterly and there wasn’t much left to feel nostalgic about. That’s why I almost entitled this sermon: “Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be.”

About two years before the Iowa trip, my family and I had taken a trip to the Holy Land (Israel, not Germany). We were excited about seeing the famous places mentioned in the Bible—the mountain where Jesus had preached his famous sermon, the garden of Gethsemane where he had sweat blood, Mount Calvary where he had been crucified. But we couldn’t find any of those places. If thirty-plus years had changed Ames, Iowa, a lot, you can imagine how much 2000 years had changed Israel. To begin with, we were told that the current ground level was as much as twelve feet higher than it had been in Jesus’ day, due to the accumulation of dirt, sand and ruins. And since Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed by its enemies twice since Jesus had walked its streets, most of the buildings we saw hadn’t even been built when he had been there. We saw some crumbling stone steps which were supposedly the steps to Caiaphas’ house where the temple soldiers had taken Jesus to be interrogated by the Sanhedrin, but they weren’t certain even about that. Jerusalem was a different city than it had been in Jesus’ day.

I’m not sure why I have the desire to see places and things that I associate with the past, but I do know that I’m incurably nostalgic. I guess I’m not alone because this same kind of longing to see things from the past has been around for a long time. In Luther’s time, people would pay dearly for “relics”—pieces of wood that were supposedly part of the cross, a piece of cloth that was said to have touched Peter’s body. They even believed that such things had special healing powers—simply because of what they were and where they had been. This fascination with relics still goes on today: several years ago a relic was put on display at a west side Catholic Church where Pope John Paul had once officiated at a mass. I suppose the desire to see a bed George Washington slept in or a costume Elvis Presley wore at a famous concert comes from the same place in our minds that the desire to see relics does. Things from the past have a kind of magic for us.

About four centuries after Christ a bishop of the Eastern Church by the name of Cyril of Jerusalem lived and taught in the city where Our Lord had been crucified. Walking amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, he instructed young men as they studied to become pastors of the church. In his diary he remarked that his students repeatedly asked him to show them the tomb where the body of their crucified Lord had been laid. But as he stood there among fragments of stone, Cyril didn’t point his students to the stone tomb where Jesus’ body had been laid. Instead, he pointed them to a more reliable witness. He pointed them to the Words of the One who had said: **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”** It was four centuries later and Jerusalem had been destroyed twice since the time of Jesus, but His words were turning the world upside down. Now, two thousand years later, when the stones of ancient Jerusalem are dust and

there are tourist shops all along the *via dolorosa*, the path Jesus trod on His way to the cross, His words still resonate around the globe. Ames, Iowa has changed and ancient Jerusalem has passed away, but Jesus' words have neither changed nor passed away. Their truth and power are undiminished.

Now admittedly, it's a little hard for us to understand how words can be more permanent than stones. Our words come and go and no one listens to us anyway. But the stones stay around—or so it seems to us. But we would do well to remember the Proverb that says: ***“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”*** What makes sense to us at any given point in time, may not make sense at all. After all, if things made sense, men would ride sidesaddle. We have to remember that we are fallen creatures who live in a fallen world and we don't see things clearly. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ***“We see now as in a glass darkly,”***—like someone looking into a clouded mirror. Of course there is much in us that rebels against this. Our senses tell us that we ARE seeing and hearing accurately, and our pride tells us that we DO understand things correctly—usually more correctly than the people around us! That's why there are things called “arguments”! After all, the last thing we want to think is that we have been betrayed by our own powers of observation and reason. We like to think of ourselves as “realists!” Only fools and psychotics are out of touch with reality, and we're neither fools nor psychotics.

Yet the Scriptures do tell us that we see things through a glass darkly. Even the philosophers that the world has produced agree with this. Plato, the father of philosophy, made this the basis of his entire system of thought. In his foundational work, *The Republic*, he said that we are like people who sit in a cave with their backs to the entrance, gazing at a wall upon which are cast the shadows of things that pass back and forth in front of the cave. Since the shadows are all that we see, we think that they are reality—instead of just shadows of reality. In the same way, Plato said, what we call real is only a poor reflection of what is truly real.

The reason we are so limited in our ability to discern spiritual truths is that our powers of thinking about spiritual things are severely compromised by sin—the sin that we inherited at our birth. When it comes to matters of the spirit, our minds are like computers that have been overloaded with useless software that has slowed us down to a crawl and will one day shut us down completely. We're not aware of this any more than a slow computer is aware of the fact that it is slow. But it is, and so are we. And so we can't lean on our own understanding. We need to view the world through God's eyes, rather than through our own. Only when we view the world through eyes of faith in Jesus Christ do we come to know the truth that makes us free. Christ is the ultimate reality and the ultimate revealer of reality. He is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. When we walk with Christ we walk in the light, but if we walk apart from Him we walk in darkness. And if we walk in darkness, we will see only what our enemy wants us to see, and that will not be the truth and it will certainly not lead us to freedom.

On the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem, the day we now call Palm Sunday, the mood could not have been more joyful. Adoring crowds, singing children, shouts of Hosanna—it was clear to everyone that the king was coming to his people, just as the prophet Zechariah had said he would: ***“Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”*** Something like a coronation was taking place—or at least that was how it seemed to everyone—including

the jealous leaders of the Jews who were frantically trying to figure out how to deal with Jesus.

But Jesus saw a different picture, that day. He saw what lay behind the joyous Hosannas. What did he see? The answer is supplied in a very revealing statement John makes about Jesus in the second chapter of his Gospel: ***“Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them...[because] he knew what was in a man.”*** And what was in a man? Jesus Himself spells it out in *Mark 7:21*: ***“...from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.”*** In these words, Jesus fleshes out what God had said about man at the time of the Great Flood, namely that ***“...every inclination of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil all the time.”*** (*Genesis 6:5*)

Jesus didn’t underestimate—as we consistently do—the evil that resides in every human being. We’re good at concealing this evil—not only from each other but from ourselves as well. We’ve developed effective techniques that keep us from having to face the ugly truth about ourselves. Things like comparing ourselves favorably to people who are worse than we are. You know the drill: *“At least I haven’t done THAT!”* Or rationalizing our sins as ways of serving a greater good. *“I hated to have to do it, but I’m afraid it was necessary.”* Or minimizing the rotten things we’ve done in the past by gilding our memories with nostalgia. Oh we’re good at hiding the evil we have done and the evil that we do.

But Jesus saw it all clearly. He saw that the same people who shouted, *“Hosanna!”* would in only a few days be shouting, *“Crucify Him!”* He saw that the mouths that sang, *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,”* would in a few days be yelling, *“We have no king but Caesar.”* And he knew that the road that was covered with palm branches would lead him to a bloody cross on a mountain called Golgotha: the place of the skull.

That is what Jesus saw on Palm Sunday as he rode into Jerusalem. And that is how Jesus sees you and me today. Today we welcome him today with shouts of hosannas, but before the week is gone, we will be adding our sins to the load he bore to the cross. Jesus saw them clearly and he sees us clearly and he still loves us with an everlasting love.

And this is the message I hope our confirmands will take with them when they go home after today’s service. Colby, Austin—I pray that you will always remember that you have a Savior who loves you with an everlasting love. And I pray that you will stay close to your Savior by making prayer part of your everyday life. By keeping your Bibles close to you and treasuring the Word of God they proclaim. You are a treasure to your Father in heaven and He wants to keep you close to Him.

May the peace and healing power of that incomprehensible gift of love fill your heart this Palm Sunday!

Amen.

Zechariah 9:9-10 The Coming of Zion's King

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 21:1-11 Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King

21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion,

'See, your king comes to you,

gentle and riding on a donkey,

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."