

## Hosanna!

*Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11*

Amongst the many privileges I have enjoyed in life, high amongst them is having visited the Holy Land on a number of occasions. On all occasions I have taken the opportunity to walk down from the highest point on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the ancient city, down the steep, winding, narrow road, passing the Garden of Gethsemane, and up into the Old Town, passing through one of the ancient gates. You take your life in your hands frequently, as the narrow road down from the Mount of Olives is used by cars and motorbikes travelling at a rate of knots, and there's rarely a pavement to jump on to get out of their way. When you reach the foot of the mountain you take your life in your hands again as you try to cross over one of the main roads that encircles the ancient walls of old Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, and then you face a fairly steep climb up through the dark, narrow streets, the road leading off to the Temple Mount sometimes open, often closed.

The old gates to the ancient city have been sealed up at different times, particularly the Golden Gate which is the gate that the Messiah is said to use when He returns to Jerusalem at the second coming. The areas around them remain disputed between Jews, Christians and Muslims. In an attempt to deny the return of a Jewish Messiah, Muslims created cemeteries at the gates, knowing that devout Jews would not make themselves ritually unclean by walking over the graves of dead people. I remember asking a Chief Rabbi in Israel about this and asked, when the Messiah came back, how would he get into the city since the way was barred. He paused for a moment and then said, winking, "I think He might jump over!"

It's not straightforward to enter the site where the Temple stood, and is now the site of two mosques, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain. Last time I was there three years ago, despite having all the correct paperwork, the Israeli police were being particularly difficult at the gates. My party started talking to each other and wondering what we should do when the Israeli police serjeant came over and asked me, "Excuse me, Your Reverence, but are you from Scotland." I said we were. "Ah, then there is no problem" the serjeant said, "My sister lives in

Giffnock and attends synagogue there, perhaps you know her?" I told a little white Moderatorial lie and said I must have met her as I not only had taken part in events in the Giffnock synagogue, knew Rabbi Moshe Rubin very well, and had recently hosted a kosher lunch for him and other Jews from around Scotland. Hospitality opened the gates to the temple, and we got in.

In Bible times the gate was an opening in the ancient city, town or village wall through which all citizens passed daily to get to their fields or to take care of business inside the city, they were the public spaces. Gates formed boundaries between who is in and who is out. Gates marked territory, provide protection, and shut out trouble. They were gathering spots, and in their shade they served as the courtroom where people would seek justice. Gates are equalisers. In times of peace, the gate was the centre of community life. Gates also were the boundary between the living and the dead. The dead were buried beyond the gates. Gates could be for shutting out, or for shutting in. But gates can also be for opening, and giving admission.

The reading from Psalm 118 has some of the most familiar words in all of Scripture. It tells us of going in through the gates of the Lord. It tells us of God's steadfast love, in Hebrew His '*hesed*'. The fierce, compassionate, steadfast love that God has for all God's people. It is the kind of love Jesus needed to get through Holy Week as He rode through the gates into Jerusalem on a donkey. Through the bright and the bleak, through the uplifting and the despairing, God was alongside, with steadfast love.

Over Holy Week we are going to be looking at the Psalms, the song book of the Old Testament, and the songs Jesus Himself would have sung. Psalm 118, associated with Palm Sunday and Easter, strikes a hopeful chord. It sings of movement, and praise. Though troubles come, God moves to save and bless the people. Though the world often rejects what is flawed and useless, God takes the broken pieces and reshapes them into places of honour. For this, let the people give thanks. This is a psalm of saying thank you. This is a psalm of great love being offered, freely, generously, without strings. It's a psalm that opens up the gates and lets us see God's love pouring out towards us, whether we deserve it or not. Holy Week begins with this promise of steadfast love, flowing out from God's heart, God's holy place, to the children of God.

Psalm 118, a song of praise, a song of hosanna, can help us acknowledge that even knowing difficult times lie ahead, loneliness and lack of social connection and the ruinous isolation that pervades our culture, all these can and will be addressed. The gates open, and God's love comes towards us, and we can say thank you to God not simply because it's good manners but because we are learning, again, the importance of gratitude.

The good news of Psalm 118 is that it sets our lives, our experiences, and our possessions in the context of the steadfast love of God. It enables us to see that whatever happens, God's love is faithful; it endures forever. As Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, was that thought in His mind? As we enter Holy Week, and begin the complex emergence from lockdown, and all the mixed feelings we will have, will we too have thankfulness and gratitude in our hearts, and be grateful to God, and so many others, for being alongside us and getting us through?

Will we rejoice in the days that God has made, rejoice and be glad in them?

Will we acknowledge the One Who comes to us, again and again, in the Name of the Lord?

Will we bless the Lord Who has given us light?

Will we sing 'hosanna', and pray to be saved, and pray to be blessed?

When the gates of God's love open up, will we have the courage to move forward, and through them, to be welcomed by our loving Creator? Accepted, forgiven, set free, and loved with that everlasting love God wants us all to know and to feel.

Ernest Hemingway once told the story of a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son, who had run away to Madrid and had not been heard from in years. The father took an advertisement in a Madrid newspaper: 'Paco, meet me at the entrance of the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.' Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father arrived at the square in front of the hotel entrance at the appointed time, he found eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.<sup>i</sup>

Palm Sunday is about procession, and movement, and going through the gate, and praise, and accompaniment, and about God waiting there, to save, and forgive, and to bless and to accept. This is a Psalm sung by Jews at Passover, and its words are often read on Palm Sunday and Easter by Christians, because it talks of a gate, a door, that is open. And there is God, standing in the

gateway, arms reached out to us, waiting to welcome us in. "O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures for ever!"

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Stephen R Montgomery, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 2, p148