

Psalm 118

Enduring Love

(t/h - m: 24 March 18)

Today is Palm Sunday which is a highly significant day in the life and sacrifice of Jesus, and instead of reading from the gospels which tell of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we're looking at Psalm 118 which is a psalm that complements the New Testament scriptures on Palm Sunday perfectly.

But a short word about this Psalm to give us some context which will help our understanding. *The Psalms are divided into five books and Psalm 118 is in the fifth book. In Jewish worship, this is the final Psalm in the Hallel, which is the Hebrew word for praise.* Jesus himself quotes this psalm during the final week of His life, quoting verses 22-23 as a summary of the parable of the vineyard found in Matthew 21. In that parable the tenants of the vineyard are the Jewish leaders who reject and persecute the workers of the vineyard, and finally kill the son of the vineyard owner. The owners Son is the *rejected stone*, which was considered unsuitable for the construction of the temple, and the rejected stone is an analogy for the worlds rejection of Christ.

Psalm 118: 1 to 4 - *Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever. Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever. Let the house of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever. Let those who fear the LORD say: His steadfast love endures forever.* The Psalmist is enforcing the truth of God's steadfast love enduring forever because this is the point of this Psalm. I don't think any of us have the capacity, either mentally or emotionally to fully grasp the meaning of God's enduring love. A love that allowed God to give us His only precious Son for a people so unworthy that it's impossible to grasp!

We worship a God who forgives repeatedly knowing that He will be disobeyed repeatedly, and yet He continues to forgive.

In human terms, we would think of someone who forgave repeatedly and continued to be treated badly as a mug who was being taken for granted. We would wonder why they didn't learn their lesson. But we don't think this of God because we're the ones who are taking Him for granted. God forgives because He loves us as His own children and His love for us never changes.

An example of this self-giving love is found in the story of Princess Alice, one of Queen Victoria's grandchildren. Princess Alice's daughter was seriously ill with diphtheria and the doctors had told the princess not to kiss her little girl, because she would catch diphtheria by breathing the child's breath. Once, when the child was struggling to breathe, the mother forgetting herself took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking to death. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said *mommy, kiss me*. And without thinking of herself, the mother kissed her daughter and catching diphtheria died several days later. Real love forgets self, real love knows no danger, real love doesn't count the cost. The Bible says: ***Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it, and nothing can quench God's love for us.***

But how do we react to God's love which was best expressed in the giving of Jesus? How did the people cheering Jesus as He entered Jerusalem react all those years ago? Times may change but it appears that human nature doesn't because we react in the same way. When we have a sense of God's loving presence close to us, we're faithful and full of praises, but how quickly we forget. The Gospels record the events of Holy Week and the wonderful celebrations that accompanied Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but where were His supporters five days later? They were baying for His blood and calling for a common criminal to be freed rather than expressing support, never mind love for Jesus. As we attempt to recreate the moment Jesus processed into Jerusalem in our minds, we should consider our part in this story.

As we read of the journey Christ took on Palm Sunday we find ourselves wanting to join in the procession, because we're Jesus' followers and we Christians are part of the celebrating parade of followers. *But like the rest of the crowd, we have to ask ourselves where we will be later in the week. Where will we be when the Roman soldier asks us if we knew Him?*

The problem with Palm Sunday celebrations like that first joyous parade into Jerusalem is that the people are faithful during the celebrations when they sense of that God's presence is with them, but they don't have any staying power, and when the opposition appears, their faith fades. It's like a football crowd after a game; one minute the streets are full of supporters in their colours and singing their songs, and an hour later these supporters have vanished and the streets are deserted.

The gospel tells us that by the time Jesus reached the temple courtyard, and drove out the money changers, the crowd had disappeared. Only a short time later, those who were shouting Hosanna and waving palm branches over Jesus' head had vanished. Their procession simply evaporated as they forgot God's love for them and returned to the routine of their everyday lives. These Palm Sunday people disappeared before they could become Good Friday and Easter Morning people. The adoring crowds abandoned Jesus once the parade was past and the excitement had faded.

The church celebrates Palm Sunday but where do we go from here? If all we do at the conclusion of Palm Sunday is to return to our routine and hide our Christian identities then we too are abandoning Jesus. How can we justify going back to life as usual, when we have just shouted in the arrival of our king, our Messiah, our Saviour? People of faith remain with Jesus beyond the waving of palm branches and we journey through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, as well as Easter morning.

The essence of Holy Week is a journey of emotions where we celebrate Christ's coming, then we mourn His death and finally, we celebrate His resurrection. Our journey through Holy Week is like a roller coaster of emotions but this is not an analogy for God, because He doesn't change in His love for us. God's love is not like a roller coaster because His love is constant and He calls us to have faith in the same way. ***We are not to fade away like the crowd on Palm Sunday. We are to have faith in and out of season. Why? Because as Psalm 118 tells us, God's love endures forever, and that is something worth celebrating!***

Mary and I were in the United States a few years ago and as I checked into our hotel, I noticed an odd clause in the agreement I had to sign to register. They wanted me to sign to promise that I wouldn't party while staying as a guest in the hotel. The actual document read something like: *We understand that hotels are ideal places to celebrate new adventures. However, problems occur when the celebration becomes a disturbance to our guests. In order to prevent any problems, we have a few simple requests. Parties will not be tolerated and neither will any disturbances to other guests. You should consider this your first notice and if we are required to contact you regarding a disturbance, you will be asked to leave. Thank you for choosing us and enjoy your stay.* I couldn't help but laugh at the idea of Mary and I partying because I haven't mustered the energy to party since about 1983!

But when I thought about this I was struck by something: As Christians in our culture, we are not good at celebrating God's love. We rarely party for God and if Palm Sunday and Holy Week asks anything of us, then it's this: ***Do we promise to celebrate the God who because one of us, in good times and bad, for better and for worse? Do we promise to journey with Christ through Holy Week and beyond, celebrating the truth that God's love for us endures forever? Do we promise that we will enter His gates with thanksgiving in our hearts?***

Or will be quietly slip away when the celebrations fade and the uplifting atmosphere of praises being sung and the prayers offered are over? Will be slip away when Sunday is past and our lives become routine again? God's love endures forever and surely this is cause to continue celebrating? Unlike my hotel, the church is the one place where it should be require people who are part of the church, to sign a celebration agreement clause! Surely celebrating God's love should mandatory?

As we leave Palm Sunday and prepare to move into the journey that is Holy Week, will we be like the people of Jerusalem two thousand years ago who abandoned Christ as the week gets rough, or will we keep the party going and celebrate God's enduring love in good times and bad? Will we throne Christ as King of our lives come what may, no matter what?

This Easter, let's journey with Jesus and celebrate the wonderful gift of life and of love that was bought for us through Christ's blood. Let us take the opportunity to tell people what Easter really means to us, and the difference it can make to them! Let's disturb other people with the Good News of Christ and invite others to join us in our discovering God's love.

Let's celebrate in response to God's love, not just when life is going our way but even when that perfect storm called Good Friday hit with all it's might. Even in that storm God is with us. Psalm 118 offers us a wonderful truth that is worth celebrating:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for His steadfast love endures forever.

Let Israel say: His steadfast love endures forever.

Let the house of Aaron say: His steadfast love endures forever.

Let those who fear the LORD say: His steadfast love endures forever. Amen

(leave on the PP for people to meditate on for a minute)

(1735 words)