

WHEN STONES CRY OUT

by Ray C. Stedman

Two weeks ago I was in Israel and, in company with my companions, was driving from the little village of Bethany, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, down across the Kidron valley, and on up into the temple area of Jerusalem. We were, in effect, retracing the path our Lord took in the so-called "triumphal entry," when he mounted the colt of an ass in Bethany and rode down across the face of the mountain, through the Kidron valley, and up into the city. He was preceded by a crowd who threw palm branches into his pathway, praising God. I was thinking of that episode as we drove along, and an incident from the account in Luke's gospel came into my mind. Luke says,

As he was now drawing near, at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." {Luke 19:37-40 RSV}

The scene has changed since those days. There are many buildings around Jerusalem now which were not there then. The Mount of Olives is still there, and a large part of the Garden of Gethsemene, but many other things have changed. As we rode along that road I thought of this scene, and I was sure there were some other things which had not yet changed. I wondered if perhaps among them were the very stones to which Jesus made reference in this passage. Stones do not get around much! And I was thinking of how Jesus said that if the disciples should remain silent, the very stones would cry out.

I have never heard a stone cry out, at least I do not think I have -- or perhaps I have. While I was in Spain recently, meeting with a group of pastors, one of the pastors amused himself and the rest of us at a meal by dipping his finger in water and rubbing it around the rim of a drinking glass, and it began to sing. Glass is a form of stone, and perhaps this is the way stones cry out. But I am sure of this -- if the stones in our Lord's day had cried out, they would not have done so as clearly and as articulately as these disciples did. Stones are not made for crying out. Therefore, if they make a sound, it must be a garbled or a less articulate sound than a human voice can make.

I wondered what Jesus meant by this statement. One thing is clear. This was an occasion which called for praise. This was a very singular moment in the history of Israel. I do not know if you are aware of this, but when our Lord was riding down that mountain into the city of Jerusalem, it was an historic event, in fulfillment of several prophecies of the Old Testament.

The prophet Daniel, hundreds of years earlier, had been given by God a certain calendar of time which was marked off precisely to determine the date when the Messiah would present himself to the nation Israel. And according to the reckoning of Sir Robert Anderson, former head of Scotland Yard, an English layman with a great knowledge of the Bible, the precise date on which Daniel's prophecy was to be fulfilled was this day.

According to the actual time which had elapsed, if Israel had been aware of it, this was the predicted hour, to the very second, in which our Lord was to present himself as King to Israel.

Zechariah had predicted that Israel would see their King coming to them, "humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass," {Zech 9:9}. That prediction also was being fulfilled in this moment. Here was an hour toward which the prophets had looked, and which they had longed to see. It was a strategic time in Israel's history, and Jesus, as he came over the hill, wept over the city, saying,

"Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid

from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation." {Luke 19:42-44 RSV}

This was a prediction of the fall of the city under the Romans, a terrible time of judgment. So this is a time of crisis when this incident takes place. And as the disciples come over the hill they feel singularly moved by the Holy Spirit to begin to praise God for the mighty works he has done in this nation, which they have seen at the hand of Jesus, and to bless God and cry out, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." The hour called for that kind of proclamation. As Jesus makes very clear, it was necessary to do this. So if the disciples had not done it, the stones would have cried out.

I think this is one of those strange parables-in-action you find frequently in the life of our Lord -- times when he said things which had symbolic meaning. I do not think we need to miss the fact that this is a parable of something which is happening today, a parable of universal application, beyond this scene of the "triumphal entry."

In other words, what our Lord is saying here is that there are truths which God wants his children to proclaim, because they are the ones best fitted to do it. They understand the mighty works of God. They know who it is who is behind these things. They understand the meaning of these events. They are the ones set apart by God to proclaim these great truths and to help the world see God's mighty works and understand what he is doing.

But what if they will not? "Well then," says Jesus, "the stones will cry out." That is, that which is not designed for this purpose, which is not particularly prepared for it, will begin to utter these truths. I believe that in a very real way this is what we are seeing happening in our own day, and what has happened many times in the past. There are truths which God desires to be uttered. There are forces at work in humanity which need to be explained. And only the church has the explanation.

But if the church will not say what God wants it to say in the hour of crisis, then that which is not equipped or prepared or able properly to do it will begin to utter sounds. In other words, the world, secular thought, will begin to examine these things. Men and women, oftentimes intelligent and educated, but blinded, unable to see reality, unable to see truth as it is in its total perspective, who do not approach life from the standpoint of divine revelation but approach it from the limited, narrow view of man, will begin to examine these same forces at work and will try to explain them. But the explanation will be dulled and distorted and twisted, and so will affect humanity adversely. Yet the fault is with the church, because it did not, or would not, proclaim the truths made available to it. This is always happening whenever Christians neglect the revelation of God. In our day, as in the days of the past, we are neglecting truth which we ought to be heralding abroad.

I picked up a book not long ago by Dr. John R. W. Stott, the famous pastor of an Anglican Church in London, a great communicator of Christian truth. Many of you have heard him speak, or know of him. The title of this book is *Our Guilty Silence*. It is a development of this theme, focusing on the idea that the church has withheld the gospel from the world. We have not proclaimed the great, marvelous, delivering, liberating truth which is inherent in the good news of Jesus Christ. Because we have failed to evangelize, in this sense, we are guilty. Our silence has condemned men to death and misery and darkness. Stott is perfectly right about this. The church at large has not properly spoken in these terms, and we need to hear that voice.

But as I read the title of that book, I thought of it as applicable in a larger, even wider sense. Not only the delivering truths of the gospel, but also truth in general needs to be proclaimed. Aspects and viewpoints of life which do not necessarily touch directly upon salvation, as such, still are contained in the Word of God. I would like to share with you certain areas where I feel this applies. I urge you, as I am urging myself these days, to be more alert to opportunities to speak of these great, mighty works of God, to explain them in terms of the Scriptures, and to make clear their provision for solving the problems of human life. And do this not only in church, but out wherever you work -- at school, at the shop, at the office, in your home. This is God's desire for his people today -- to proclaim, in the midst of life, the mighty works of God, and to give an explanation of the forces at work, so that the world might understand what is happening to them.

One such area which is very evident today is the whole realm of sex, and the understanding of what this strange, mighty force, this urge to merge which is so present in humanity, is all about. What is it provided for? It is God-given, and yet, what is it? I find there is a great deal in the Scriptures on this subject, from Genesis through Revelation. The whole book is replete with explanation of this strange force -- what God intends it for, how it finds its culmination in marriage, and what marriage really is. But, because the church has been so grossly negligent in developing this theme as it is found in Scripture, we are subjected to terrible extremes of its treatment by the world. "The stones cry out," begin to try to speak on this subject, make a lot of noise, but are not very helpful. This is why we see the world lurching drunkenly from side to side in this area.

One of the philosophers -- I think it was Kant -- describes humanity as like a drunk going down a narrow alleyway. He lurches from side to side, bouncing off one wall and then the other. This is a vivid way of portraying what is happening in human life. Many have noted how we tend to swing from extreme to extreme. There is a pendulum-like movement in history. The pendulum swings so far in one direction, then goes back as far in the other direction, back and forth. This strange, sweeping movement between extremes is the course which history describes humanity as taking throughout all its long centuries. Why? Because oftentimes the church, the people of God who have the truth about these forces, is silent, or says little about them. Therefore, people do not know how to interpret these things and are unable to understand.

Sex is certainly one such area. We swing from Victorian prudishness -- trying to pretend sex does not exist, even to a degree of squeamishness in which people would call the legs of a piano "limbs" -- to the other extreme of excessive permissiveness, wherein sex saturates everything we do -- it is thrown at us in our advertising, and in everything around us; the beauty of marriage is broken down and marriage is made to appear as though it is merely a convenient way for people to live together, but has no importance in itself. This happens because the church has not spoken out on the subject.

Now, by *church* I do not necessarily mean only this congregation here. I believe, under God, that we have made some really valiant and helpful efforts to speak out in these areas recently. And we have already seen some wonderful results. But I am speaking in terms of the church at large, the church of our day. As I travel around, I see some of the terrible results of the failure of the people of God to declare the mighty works of God right where they are.

Take, for instance, the whole realm of the knowledge which Scripture reveals about Satan and the dark forces which are at work in this world to govern and to regulate human events. It is given unto us to declare this, to explain why humanity seems periodically to be gripped by anarchist revolutionary movements, with the resultant blood and lust and war and crimes mounting up to frightening levels. Why is this? As long as we deal only with the symptoms of this, as the world would do, we are not very helpful. We need again to talk freely and openly about what the Lord Jesus, and all the apostles, and all the prophets of the Old Testament revealed to be true -- that there are spiritual forces in high places, wickedness entrenched, and that these manipulate the minds of men and implant demonic ideas and philosophies which are picked up by the writers of today, spread through the media, and widely believed.

We ought to speak up about these matters, and help people to see the truth about them. Otherwise, we will find the world again falling into two extremes -- either wild occultism, with people thinking that life is operated by the influence of the stars, and going in for seances, horoscopes, spiritism, black magic, and the worship of demons; or excessive intellectualism, in which people try to rationalize everything and make of life a kind of super-psychology, thinking that there are certain hidden forces latent in the human spirit, in the subconscious or superconscious, which control us and which must be brought to light and developed, and that life can be explained only in those terms, without reference to the age-long battle and conflict going on between the Spirit of God and the spirit of evil. You see, it is up to us to speak the truth, not merely here at church but out where we live.

Take the realm of nature. We are now seeing the extreme of natural pollution in our day. We are battling with this terrible ecological upset and disaster which is threatening our planet -- pollution of our streams and air, the depletion of our natural resources, etc. We are seeing the other extreme of a return to the worship of nature, manifesting itself in all kinds of food fads and in a love of primitive living in which people want to return to

nature entirely.

What is the reason for this? It is because the church has been almost totally silent about what the Bible has to say about nature, the world and the universe in which we live, how it operates and why it operates the way it does, and how it is designed to reveal that which is going on in the spiritual realm -- the natural reflecting that which is occurring in the realm of the spirit.

It is up to us to declare that. No other persons can. Without that knowledge, man tends to exalt science to such a height that it becomes almost a form of worship, even though the scientific method, though it has validity in many areas, cannot operate in certain realms of life. For instance, science has nothing to say about purpose in living. Yet purpose is one of the ingredients we must have or we cannot live. We must have a sense of meaning. Science does not give us that. Science reduces us to tiny, insignificant atoms, crawling around on a small planet in the midst of the vastness of space. It takes away all sense of meaning and purpose and significance from life. But that is a violation of the laws of nature.

On the other hand, while man must be given a sense of meaning and significance it must not be to the extent that it results, as we have seen happening in our day, in an exaltation of man, in a new humanism, a spirit which says that man is the master of all things, is in control of all of life, and can run all things. The reason these two extremes exist and govern so widely in human thought is that the church has not said what man is, who he is, and what nature is.

One of the most penetrating examinations I have ever seen in the realm of natural knowledge is found in the book of Job, Chapters 38 and 39. I suggest you read them and see if you can pass that examination. How much do you know about nature, about what makes it work, and how it operates? Job was put to the test. And there are questions in that passage which no scientist can answer today. Man's knowledge is too limited.

Then, in the realm of authority, the Bible speaks volumes. But we do not speak much at all. As a result there has arisen this whole idea of nationalism, whereby the nation-state is made supreme. We are seeing a revival of this in our day. Not long ago the church was so ignorant in this area that the church itself was swept by a wave of supernaturalism and tried to identify the gospel of Jesus Christ with American patriotism. Those two concepts do not belong together. One impinges upon the other, it is true, but they are not the same thing. That kind of distortion in the church is but a reflection of the distortion of the world.

We can go on in many areas along this line. I have become so aware of the terrible weakness which prevails in the church because we have been ignorant of the whole matter of the impartation of spiritual gifts. Everywhere I go I find leaders, pastors, theologians, and others who never seem to have realized that the Spirit of God is ready to equip, and has been equipping, his people with gifts which enable them to function in a ministry of their own. They treat these passages as though they were to be relegated to the 1st century only, or were in no way pertinent to our day.

In Spain I spoke to a group of pastors who were bug-eyed in amazement at the idea that we would take seriously the teaching about the gifts of the Spirit found in First Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. But when they began to see that this is God's intent for the church in any age, they began to come alive with a new excitement, realizing that they could now discover what God has already given them in terms of resources in their own congregations. Many of them went back to their congregations with a new hope, and a new light in their eyes, because they had found out truth which had been hidden in the church for decades and decades.

The greatest truth which God has to impart to man, I am convinced from my study of the Scriptures, is what the Bible calls "the New Covenant," the new arrangement for living which God has made possible to his people. We are not merely to try to do our best to serve Christ, to mobilize all our human resources, and put them at his disposal. The believer's dedication to God is not the primary call of the Spirit. Rather, the New Covenant is the understanding that God himself is pleased to live in us and to work through us. He is ready to do everything he demands of us, and to utilize us in the process. Our wills and minds are involved in it. We still make the choices, but he does the work. The power comes from him. And there is no demand made upon us in the Word of God which we are not capable of meeting -- if our reliance is not upon ourselves but upon God, who is ready and able to give to us power to do it, if we are ready and willing to step out, and start doing

it. This great truth is able to transform people, to transform congregations, and to turn the church into a powerful army, "... bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners" {Song 6:10b RSV}, able to accomplish tremendous things. But the New Covenant has been relegated to silence in so many parts of the church.

What I am saying is that it is necessary for us to learn again to speak out about these things. How can you be what God wants you to be, and utter the truth he wants you to declare, if you do not know the Scriptures yourself? This is why it is so incumbent upon you that you learn, really learn, the Word. Paul writes to the Corinthians,

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. {1 Cor 4:1 RSV}

The "mysteries of God" are those sacred secrets that human life needs in order to operate properly, which are given to us in the pages of the Word, which will save life from boredom and dullness, and transform it into excitement and electric adventure in Christ. This is what we need again to display before the world. Paul wrote to Timothy, "I write these things so that you might know how you ought to behave yourself in the church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth," {cf, 1 Tim 3:15 KJV}. Did you ever think of the church that way? The church is the pillar, the support, and the ground, the foundation, of truth in the world. It is as the church declares these great, unshakable facts of life that the world begins to obtain light in its thinking, and is able to handle properly some of the knowledge it discovers as it investigates various aspects of life. This is what Jesus surely meant when he said, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world," {Matt 5:13a, 5:14a RSV}. And if the world is in darkness, it is because these truths lie hidden, not only in the church, but, oftentimes, to the church. We need to discover them again and begin to proclaim them -- again I stress, not only here but out where you live!

A man told me this morning about attending a sales meeting in the Midwest. It was not a Christian meeting at all. In fact, as far as he knew, the speaker was not a Christian. It was a meeting designed to stir up salesmen and to promote the selling of a product. But the lecturer had evidently been exposed to spiritual truth, and in the course of the meeting he kept bringing it out, but not labeling it as Christian. He said, "One of the things you must remember is that if you are going to affect people and lead them in the way you want them to go, you must be their servant. You must serve them, meet their need." This Christian man listening nudged another Christian sitting close by, and said, "That's the teaching of Jesus! Where did he learn that?"

I do not know where he learned it, but there is where it ought to be taught! It is in places like this that we again can show people how men are to operate. And as they learn more and more of that, they will see more and more the wisdom of the Word of God, which says that the natural mind can never encompass God. The searching of man will never discover God. The wisdom of man is foolishness with God. Only that marvelous truth encompassed in the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, ultimately, is able to make sense out of life.

There is where the church stands in the world today. I call to your mind again, as I call it to my own mind, that as our Lord looks at his church, his body, his people in this world today, what is he saying? "If these hold their peace, the stones will cry out."

I would like to ask Dr. Henry Brandt, a dear friend visiting with us, to come and dismiss us in prayer.

Prayer

Lord, we are thankful that we can come together and contemplate the possibilities and the responsibilities which each of us has. I pray that as we go, we will be your mouthpieces, that we will make an effort to understand this Word and make it known. Help us to avail ourselves of the resources that you died to give us, and to make ourselves available. Lord, we thank you that we can depend on you, and that your power is ours. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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