

“The Stone The Builder Refused”

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Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. Today we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, beginning the path to his humiliating death on the cross and his glorious vindication in the resurrection at Easter.

Palm Sunday was central to the formation of my personal Christian faith in the early 1980s, when each year I marched on Palm Sunday with hundreds of thousands of people in Sydney to call for nuclear disarmament and world peace, to end the high danger of nuclear war between the USA and the USSR. Through joining these Palm Sunday peace marches, I came to see Jesus Christ as symbolising the messianic transformation needed by our world, as we reflect on how our prevailing doctrines of military security and our ideas about psychology and politics need to change to truly make us safe.

Here is a hymn I wrote about the entry of Christ into Jerusalem, called [On Palm Sunday](#), based on the text from Luke 19:28ff.

Our reading from Psalm 118 provides an insight into the meaning of the passion of Christ, with its seeming paradox that the stone the builders rejected has become the head of the corner, the cornerstone of the arch. This puzzle is that something tossed aside as worthless in fact turns out to be the most important of all. This idea is the crux of the theology of the cross. The supreme importance of Jesus Christ is that he mediates the connection between our depraved world and the ultimate truth of God, providing a path to the restoration of wholeness. But when Jesus proclaimed this message of salvation in ancient Palestine the response of his society was total rejection.

The cruel execution of Christ on the cross reflects a tragic brutality and blindness in human psychology. Still today, when confronted by a necessary vision of transformation, our instinctive tribal response is often one of denial. We reject what is most important because we don’t see the big strategic picture. Against this tendency, Jesus asks us to shift our ethical compass away from assumptions about what might be convenient for us as selfish individuals and instead do what will be best for the world. This is a paradigm shift that disrupts our usual priorities of security and stability, pointing out that we cannot be secure and stable when the world around us is at risk of collapse.

We need a point of connection to enduring truths rather than just accepting the tribal mythology of our shifting world of everyday appearance. Unfortunately, as the story of the crucifixion shows, people can become terrified and irrational when their entrenched presuppositions are challenged. The messianic triumph of Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the temple by Christ were too confusing and difficult for his society. The irony of a messiah riding a donkey was lost on them as the fickle and ignorant public mood turned from adoration to hostility. The prophet Isaiah had similarly encountered insults as he proclaimed what he had been taught by God, confronting his adversaries. Jesus stood in this high intellectual tradition of prophecy in calling humanity to evolve beyond the reliance on emotion as a basis for our decisions and instead to reflect in prayer on what the Spirit of God is calling us to do for the common good.

In his letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul reflects the ethical transformation of service proclaimed by Christ, as he prays that the same mind might be in you that was in Christ

Jesus. Paul's magnificent vision of the free and infinite grace of God tells how Jesus emptied himself of all but love, as Charles Wesley put it in the hymn *And Can It Be*. For Christ to become a slave to grace in the way Paul describes involved a total inversion of the prevailing ideas about the role of a king. This turning of the tables is deeply challenging and troubling, in culture, politics and psychology, just as Christ's overturning of the tables of the money changers in the temple during Holy Week disturbed the prevailing consensus of his time. The mind of Christ had a vision of cultural evolution similar to the Buddha's theory of enlightenment, with humanity transcending our limiting tribal divisions to unite in a shared vision of truth.

In theology this self-emptying transcendence of our personal interests is called kenosis, a term that means allowing your life to become a channel of the will of God. The sublime example of kenosis is the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. His sacrificial intent is explained in visions such as the Last Judgement at Matthew 25:40, where Jesus says we should treat the least of the world as though they are him. This kenotic perspective calls us to empty out our personal interests and instead focus on the good of the whole.

I was recently reflecting on this problem of kenosis in reading Harper Lee's classic American novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which holds a lens up to prevailing social assumptions about race and class. The hero of the book is the Alabama lawyer Atticus Finch, who unsuccessfully defends the black man Tom Robinson against false charges of rape. After the trial, the Finch family discuss making friends with a member of the jury who had wanted a not guilty verdict. But the strict traditionalist in the family, Aunt Alexandra, firmly explains that friendship is impossible with people who are trash. Her fear is that associating with people of low social station is disreputable and contaminating, likely to prevent success in the world.

The result of such tribal attitudes, condemned by Harper Lee's novel, is that cultural divisions harden into castes, creating rampant injustice for those who are unfairly excluded by prejudicial thinking. Against this exclusive racist thinking we see the model of Atticus Finch, the lawyer who sacrifices his own social reputation by trying to use the law to deliver justice. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a great example of kenotic theology, with Atticus Finch emptying himself like Christ to expose the hypocrisy of his allegedly Christian society, and as a result becoming revered as a model of legal ethics.

The Christian model of kenosis calls for humility before the big problems of the world, and can find many ethical applications. For example, we can consider climate change policy, where the kenotic strategy requires that we put aside our immediate personal and community interests and beliefs to instead focus on what will provide enduring planetary benefits by most effectively preventing global warming. That means firstly that any denial of the evidence of climate change should be rejected as a corrupted and self-interested delusion. But such a kenotic approach to the big issues of world climate, basing opinion on evidence, also requires better approaches than the widely held ideas about decarbonising the world economy, which fall way short of the changes needed to stop dangerous climate change.

The inconvenient truth is that even net zero emissions is far too small a goal against the immensity of the planetary climate emergency. A kenotic self-emptying approach to climate would put aside ideological conflict and look strictly at an evidentiary approach to policy. My view is that such an approach requires global coordination to implement cooling technology, as a planetary security imperative. In climate policy the 'stone that the builder refuses' includes the need for new methods to brighten the planet and physically remove greenhouse gases from the air. These difficult ideas are rejected by the vehemence of prevailing opinion within the emission reduction tribe, but need to become the cornerstone of action to restore a stable climate.

Considering Jesus Christ as the stone the builder rejected has major implications for widely held views within Christianity. The Protestant Reformation was based on the observation that the Roman Catholic Church had built its worldly tribal institution by rejecting Biblical teachings which are the cornerstone of our faith. I would like to conclude with the provocative idea that Christianity today needs a new reformation, through a reconciliation between faith and reason.

My own studies of the origins of Christianity suggest that many stories in the Bible that are accepted as literal history by the church were actually originally intended as symbolic parables. One key issue here is that ancient religion involved an intimate relationship with astronomy. The orderly grandeur of the visible heavens of the starry sky reflected what Saint Paul in Romans 1:20 called the eternal power and divine nature of God, clearly perceived in the natural creation. Over the millennia of Christendom, the Roman church followed its tribal interests to prioritise the worldly alliance of throne and altar over the messianic vision of Christ. As a result the original astronomical vision that informed the Gospels was unfortunately largely lost.

Reading the Bible against this cosmic heuristic, many stories attain a deeper ethical meaning as symbolic parables rather than literal events. Even such grand and mysterious astronomical observations as the slow shift of the annual position of the Sun against the background stars, known as the precession of the equinoxes, appear to have a precise and elegant correlation with the underlying meaning of the Gospel narrative, providing a framework for the story of how God is revealed in the natural creation. But this whole astronomical way of thinking was suppressed, ignored, forgotten and denied.

If the astronomy in the Bible is seen as the stone the builder refused, then returning this terrestrial cosmology to its position as the cornerstone of faith offers a new way to understand the real intent of the authors of the New Testament, with potential to put systematic theology onto a more coherent empirical foundation.

The keystone of an arch is a more complex shape than the square blocks used for the rest of the bridge, so the ancient masons chose it from stones they had set aside. They finally locked the keystone into place to hold the whole structure together with stable integrity. This image is a parable for how today we need to find the complex forgotten meaning of the message of Christ, to hold together our faith, and understand and share the crucial ethical visions that the Gospels proclaim for the salvation of the earth.

Readings

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

118:1 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! 118:2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." 118:19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. 118:20 This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. 118:21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 118:22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 118:23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 118:25 Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! 118:26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. 118:27 The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches,

up to the horns of the altar. 118:28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. 118:29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Mark 11:1-11

11:1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 11:2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 11:3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" 11:4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 11:5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 11:6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 11:7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 11:8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 11:9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 11:10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 11:11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

50:4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens-- awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 50:5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 50:6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 50:7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 50:8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 50:9a It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Philippians 2:5-11

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. 2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.