

Foundered on the rocks

Philippians 2:5-11. Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-11

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Today we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place – quite literally. We have arrived in Jerusalem with much celebration. Jesus is the rock of our foundation...but we know about the harrowing events about to unfold.

Rocks are symbolically significant in our biblical world. They are sacred spaces and spaces for refuge. Jacob laid his head upon a rock. Moses struck the rock. Rocks and stones represent the consistency and permanence of the Lord. Psalm 30 celebrates the opening of the temple saying it is built on a rock. Today's psalm talks of the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone¹. Other psalms say the Lord is my rock and my fortress², my rock and my shield, my rock and my salvation and more. In Matthew³ Jesus says "...you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church..."

... and Jesus is the rock: Permanent, consistent, ever-present, unmoving, unchangeable.

Today is a day of contrasts and contradictions.

We are swept up in the hustle and bustle of ancient Jerusalem. Remember each year, the Passover seder ends with the line, "Next year in Jerusalem!". This feast that celebrates the liberation from Egypt has ended with the same words for 1000s of years – and next week, at every Jewish table, they will say it again.

Jerusalem is filled with excitement. People from all over the known world are arriving. Hawkers are hawking; pilgrims shopping and families sight-seeing the wonders of the city. There's an energy electrifying the dusty air. Smells from spices and newly dyed cloths fill the narrow streets.

The Romans are nervous. How will they control the crowds? What if, hidden in the joy of celebration, there are seeds for another Jewish rebellion?

To the west – a Roman procession makes a spectacle of its power. Flags and stallions, glistening armour and foot soldiers with their lances and pennants aflutter proclaim their peace-keeping ideology. There is victory and repression in every pounding step. There is order and silence as they pass by.

¹ 118:22

² 2 Sam 22:2, psalms 18, 62

³ Matthew 16:13

While to the North, a rag-tag group from Galilee, cheering a man on an ass – a borrowed donkey, create their own home-made parade throwing their capes on the ground and waving palm branches. It looks as humble and amateur as making paperchains for your Christmas tree: sticky tape and whatever is at hand. It is an odd and ad hoc celebration, noisy and disorganised.

They're on a collision course. The rock and the hard place.

And here we are with the helicopter view. We can see what's happening. How do we accommodate falling off the cliff of joy to disappointment? There are times in our lesser lives when what we imagined didn't pay out.

When after the joy and fanfare of an elaborate wedding – the reality of the relationship was something altogether different. When we've won jobs on the crest of excitement, thrilled we've been picked, only to have it turn to hell to work there. I know how sometimes the dream of travel can become an expensive, disappointing nightmare. All of these things pale to the crisis in Jerusalem but it gives us a tiny insight to the sickening free-fall from excitement to sorrow. It makes us doubt ourselves. How could we have got it so wrong?

And it makes us doubt God – the one who is supposed to be with us always. And what if you totally invested your God into a human form, or in a job, or a relationship, then you will probably feel totally lost.

Foundering on the rocks – either you got it wrong or God did – neither of these options make you feel better. Foundering means taking on water – you are beginning to sink. If you do not take action, you will be lost.

Holy week is all contradictions and conundrums: elation and disappointment; loyalty and betrayal; denial and steadfast commitment; the reign of God or the reign of Rome; success or failure, belief and disbelief; death and life. We need water to float but it can also take us down.

They call it passion Sunday for a reason. Too readily have we protestants raced to Easter Sunday. The smashing and clashing of emotions is uncomfortable. It is too easy to imagine pacing the garden, praying, honestly terrified of what is to come. It is too scary to ask ourselves if our lives were at stake, would we deny, deny and deny again? It is too confusing to watch the one we've put our hopes in suffer, cry out and die.

But, and that is a very big 'but', we have the helicopter view. Not only can we rise above and watch the events in Jerusalem – we can see the whole story as it plays out across the landscape, across time.

The Jewish Seder is the celebration of the liberation of the Israelites. It carries the story right from the beginning. The people were ordered to eat quickly, have lamb for dinner and smear the blood of the lamb over their doors so that the angel of death would pass over their houses. It retells the story of Moses leading them through the desert, of the bitter herbs they ate and the tears they shed on the journey. It tells and re-tells the story of God with them through the trials – providing food and water even when they didn't believe. He delivered them to the promised land.

It is no accident that Jesus chose the seder as his last supper. As a rabbi and a good Jewish man, he would have blessed the bread and the wine before eating as he did with every meal...but to do it at Passover took on a whole new meaning – one that mostly passed over the heads of his disciples. Only later, did they understand.

Breaking bread his blessing was saying, I am the bread that sustains us on life's journey from oppression and slavery to freedom. He is the new Moses leading in a much more spiritual way to a spiritual land. And to take the wine and say this is 'blood' – is to promise the angel of death will pass over us and save us from the despair of dying. It is saying that the promised land is something more wonderful than real estate.

If we come to the table hungry – we will eat. And that's why it was important to Run TO empty this Easter.

A ship that is taking on water, founders. To save it you must empty the bilge. All able hands below, bailing -
and those above tossing things overboard to lighten the ship. We have spent Lent emptying ourselves of
regret
assumptions
sin
unconscious bias
and the busy-ness we create to stop us from thinking.

We are on the hill, looking down on the streets lined with people. Joyous noise rises up. We are empty. We are hungry. We are eager to be filled. And we must descend into Holy week with our stomachs empty and our eyes wide open.

But we have a secret weapon. The rock that is our foundation: Our refuge and our salvation. The Rock that never leaves us. "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love endures forever."⁴

Lord, in truth, I live my life between THE rock and a hard place. When I am closer to the rock, I am closer to you. Help me remember that when I drift too far away, I need to let things go, lighten the load and empty the bilge and make room for you. Amen

⁴ Psalm 118:29