

Song: Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)

Praise is rising
Eyes are turning to You
We turn to You

Hope is stirring
Hearts are yearning for You
We long for You

When we see You we find strength to face the day
In Your presence all our fears are washed away
Washed away

*Hosanna Hosanna
You are the God who saves us
Worthy of all our praises
Hosanna Hosanna
Come have Your way among us
We welcome You here Lord Jesus*

Hear the sound of hearts returning to You
We turn to You
In Your kingdom broken lives are made new
You make us new

'Cause when we see You we find strength
To face the day
In Your presence all our fears are washed away
Washed away

*Hosanna Hosanna
You are the God who saves us
Worthy of all our praises
Hosanna Hosanna
Come have Your way among us
We welcome You here Lord Jesus*

Brenton Brown/Paul Baloche
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Integrity's Hosanna! Music (ASCAP)(c/o Integrity Media, Inc.)

Gathering Prayer

We welcome you, King Jesus,
humble king, king of our lives,
with shouts of “hosanna”
for you are the God who saves.
We fix our eyes on you, King Jesus,
the pioneer and perfecter of faith,
our hope of a wilderness restored.
Amen.

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Video

Isaiah 35 visual reflection

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

Have you ever anticipated a homecoming? Perhaps it was your oldest child coming home after their first term at university. Maybe it was a reunion with a long-lost friend.

If you have, then you probably imagined what it would be like. But then the person arrives, and they look different. Your son home from university has grown his hair long. Your daughter has arrived home with a tattoo. The friend you haven't seen for years has aged badly.

Somehow, homecomings do not always turn out how we imagine they will.

Israel was longing for the homecoming of her God to Jerusalem. We read that in Isaiah 35. But when it happens, as Jesus enters Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, it isn't entirely in the form they had popularly imagined from their interpretations of the prophetic hope.

It is a surprising homecoming at the end of this wilderness journey we have been exploring through Lent.

Let's look at the elements of God's homecoming in Isaiah 35 and see where the surprises lay in the light of Palm Sunday.

The **first** element is *joy*:

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;

it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendour of our God.

The joy is so unconfined that even the inanimate parts of creation seem to shout with gladness. Poetically, creation sings. It is renewed.

The New Testament takes up this theme when it fills out the Old Testament prophecies about a new creation. Before that time, we see creation groaning in expectation, but we look forward to a day when, as Augustine of Hippo put it, every part of creation will mediate the presence of God to us. The homecoming of God is not just about personal salvation, it's about the renewal of all creation. This is something to shout, sing, and celebrate!

But where is the surprise on Palm Sunday? Isn't it in the failure of the religious establishment to welcome this and join in? They tell Jesus to silence the children who are singing praises, but Jesus says that if their mouths are shut, then even the stones will cry out.

How easy it is for our meanness and jealousy to close our own mouths to the praise of God and to close our hearts and minds to seeing and rejoicing in the fulfilment of his purposes. For that is what many of the religious leaders of Jesus's day did.

Has a mean spirit silenced our praise? Has our jealousy of what another Christian can offer stunted our faith? It's time to repent of these unworthy attitudes. They rip churches apart, and they suffocate our faith.

The **second** element is *hope*:

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
'Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.'

Think how Israel struggled for hope in the face of Roman occupation. To them, it was like being in exile despite being in their own land. So they looked forward to the day when God would come and right these wrongs, and his Messiah would boot the Romans out, leaving Israel to live in peace within her own borders.

Where's the surprise? Well, the Christian hope does include the righting of all wrongs and the judgment of the wicked and the unrepentant. No-one in the Bible talked more about Hell as a place of punishment than Jesus.

But the difference is this. Jesus postponed the judgment. It wasn't to be now, but at the end of time. When he preached at Nazareth in Luke chapter 4, he stopped his reading from Isaiah 61 before the verses about judgment.

So when Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he adopts instead the prophecy of Zechariah, by entering on a donkey, not a war horse. His gift of hope comes in a peaceful manner, not a warlike one. When he receives the cries from the crowd of 'Hosanna' (which loosely means, 'O God, save us') that opportunity for salvation is not just for Israel. When he dies on the Cross, a convicted thief and a Roman centurion will confess faith in him. The hope is offered both to Israel, and to Israel's enemies.

And that must make us think about how we frame our hope in Christ. Do we see that he also offers hope through his saving love at the Cross to the people we don't like? Are there people whom we would rather God just zapped with a thunderbolt, but who are also candidates for hope, according to Jesus?

The **third** element is *healing*:

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

In these verses we see both the kinds of personal healings that Jesus himself performed (curing the blind and the lame) and also the healing of creation, where even inhospitable places like the wilderness become beautifully inhabitable, and safe instead of being places of danger.

One thing we might dwell upon is how some Christians favour physical healing and others favour the work of the Church to heal the wider creation. However, neither Isaiah nor Jesus give us a choice in this. We are called to both. The Christian with the healing ministry may need to learn about climate change, and the Christian politician may need to pray for the sick.

But there's another surprise here. Strictly it doesn't come on Palm Sunday, but what we've said in the point about hope being offered not just to Israel but to her enemies might make us think further on into Holy Week. Remember when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane after Judas betrayed him. Then remember how Simon Peter lashed out with a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. What did Jesus do? He healed the servant, even though that servant was part of the group that was arresting him and about to take him away to certain torture and death.

So the surprise here for God's people in God's homecoming is the call to bless all the broken people and all of broken creation, even including the enemies of God. The healing mandate brought by Jesus encompasses a call to love our enemies as well as those for whom we feel an affinity.

Who is God calling me to bless this week?

The **fourth** and final element is **holiness**:

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

God makes his homecoming on a particular road. It is called the Way of Holiness. Israel rejoices that 'The unclean will not journey on it': they can't have any Romans or even native sinners joining in this celebratory march to Jerusalem.

But the surprise here is that God's people cannot simply look down their self-righteous noses at those they consider unworthy to be on the Highway of the Lord. The call to holiness is a call for all of us to shape up. It's a call that reminds us that the only way we can march to Zion with Jesus is if we too take the Way of Holiness.

And as Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the event we often call 'The Triumphal Entry', we need to remember that his greatest triumph is to come at the Cross and the tomb. Jesus took that journey, doing what was right. It led him to Calvary, but then to the vacating of his grave.

If we want to walk with Jesus, it is on this road, the Way of Holiness. We shall slip up from time to time, but the basic question is whether this is the direction we are willing to take or whether we have deluded ourselves that we can take a different route to glory. The Cross to which Jesus was headed was not only for our forgiveness, but it was also to make us more like Christ.

Informal Intercessions

Based on the four elements of the talk

Hymn: All Glory, Laud and Honour

*All glory, laud, and honour
To Thee, Redeemer, King!
To Whom the lips of children
Made sweet Hosannas ring,*

Thou art the King of Israel
Thou David's Royal Son,
Who in the LORD'S name comest,
The King and Blessèd One.
All glory, &c.

The company of Angels
Is praising Thee on high,
And mortal men, and all things
Created make reply.

All glory, &c.

The people of the Hebrews
With palms before Thee went
Our praise and prayers and anthems
Before Thee we present.

All glory, &c.

To Thee before Thy Passion
They sang their hymns of praise;
To Thee now high exalted
Our melody we raise.

All glory, &c.

Thou didst accept their praises;
Accept the praise we bring,
Who in all good delightest,
Thou good and gracious King.

All glory, &c

Theodulf of Orléans, AD820

Translated by John Mason Neale (1818-1866)

Performed by musicians from St Paul's, Sarisbury Green

Sending Prayer

Jesus, we have walked with you this far.
May we not abandon you in this Holy Week,
but stay by your side through your sorrow,
that we might also join you
for your resurrection morning.
Surprise us on this journey,
as we fix our eyes on you,
author and perfecter of our faith.
Amen.

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