

Sermon: Stones Cry Out

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, April 13, 2025, Palm Sunday)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that the Israel Defence Force (or IDF) has been conducting bombing campaigns against targets in Gaza, using the latest, most advanced F-35 fighter jets? I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise, ever since the October of 2023 when the Israeli forces have been engaged in an all-out war with Hamas. Yet, the news of the use of F-35 still shook me. I really should be paying more attention to this.

You see, the F-35 jet designed by Lockheed Martin, is an American class of single-seat, fifth-generation supersonic strike fighter, originally envisioned for air superiority and strike mission, and equipped with highly advanced stealth, electronic warfare, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities.

The variant supplied to the Israeli Air Force is known as F-35I (given the name Adir, meaning "Mighty One" in Hebrew), had become operational in 2017. It had flown defensive missions in the past against Iranian drones, Houthi cruise missiles, and Hamas' rocket array in the northern part of Gaza Strip. However, since the initial terrorist attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the IDF have hit back on multiple fronts, including using F-35I as the Israeli Air Force's own social media posts bragged, of more than 15,000 operational flight hours, in "thousands of sorties in all theatres".

As far as I know, Hamas has no anti-aircraft nor radar capability; its ability to launch rockets against Israel was primitive to start with, and all but non-existent 18 months into this war. The use of F-35I, the most advanced stealth fighter jets in the world, in this current conflict is like 'bringing machine guns to a knife fight'—hardly seems fair.

Then with the resumption of fighting last month, again according to Israeli Air Force's own social media posts, the F-35I have fought, for the first time ever, in the so-called "beast mode", that is lugging an extra 22,000 pounds of munitions, in bombing runs against Gaza. According to the United Nations' Human rights office in Palestine, since March 18, there have been at least three incidents where more than twenty fatalities were reported due to these bombing runs, and at least eight incidents with more

than ten fatalities. Using explosive weapons with wide-area effects in such densely populated ghettos will almost certainly have indiscriminate effects, and is very likely to be in violation of international humanitarian laws on the conduct of wars.

Look, no body is saying that Israel should not defend itself against brutal attacks by adversaries that vow to annihilate the country. They can defend itself, and they should. But at what cost, what collateral damages? By what point does the word 'defence' in IDF loses its meaning completely? By what point does the Old Testament's scale of justice known universally as "eye for an eye, tooth for an tooth" loses its meaning, and become completely unbalanced with the loss of so many eyes, teeth, organs, limbs and lives of so many Palestinian civilians? By what point will the stones from the blood-soaked rubbles in Gaza finally cry out for justice?

You may ask, "What does it mean to say 'stones crying out'?" It is an expression used by Jesus in today's reading, in Luke 19, specifically verse 40. This is a passage commonly known to as the 'triumphal entry' of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. It is often read on Palm Sunday, referring to the residents of that city waving palm branches while welcoming Jesus as a king, riding on a donkey's colt.

For all its joyful and celebratory shout of hosannas, which in Hebrews means "O Lord, save us!", Palm Sunday is a day of contrast. We hear it in hymns, moving from happy triumph to inevitable crucifixion, such as "ride on, ride on in majesty! Hear all the tribes hosanna cry" in verse 1, then ending in verse 5, "ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die." We see this contrast in Jesus himself, as the Son of God, the ruler of heavens and earth, choosing to ride a borrowed colt, which presumably was returned eventually to its rightful, nameless owner. The contrast is also apparent in the destination, as the city of Jerusalem welcomed him with unbridled exuberance and then screamed a few days later for his blood.

We have our own contrast, of course, since we live in a society full of contradictions. Some argue that the best path forward to create peace is by going to war. Others believe the best way to get ahead is by stomping on the heads of others who are also trying to get ahead. People buy hand guns to protect their families, while knowing the number one cause of gun fatalities is accidental discharge at home. Businesses seek to profit at all cost even if it bankrupts them. Governments impose tariffs and counter-tariffs on trades, all-the-while knowing it is hurting their own citizens the most. Jesus rides his lowly donkey colt through it all.

It is impossible to understand Jesus apart from the history of Israel, especially its prophetic literature. Riding on a colt into Jerusalem fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, “*See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*” The shouts of hosanna from the crowd echo the words of Psalm 118:25, “*Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord!*”, While the praises of multitudes of disciples echo the words of the following verse, “*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*” When Pharisees asked Jesus to silence his disciples, Jesus replied paraphrasing Habakkuk 2:11, “*I tell you, if these were silent, ‘the very stones will cry out from the wall’*”.

There are two ways we could make sense of inanimate objects crying out, as shouting in praise of God, or as crying out against injustice. The Scripture provides us with evidences of both.

As shouting in praise, we find in Psalm 114:6, of mountains skipping like rams, and hills like lambs, in awe of the presence of the Lord. We find in Isaiah 55:12, of mountains and hills bursting into song and trees of the field clapping their hands, in praise of God’s act of restoration. We find in Psalm 148, Creator being praised by all created things—the sun, moon, stars, heavens, water, sky, animals and people—for raising the horn of salvation, pointing really to the eventual coming of Christ.

The other way we could understand the expression of “stones crying out” is more ominous. It has something to do with crying for vengeance, or righting a terrible wrong.

The story of the first murder in Genesis 4, of Cain killing his brother Abel in cold blood, is illustrative. I won’t go into all the details, but suffice to say when God asked Cain, after he committed the act, “Where is your brother Abel?” His reply was, “I don’t know; am I my brother’s keeper?” To such a brazen reply, the Lord said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!”

Of course, there is also the passage of Habakkuk 2:11, of stone crying out from the wall, which in its context of that chapter, is really about God pronouncing multiple woes on the wicked, for bowing down to idols carved by hands, for coveting what is not their own, for building a town marked by bloodshed, and making one’s neighbours drink one’s wrath.

Into both these meanings, of praise and of cry for justice, Jesus rides into town, not on high horses like a conqueror, but on a lowly colt, as a messenger of peace, as the Prince of Peace. Jesus rides into what was a destructive and deadly situation without the heavenly host nor an earthly

army. He readily gives himself without reservation. His prophetic sign and re-enactment is a sign of God's vulnerable love for us all, a love that risks everything in order to redeem all in all.

Coming back to that blood-soaked Gaza now in rubbles, I don't have an easy solution nor even a hard one. What I do know is that we have been complacent, perhaps reasoning our way through this conflict, the why's, the how's, the who's, while missing out on the victims.

The latest figures according to the Office the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights, 1,706 Israeli and 50,810 Palestinian have been killed, including 166 journalists, 120 academics, and 224 humanitarian aid workers. Their blood is now crying out from the ground, and the rubbles of Gaza echo.

Earlier, I cited the text of Zechariah 9:9, as the coming king riding on a donkey colt. I neglected to mention that it is 9:10 that is truly inspiring, indicating what this king will do, that is

*"He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim,
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth."*

Did you catch that? The very first act of this king, this mediator from the Holy One of Israel, is to cut off all instruments of war (such as F-35I) not from adversaries, but from Israel itself. Perhaps that should give us a clue on what to strive for in the coming days, as followers of Christ, who according to the author of Hebrews, is the mediator of a new covenant, who sprinkled his blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**