

## MARCHING TO ZION

Barry Chant

I still remember the first time I saw 'Pop' Justice.

I was the new pastor at a small church which had been established about five years earlier. We used to meet in a hired hall on a busy road, where the noise of passing traffic was a constant growl in the background and the bare, dusty floor boards added to the echo.

Someone at some time had organised a special function there and left shining blue, gold, silver and red paper stars hanging by the dozen from the ceiling. It was only months later that we learned we could remove them.

In an effort to reach new people for Christ, we invited a guest speaker to come for a few nights and conduct some special meetings. Our own few faithful people came along but we were not overwhelmed by visitors, to say the least.

Then one night Pop Justice appeared. He was an old mild-mannered, silver-haired man, with a pointy nose, sad eyes and a severe stoop which made him look shorter than he was. When the preacher, a lively, loud and enthusiastic speaker, got to the end of his address, he invited people to go to the front of the hall to meet him so he could introduce them to Jesus. One person rose gingerly to his feet and shuffled his way forward: it was Pop Justice.

From that time on he began to attend our church regularly. One day I visited his home. It was a small cottage jammed between two large factories. More than once, the factory owners had tried to buy him out, but he would not budge. The place was dark, with drawn blinds and varnished woodwork. And there were newspapers everywhere. Great stacks of them in every room. In fact, there were piles of all kinds of things throughout the house. It was plain that Pop simply could not be bothered cleaning things up.

The kitchen was dirty and untidy, with unwashed dishes in the sink and food scraps on the bench. And there was the pervading smell of foulness that I was beginning to recognise in the area where we ministered—as there were many homes like this, where people were either too poor or too sick or too tired or too lazy to tidy things up.

It was obvious that something had to be done. One of our elders, a man named Murray, said, 'I'll look after him. Leave it to me.' So Murray got busy and found a guest house where Pop Justice could stay.

After some weeks, we discovered that the old man was being abused and manipulated by the lady in charge. Pop was a gentle soul. He would not argue or defend himself. He just went about his small daily affairs with dignity and quietude and was an easy prey for the unscrupulous. So Murray got busy again and found a new place for him where life treated him more kindly. Now the old man was clean and tidy and well-fed.

Three or four years went by. Murray would bring Pop to church where people got to know him and although he never said much, to appreciate him and love him.

Then one day he fell ill and before long he passed away. It appeared he only had one relative in the world, a niece who was anxious to do whatever she could, but who really hardly knew him. So she and her husband worked with Murray and arranged his final affairs.

Then came the day for his funeral. We decided not to have a grave-side service. We would farewell him from the church. By this time we had our own building, a modern, airy hall, where the sunlight streamed in and the atmosphere was bright. There was a goodly number of people at the service and several paid fine tributes to the old man. Murray, in particular, spoke glowingly of his simple faith, his steadfastness, his persistence in the face of trial and his gentle spirit.

Finally, the service was almost over. We chose for a final tribute Isaac Watts' grand old Hymn -

Come ye that love that Lord  
And let your joys be known,  
Join in a song with sweet accord,  
And thus surround the throne.  
We're marching to Zion  
Beautiful, beautiful Zion,  
We're marching upwards to Zion  
The beautiful city of God.

As we began to sing, the pallbearers took their places beside the coffin. They lifted it, not just waist-high, but shoulder-high. Then with great dignity and with solemn purpose, they began to move slowly up the centre aisle, bearing Pop Justice aloft, on their shoulders, like a fallen hero, towards the entrance doors. It was to be a triumphant departure.

As they walked, the people sang -  
Let those refuse to sing  
Who never knew our God  
But children of the heavenly King  
Shall speak their joys abroad.  
We're marching upwards to Zion  
The beautiful city of God.

The small procession moved slowly and we struggled to sing as the tears began to flow. An old man who had lived and died virtually unknown was on his final journey, not from guest house to guest house, not from room to room, but this time to a heavenly mansion, repared for him by the Lord he loved.

The hill of Zion yields  
A thousand sacred sweets  
Before we reach the heavenly fields  
Or walk the golden streets

Slowly, step by step, the pall bearers moved along the aisle. Handkerchiefs emerged as people tried discreetly to wipe away the glistening tears. But they sang on, notwithstanding -

Then let our songs abound,  
And every tear be dry;  
We're marching through Immanuel's ground  
To fairer worlds on high.

Today, over thirty years later, I still recall the scene as I stood on the platform watching that small group leave the building. The sun was bright outside and they were silhouetted against the clear glazed doors. I found myself squinting to focus against the glare. Pop Justice was moving from darkness to light.

My last memory is of the casket being lowered into the hearse and then being driven away as if to heaven itself -

We're marching to Zion  
Beautiful, beautiful Zion,  
We're marching upwards to Zion  
The beautiful city of God.

I stood there quietly, not wanting to move, knowing that all too soon I would have to socialise. I thought of the words of Paul. We do not grieve, he says, as those who have no hope. If ever a text was proven true, it was that day.

1100 words

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## About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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