**Service for Palm Sunday 5th April 2020 Revd Brenda Stephenson**

Take time to be still, comfortable yet alert. Reading some of this aloud will help to slow things down and let the words penetrate better to mind and heart.

Today we are encouraged to read the whole Passion narrative. I don’t think that is practical for us. I have chosen three sections from Matthew’s gospel with some thoughts after each. And at the end I’ve suggested how you might divide the rest of the story between the days of Holy Week. I hope that will be helpful.

Call to worship In you O Lord I seek refuge;

do not let me ever be put to shame.

Incline your ear to me;

be a rock of refuge for me,

a strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;

for your name’s sake lead me and guide me.

Into your hand I commit my spirit;

you have set me free O Lord,

faithful God. (verses from Ps 31:1-5)

Hymn (HP42) O love of God how strong and true,

eternal and yet ever new;

uncomprehended and unbought,

beyond all knowledge and all thought.

We read thee best in him who came

to bear for us the cross of shame,

sent by the Father from on high,

our life to live, our death to die.

We read thy power to bless and save

e’en in the darkness of the grave;

still more in resurrection light

we read the fullness of thy might.

O love of God, our shield and stay

through all the perils of our way;

eternal love, in thee we rest,

for ever safe, for ever blest.

Horatius Bonar

Prayer Let us give thanks to God for all that we enjoy………

Let us give thanks for faith in Jesus Christ and the difference it makes to our lives…..

Let us give thanks to God for all his promises……………

Amazing God, we come to worship you with gratitude in our hearts. We pray that what we offer in worship and in our lives may cause others to give thanks and bring you honour.

So we dedicate this time to you and ask you to speak into our hearts and lives. And we do so in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying: Our Father………………………….

Reading Matthew 21:1-11 (at end of paper)

**Throwing down the gauntlet**

How do you deal with conflict, or what could turn into conflict?

Some people revel in it, others go out to meet it. I think my natural tendency is to avoid it, though I’m well aware that is often not the right attitude. How about you? (Have a think!)

What was Jesus doing, leading his followers into Jerusalem riding on a donkey in fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy? Zechariah (9:9) speaks of a king coming and establishing peace. How would the religious leaders respond to such an action? Wasn’t it asking for trouble? Wasn’t Jesus making a claim here they could not ignore, especially at this crowded Passover season? And there are certainly some commentators who believe Jesus was throwing down the gauntlet, challenging, even daring, the chief priests and elders to act. Perhaps he knew it was time to bring things to a head. Perhaps he believed he had done the teaching he needed to do and it was time to hand over to the disciples. We shall never know. Only that sometimes people do need to be challenged, to be made to pause and think. There may be an example you can think of in your own experience…………..

Reading Matthew 26:14-35

**Tenebrae – the growing darkness**

Have you ever been to a Tenebrae service? It’s usually held on Maundy Thursday, often in ecumenical contexts. Near the beginning a central candle and twelve smaller ones are lit. Then, as the Passion story is read section by section, after each one two candles are extinguished until only the central one remains alight. Finally, after the verses referring to the death and burial of Jesus have been read, even that one is snuffed out. The congregation leave silently, with as little illumination in the church as possible. It can be a powerful experience.

The growing darkness is a symbol of the way that Jesus is more and more isolated. First Judas puts into effect a plan to hand Jesus over to the authorities. Then Peter, brave enough to follow where Jesus is taken, denies his Lord. Finally the disciples flee. Only Jesus is left, upon the cross, still shedding light into the world. And then he dies and all is dark.

Our second reading covered those events. We shall never know (or therefore understand) the motives of Judas. The actions of Peter and the rest of the Twelve are closer to our own experience. We understand the pressures they were under.

At this point in the service let us seek to be alongside Jesus as his friends and followers desert him. How dark is it growing for him? Is he surprised at their reactions? What is keeping him strong? – strong enough to ask forgiveness for those who are crucifying him. It is surely his relationship of love with his Father. And even that will be lost in his cry of dereliction on the cross – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? No doubt we have all known moments when God seemed absent, uncaring, our enemy rather than our friend. But how must that have been for Jesus? That means that whatever darkness, whatever depths of pain and difficulty you have to encounter, Jesus has been deeper. He understands and is with you, alongside you to strengthen and give courage.

Reading Matthew 26:36-56

**Being God’s servant**

We could have read part of one of the Servant Songs, as they’re called, from Isaiah this morning (Isaiah 50:4-9). Those sections in the middle of his prophecy seem to have been well known to Jesus. Certainly the early Christians recognised that in Jesus they were being fulfilled. And in the reading we’ve just shared we heard some of the characteristics of being God’s servant actually acted out.

At the Passover meal, Jesus reinterprets the bread and wine to be his body and blood. They were to be broken and poured out on the cross. This servant is a suffering one. Then in Gethsemane, with the disciples asleep, Jesus faces up to his death. It is a passage where his humanity is most clear to us. And at the end of this service we shall read or sing a hymn based on an ancient poem which St Paul incorporated into his letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:5-11). That poem speaks of God’s self-emptying in Jesus crucified. Here is God’s servant (slave in some translations) humbled to the point of death. However, God raises him to the heights and makes him Lord of all peoples and nations.

I used a small s in the title of this section for it’s a title that belongs to each of us who have given God our allegiance. Part of belonging to him, part of following Jesus where he leads us, is to be ready to face suffering and those little deaths that life brings us. I mean those circumstances we would never choose – like self isolation – but which we must undergo. And some of them come about as a result of us being believers, because we are acting as God’s servants. There are people it is not easy to love, certainly not our “enemies”. There are situations that are risky, if not physically then in terms of ideas or faith. We can find ourselves being led in directions we would not choose and faced with challenges that make great demands on us. However, God is there with us in those circumstances, even when it doesn’t feel like it; (as when Jesus felt abandoned on the cross. We don’t believe he was.) God and his love offer us strength in our weakness and courage when we need it most. This Holy Week allow yourself to drink in all he wants to give you so that you too may know fullness of life, whatever your situation at the moment.

Prayers for others Loving Lord God we bring to you the needs of our world.

Amidst the coronavirus crisis we pray for those who are anxious,

those whose plans have had to be cancelled,

those whose livelihoods have disappeared overnight,

those whose futures are uncertain as exams are not taking place,

those who live in a country with inadequate healthcare,

those who have no permanent home or who are far from home.

In some way speak to them your word of peace and grace.

We pray for those in the front line of care,

in hospitals, residential homes and people’s homes,

that they may be kept safe.

We pray for those expected to have all the answers,

politicians, medics, scientists,

that they may show humility and wisdom.

We pray for ourselves that we may discover

fresh ways of being your servants at this time.

And finally we pray for one another and ourselves.

Keep feeding us your words of hope

so that we can be people of hope for others.

We ask these prayers and the unspoken prayers in our hearts

through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen

Hymn (StF 272) From heaven you came, helpless babe.

Entered our world, your glory veiled,

not to be served but to serve,

and give your life that we might live.

*This is our God, the Servant King,*

*he calls us now to follow him,*

*to bring our lives as a daily offering*

*of worship to the Servant King.*

There in the garden of tears

my heavy load he chose to bear;

his heart with sorrow was torn,

“Yet not my will but yours”, he said.

Come see his hands and his feet,

the scars that speak of sacrifice,

hands that flung stars into space

to cruel nails surrendered.

So let us learn how to serve

and in our lives enthrone him,

each other’s needs to prefer,

for it is Christ we’re serving.

Graham Kendrick

Blessing

**Suggested Holy week readings**

Monday Matthew 26:57-75

Tuesday Matthew 27:1-26

Wednesday Matthew 27:27-44

Maundy Thursday Matthew 26:17-30

Good Friday Matthew 27:45-66

Saturday Your body in the tomb, your soul in hell,

and with the dying thief in Paradise,

enthroned as God, in holy Trinity:

Christ filling all things, ever unconfined.

Anon from Orthodox liturgy

**Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem** Matthew’s gospel 21:1-11

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. **3** If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately. **4** This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

**5**“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

**6**The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; **7** they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. **8** A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

**10** When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” **11** The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

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**Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus** Matthew 26:14-35

**26** 14 Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16 And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

**The Passover with the Disciples**

**17** On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” **18** He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.’” **19** So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

**20** When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; **21** and while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” **22** And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, “Surely not I, Lord?” **23** He answered, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. **24** The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” **25** Judas, who betrayed him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” He replied, “You have said so.”

The Institution of the Lord’s Supper

**26**While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” **27** Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; **28** for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **29** I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

**30** When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

**Peter’s Denial Foretold**

**31** Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd,  and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

**32**But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” **33** Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” **34** Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” **35** Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

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**Jesus Prays in Gethsemane M**atthew 26:36-56

**36** Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” **37** He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. **38** Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” **39** And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” **40** Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? **41** Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”  **42** Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” **43** Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. **44** So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. **45** Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. **46** Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

**The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus**

**47** While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. **48** Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” **49** At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. **50**Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. **51** Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. **52** Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. **53** Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? **54** But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” **55** At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. **56** But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.