**Palm Sunday 28th March 2021**

**Call to worship**

Lord of all, when Jesus entered into Jerusalem,
the people welcomed him with praise
and gave him the best they could offer.
As we gather here, we ask you to fill our hearts with joy and love.
Help us to understand what it means
to give freely and extravagantly of our time,
our treasure and our talents.
Most of all, inspire us to give you our praise.

Hosanna to the son of David, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

The gates of Holy Week are open,
and we gather to celebrate our King who rides a donkey.
We bring to you the best of what we are, Lord Jesus,
laying down our lives in service,
as you laid down your life for us.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Eager to emulate that first Palm Sunday crowd, we picture ourselves casting our cloaks before Jesus and joining the celebration. Would we, though, if it were to happen again today? An impoverished preacher on the humblest of beasts – would we cast our finest before him? Tear off our wool and cashmere coats, our leather jackets, and throw them down for his donkey to trample?
We confess, Lord, that we would probably be loath to leave our homes.
We confess that we are carried away by stories and the seeming romance of them.
Those people threw their prized possessions before Jesus, giving the best they had.
Forgive us for holding back so much from him, and help us to celebrate with all that we have.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, thank you for forgiving us when we have been mean with our attitudes.
**Jesus forgives us and opens our hearts and our minds to how we should think and feel.**
Lord, thank you for forgiving us when we have withheld our possessions.
**Jesus, who had nothing, forgives us and shows us how to share.**
Lord, thank you for forgiving us when we have kept ourselves to ourselves.
**Jesus, who lived and died for others, forgives us and calls us to join him.**
**Amen.**

**Mark 11.1-11**

I don’t know if you have seen pictures of the stranded Ever Given mega-container ship in the Suez Canal which is holding up an estimated $9.6bn (£7bn) of goods each day. This works out at $400m an hour in trade along the waterway which is a vital passageway between east and west.

The ship, the length of four football pitches and one of the world's biggest container vessels, has drifted sideways blocking the Suez Canal and has run aground on the bank. Pictures show just one man in a digger, a JCB, trying their best to dig out this massive boat. The Daily Star called it in their usual way with the headline:

 ‘£7bn a day shipping crisis, fears of oil shortages and they’ve got one man and a dog fixing it…. We’re going to need a bigger digger![[1]](#endnote-1)

This is Palm Sunday the start of Holy Week. Christians claim that the massive problems of the world: evil, suffering, sin, death are addressed and answered by God through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This event, two thousand years ago, is now largely overlooked by most in our contemporary society as irrelevant, as a fable, as insignificant. Easter is all about chocolate eggs and bunnies. The cross and resurrection is insignificant, like a small digger trying to free a mega container ship stuck in the Suez Canal.

So, let us remind ourselves of our Christian claim, that such a relatively insignificant event, because the Romans crucified thousands of their subjects and this was just another state execution, turned out to be the most significant event in world history.

It all started with a celebration. For the Jews at the time of Jesus there was a desire to find a reason to celebrate. They were a people under occupation who were heavily taxed and did not have full liberty. It is interesting to contrast their desire for and glimpse of liberty and how they celebrated that, with our response today in the midst of a year long pandemic, whose annivewrsary we marked this week. We are desperate to celebrate the end of this and be with others and throw a party. All we can do this Easter is treat ourselves to Easter Eggs (\* some are being sold for £37 egg) and a garden meet up with another household.

While we long for liberty from the pandemic and freedom to meet other people and enjoy life to the full, others simply long for freedom. Those who took part in the carnival entry of Jesus into Jerusalem celebrated in different ways. The people celebrated in expectation of deliverance. They were cheering for what they anticipated Jesus would achieve. They wanted a Messiah who would overthrow their enemies. They waved palm branches shouting Hosanna blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Astonishingly the crowd lay their precious cloaks on the road for Jesus’ donkey to tread on – an act I reflect on in my short daily meditations that I’m offering each day in Holy Week on our Facebook page. Would you put your precious coat down on a dusty road for a donkey to tread over it? Must have been some reason?

Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. There the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate would have entered the city for this potentially combustible Jewish festival of Passover. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory and violence of empire that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast between the kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world and of Satan is central not only to the gospel of Mark but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity. As we know the week ends with Jesus’ execution by the powers who ruled his world. The crowds turned against him. He wasn’t the Messiah they hoped for. But Jesus did not get executed because he was a nice guy! He got executed because he confronted the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God.

The cross exposes the world’s values, the world’s sin, and God’s judgement.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord goes the spiritual? Well, no I wasn’t there physically at an event that happened two thousand years ago in a far-flung place of the Roman empire. But we were all there in another sense.[[2]](#endnote-2)

What the characters in the Passion story did to Jesus we still do. The cross of two thousand years ago exposes the kind of people we are.

*We were there with Judas*, who sold out, probably because Jesus refused to serve Judas’ military and political goals for his nation. If it comes a choice between the justice of the kingdom of God for all people and the self interest of our own people, it is clear which we must choose.

*We were there with the disciples* who deserted him and fled when they discovered that loyalty to Jesus meant being rejected by both the political and religious authorities, thrown in jail and perhaps killed. Why be a Christian if it doesn’t pay off? Who wants to follow a loser?

*We were there with the pious leaders of the religious establishment* who were out to get him because he didn’t act as they thought one sent from God should act. He crucified good law-abiding people and made friends with guilty sinful people. He thought human beings were more important than moral and religious rules and conventions.

*We were there with Peter* when he denied him. When it is safe and words are cheap, we too confess, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God’. But when we are among outsiders, we too are afraid to be different, it is better to be silent, and if necessary, deny him, than to get into trouble by having convictions and attitudes that only make people mad and turn against you.

*We were there with Pilate* when he made the decision to let the mob have Jesus, although he knew the defendant was innocent. It is better to sacrifice Jesus than to go against the will of the majority of the people. What can you do when the choice is between justice that threatens and injustice that preserves your own comfort, power, and wealth?

*We were there with the soldiers* who played games while he died. While many of us enjoy all the pleasures of our affluence, within a few blocks of where we live (not to mention across the world) people go to bed hungry, strangers are excluded, elderly people forgotten, prisoners condemned and abandoned. According to Jesus, when they suffer, he suffers too. What we do or leave undone with them, we do, or leave undone with him.

*We were there*. The cross of Jesus exposes not just their sin back then but our sin here and now. When we read about them, we read about ourselves. Those of us who are willing to let ourselves be told this will not even think of going on with defensive questions and arguments about whether we are as bad as some other people or so bad that the atoning death of Christ was really necessary. We can only ask how can we be changed from the kind of people we are, to become new and different people. Is it possible that the death of one man can make a difference? Is it possible that only the death of what we are can make a new life possible?

This last year has been a year in which we have been reminded of the sin in the world. Racism, sexism, inequality, poverty, oppression, authoritarianism. I could go on. The secular response is usually ‘if only we can educate people differently’. Well, I’m sure education helps to a degree., But knowledge may only make you even more devious and clever at manipulation and oppression.

The gospel of Jesus calls for repentance, a change of heart. To acknowledge our guilt and know the forgiveness of God to change us to live as forgiven sinners. To be born again of God’s Spirit.

The ‘God part’ is the key. The God part is why the cross and resurrection of Jesus is for Christians the world changing event it is and not just a hopeless digger trying to free a huge container ship.

We believe God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life. We constantly say God loves you. There is a danger that we can affirm people in their sinfulness. It is an incomplete statement. We should say God loves you despite… despite our sinfulness, our injustices, our self-centredness, even our own collusion with evil.

Our society has got round the significance of Easter by basically ignoring God or believing the God doesn’t exist. This makes the cross just the unjust execution of a decent bloke. That’s all.

But if Jesus is the Son of God, as the centurion who stood at the foot of the cross declared at his death, then this ‘death of God’ at our hands, is the pivotal point in history.

Is God therefore against us? Does God judge us? Is god angry towards us? The cross says to us ‘You are forgiven!’ We of course have to recognize that we need forgiveness, that we are debtors, still guilty. We have worshipped and served ourselves rather than God. In all kinds of ways, we have hurt other people, or by our silence and inactivity let them be hurt. We have contradicted our humanity. Christ does not take away our guilt so that all the damage we have done to others, ourselves, our relationship to our Creator is magically undone. We are guilty sinners. The cross of Christ exposes that.

But to know we are forgiven debtors, means that we do not have to circle round and round ourselves, arrogantly defending or anxiously condemning ourselves, or trying to think up excuses to make our guilt seem less than it is and easier to bear. We have been forgiven. God forgives us. Jesus on the cross says Father forgive them they know not what they do.

To be forgiven means to be free to put behind us what we have been and done, or what we have not been and not done. If God has forgiven us, without demanding that we pay up, then we can forgive ourselves. We can forget what lies behind and press on to what lies ahead. Our hearts are changed. WE can be restored in friendship to God and others. A new creation. A new beginning.

The writers of the New testament are often lost for words as to what the Passion of Jesus means.

God was in Christ reconciling the world

We are no longer enemies but friends with God.

Though we were sinners, Christ died for us.

God is for us not against us

Frederick Buechner the American Presbyterian minister said the Bible has a central plot:

‘God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it’.

The world gets lost. We get lost. Are we on a journey – to get found again and get back on the right road? Is Jesus the one who puts us on the way? Is Jesus the one who brings us to God? Who changes our hearts, our lives, our relationship to others?

All this from one event in history? Is the cross as insignificant as a small earth digger trying to save a huge ship? Or can this event be the pivot of history? This week is all about that question?

May we with the centurion be filled with awe again and confess ‘Truly this is the Son of God’. May we with those crowds on Palm Sunday proclaim ‘Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

**A sending out prayer**

Let us go in peace to follow Jesus

On the way that leads to the cross

And onwards to eternal life.

Hosanna in the Highest!

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-the-papers-56531927 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. S Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, WJKP, 2018 Ch 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)