**10th April 2022 Palm Sunday**

**Call to worship**

We look for an all-powerful king,
but Jesus confidently comes among us
as an ordinary commoner.
How extraordinary!
Are we still looking for God in the wrong places?

**A gathering prayer**

Wonderful God,
thank you that you meet us
right here where we are sitting –
in the ordinary stuff and activities of this day.
As we journey through Holy Week,
may we recognise you in Christ Jesus,
be empowered to live like him –
to live into the preciousness of the life
that you sustain in us. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Living God, we bring you our ‘hosannas’ –
for you are an almighty God.
We bring you our ‘alleluias’ –
for you are a wonderful God.
We bring you our dreams –
for you are a faithful God.
We bring you our discipleship –
for you are an encouraging God.
We bring you our hearts –
for you are a loving God
in whom we can trust. Amen.

**A prayer of adoration**

Lord of power and humility,
the crowd roared,
their spirits soared –
for you were a king.
Their king.
They longed for your rule,
though you rode on a mule –
for you were a king.
Their king.
And here today,
as we worship and pray,
we adore you as king.
Our King! **Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

We are sorry, Lord Jesus, for the moments
when our hosannas are loud but lacking in love,
when we chase the lure of worldly power,
but miss the signs of heavenly glory
when we choose popularity over integrity,
when we would silence those who speak the truth
and are silent when we could speak out.
Forgive us, and inspire our steps as we follow you to the Cross…
and beyond. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God of all that is,
your power is both mighty and vulnerable,
and you both judge and forgive.
Your son is both King and servant,
and he both teaches and serves.
You hear our words and you understand our silence
and you both accept and inspire.
Loving God,
thank you for this day,
for this journey,
and for your Son who draws us closer to you.**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord Jesus,
you journeyed to Jerusalem many times,
as a child and as a man,
touching many lives along the way as you taught and healed and challenged.
Thank you for inviting us to journey with you today,
for showing us the depth of your courage and the power of your love.
Thank you, Lord,
for being our King and Saviour – and our friend.
You are worthy of all our praise. **Amen.**

**Luke 19.28-44**

**Sermon**

The story of Palm Sunday is about people who had been looking for a sign for a long time. They’d been waiting and hoping for a messiah to arrive and free them from Roman occupation. When Jesus arrived on the colt, there would have been plenty who understood this as a symbol of the Messiah. But there had been so many false dawns and big promises before – why would this time be any different? Little did they know that Jesus was about to fulfil the promise of this sign, in ways they couldn’t even imagine.

It can be difficult to keep looking for a sign; from waiting for a sign that a sick loved one is getting better, to the hope that peace might prevail in Ukraine. And yet Palm Sunday reminds us to keep looking for signs that things will change, that things will get better, that our Saviour is already here and at work.

The crowds hailed Jesus as the Messiah. What they expected a Messiah to do was to defeat the pagan enemy, rebuild the temple as a sign of nationalistic pride and identification, and to bring God’s justice to the world.

Jesus would prove to be a bit of a disappointment. God can be like that. Disappointing.

The horrendous suffering experienced by the Ukrainians maybe making it harder for many people to believe that there is a God, at least as conceived in terms of a benevolent and all-powerful deity who actively intervenes in the world. Surely such a being would never have allowed these terrible things to happen?

Revd Andy Braunston, URC Minister for Digital Worship wrote a prayer on the URC website:[[1]](#endnote-1)

Oh Lord,
I really want to ask you smite Mr Putin;
it hasn’t got to be a big smite,
just enough to remove him from power,
topple him from his throne,
remove his advisors,
disable his armed forces,
and make him see sense.
Is that a big ask Lord?

After all you seem to have smote a lot in the Bible;
powerful kings brushed away,
invading generals confounded by your power,
or had their heads chopped off by some pretty feisty women,
so that your people would be free.
Even your mother sung of your power to remove tyrants from their thrones
and she faced the might of Rome.

The problem with asking you for some smiting,
is that I see myself as a trendy leftie,
what they call a snowflake,
I don’t really believe in violence,
I think anger can be used more productively,
I know you call us to solve our problems and not depend on you to sort out our messes,
but just this once Lord?
A bit of a smite?
A localised precision smite?

In the meantime, Lord,
please look after Mr Zelenskiy,
inspire him to continue to use his skills to defend his people;
protect him as you protected his ancestors of old.
Give hope to the people of Ukraine,
hope in your providence,
hope that the world won’t ignore their plight,
hope that the invaders will go,
and if, after that, you’ve got time for a smite….
**Amen**

What kind of God do we believe in? [[2]](#endnote-2)

A recent YouGov survey suggest that just 27 per cent of Britons believe in ‘a god’ – rather fewer than believe in angels – with a further 16 percent expressing faith in a higher power. One respondent when asked ‘do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on Earth?’ replied ‘No, just the ordinary one.’

Who or what is the ordinary God?

Traditionally many believers conceived of God in human terms. It is analogies which we can understand and relate to. I know at Mothering Sunday you explored the gender of God, father, and mother of us all, describing the relationship of God to us and God’s creation in parental terms and analogies. Other biblical descriptions are less personal and more metaphorical: a rock, a refuge, a shield, a fortress. Or as spirit. This suggests a life force or energy associated with God’s role as creator of the world.

The deists by the 18th century were very influential in the church, especially in Presbyterianism. They saw God as having set things in motion and then stood back. God doesn’t intervene in everyday events. God is a bit removed and impassive – unfeeling, not involved.

George Whitefield and John Wesley upset that view through their preaching of a personal God who wanted hearts to be moved and strangely warmed by the action of the holy spirit as they pioneered what became known as the evangelical revival in the mid-18th century. It was a revival because most people had stopped going to church in that century because they thought it was pointless praying to a God who didn’t do anything.

The horrors of the 20th century also led theologians to question God’s all-powerful nature. God may still be all good, but not all powerful. God maybe the ground of all being, not up there but within according to Paul Tillich. God suffers said Jurgen Moltmann, a German prisoner of war turned theologian, who wrote that in creating the world and humanity with all that attendant risk God engaged in self-limitation and withdrawal allowing great freedom within creation. Vulnerability and sacrifice are at the heart of the divine being he said.

Ultimately, we are not God. God is a mystery. Beyond our imagining. Transcending our existence and understanding.

What we have as Christians though is the story of Jesus and what that may tell us about God’s nature and God’s relationship with us and creation.

Jesus got crucified for being a Messiah. The Roman Empire didn’t like enemy kings and put them to death thus emphasising their claim to be the only power in town. The title board at the top of the cross of Jesus sarcastically said ‘The king of the Jews’!

Several other Jewish messianic or prophetic movements took place in the first century. One of the best known was during the Jewish - Roman wars of AD 66-70 when the leader – whom many of the Jews regarded as their true leader, king and possibly Messiah – was a man called Simon bar Giora.[[3]](#endnote-3) Simon bar Giora was taken back to Rome in order to be paraded through the streets as part Emperor Titus’s triumph. At the end of Titus’s triumph, as the historian Josephus describes it, Simon was ceremonially killed. He was flogged and executed, which was how the Romans carried things out. It was much more satisfying to have enemy kings killed in public at the height of your triumph than simply buried under rubble somewhere back in Jerusalem. Hence the public humiliation and execution of Jesus.

The message is: we are the only power in town. There is no God – but us. We rule. Behave.

Imagine then the situation of some of Simon’s followers who had escaped capture. Supposing one of them said two or three days later, ‘Simon really was the Messiah.’ The others would almost certainly say, ‘what on earth do you mean?’ what are you talking about? The Romans got him. They killed him. Of course, he isn’t the Messiah. Everyone knows the job of the Messiah is to defeat our pagan enemies and establish God’s kingdom of justice. Instead, he has been defeated by the pagans, the temple is in ruins (it was destroyed in AD 70) God’s justice is nowhere to be seen. All we have is Roman justice thank you very much.’

In response, suppose then the friends said, ‘Oh no. You see I think Simon has been raised from the dead.’

The others would likely say ‘well that’s extremely odd. What do you mean? There is no sense of that in our scriptures. What are you talking about?’

If then in clarifying (as many theologians have tried to rationalise this over the centuries) the friends then said, ‘Oh no, I don’t mean that he has been bodily raised, leaving an empty tomb behind. I mean that I have had a sense of his presence with me. I have had a sense that the cause for which he fought is still going forward. I have had a sense that God has forgiven us for running away and leaving Simon to his fate.’

Now if the others were feeling kind, they might say,’ I think you have been sitting in the sun for too long!’ Or they might say, ‘Well it seems like you have had some kind of interesting spiritual experience. We Jews, as you know, have a tradition of singing the psalms, reading the prophets, and offering special prayers when we have special kinds of experience. Why don’t you do that? Why are you saying he has been raised from the dead? He clearly hasn’t been. He is still dead and buried. And if he hasn’t been raised then he certainly wasn’t and isn’t the Messiah.’

You see after Jesus of Nazareth had been executed, anybody two days, three days, three weeks or three years after that would never have said he was the Messiah, unless something extraordinary had happened to convince them that God had vindicated him – something grander than simply going to heaven in some glorious exalted state. That is what they believed happened to the martyrs. They die in righteousness, and they go to heaven. They had ways of talking about that. They would almost certainly have said that he would be raised from the dead *in the future*. They would never have said that this had already happened.

Had Jesus followers wanted to carry on with the messianic movement after Jesus’ movement had failed with his own death, they had an option: find another messiah. There are some groups in Judaism who did that in the first century. Each time a would-be Messiah got killed, the movement found another one, perhaps his brother, his cousin, his nephew, or his son.

And this is the clincher for me: The great leader in the early church in Jerusalem was James, the brother of Jesus. He was a great respected figure, a man of prayer, a fine teacher. He was respected not only by the Christians but also by the Jewish authorities, some of whom wrote about him outside of the New Testament. Everybody knew he was the brother of Jesus. Yet this brother claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. You can fool other people, but you generally can’t fool your family. Especially your brother. Especially when earlier stories in the gospels said Jesus’ brothers and sisters thought he was mad (Mark 3.21). Something happened to convince his brother that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about how if the resurrection didn’t happen you believe in vain. He lists all the people Jesus appeared to after he was resurrected: Peter, the Twelve, 500 brothers and sisters. Then in verse 7: he appeared to James, his own brother…. Bet that was quite a reunion. You thought I was mad and just a naughty boy. Actually I am the Messiah!

Nobody dreamed of saying that James was the Messiah. They should have done so, according to the pattern of looking for the next Messiah after the last hope ended in tears and death. That they didn’t suggests they had good reason to believe that Jesus himself really was the Messiah, even though he had been crucified thus going against everything they believed a Messiah should be and do. Arguably, the only reason that they would still believe Jesus was the Messiah was that he had been raised from the dead.

Jesus is not the Messiah you thought he was. But he is still the Messiah, the anointed one, the Saviour.

God is not who you think God is. But God is still God. If we look at the events of this Holy Week, what does it suggest about how God works in the world and how we can therefore pray?

Well - evil has its way. The cross is the focus of evil, sin, and death: the deadly forces at work in our world. There is greed and envy, betrayal and deceit, denial and hatred evident in the main characters in the passion drama.

God, for whatever reason, does not change them or step in and stop them. Jesus is not protected from these dark forces and passions. Yet he remains resolute and courageous in facing them, facing them with love and forgiveness, justice and mercy.

There is intervention by God, namely resurrection. It is more a vindication, a sign or a banner of hope that evil, sin, death will not have the last word. But evil, sin, death still have a word. They are still at large. In the providence of God, they are allowed freedom to wreck lives and communities.

We can despair. We can be broken and defeated. We need encouragement to keep going.

The cross was a triumph. But it does not lead to triumphalism: the disposition that all will be well and there will be no more trouble. The cross is a triumph over the forces of death: a sign to keep us holding on and hoping on.

I do believe that God cheats and tips the scales so that in the prayer of Desmond Tutu:

Goodness is stronger than evil, Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours, Victory is ours
through God who loves us.

How and why God doesn’t do it a bit more often I would like to know. A few more miracles would help - so that more people may believe. The odd smiting say of President Putin might save hundreds even thousands of lives. I will never know. Its not for want of asking.

We pray for ourselves for courage, strength, and the spirit of Jesus to fill us. We pray the same for others. We pray that somehow, mysteriously, God will be at work so that through the evil, sin and death, goodness will be stronger, love will be stronger, light and life will be stronger and God will win the victory.

May the cross of Christ remind you this week that the world is till a nasty place, but that God has not abandoned us, even though it may seem that way at times. May God grant us the endurance and faith to hope the cross leads to the resurrection.



**Prayers of intercession**

*Ideally, these prayers should be used after the distribution of palm crosses so that the cross can be used during the prayers. If you do not use palm crosses, then it would be helpful to have a cross visible during the prayers.*

On this Palm Sunday, as we hold the cross in our hand, we focus on the humility of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came in humility to show us what love is really like. Thank you for the example you have given us. Teach us how to love like you do. We pray for all those we are called upon to love: our families, friends, colleagues and neighbours. We remember especially, any who we have been asked to pray for…

We think particularly of one person that we spend time with. Show us one special thing we can do for them this week.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

We pray for all those in our world who are downtrodden, forgotten, unloved and homeless. We pray for refugees and all those fleeing pain, war or persecution, particularly the people of Ukraine. May they all know you especially close to them this week.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

As we remember that you came in humility, we pray for the world’s leaders and rulers. We ask you to give them humility and wisdom. Give them listening ears and open hearts and a deep desire to put others first.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

Now, we hold our cross in front of us.

Lord Jesus, go ahead of us this week into all that we do. We think now of the places where we know we are going this week. We acknowledge our feelings about each situation and ask you to be there with us. We know there might also be unexpected places or people who will cross our path this week. Make us gracious in every situation we face.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you went willingly to the cross for us. Without your amazing act of love we would not be here today. Thank you for your goodness and self-sacrifice. Give us the courage to tell our friends and neighbours about what you have done for us so that, one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that you are Lord.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

We hold our cross high.

Lord Jesus, risen in glory, thank you for all the joys that we have in our lives. Thank you for sunny days, blossom on the trees, blue skies and birdsong. Thank you for everyone who has made us smile this week. We think now of two amazing things or people that make our lives richer and deeper.

Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name,
**May he bring blessings to his people.**

As we walk with you through the darkness of Good Friday to the triumph of Easter, help us to learn something new about you this week that will spur us on to a deeper relationship with you.

We ask all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Blessed is his name. Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Loving God,
these stones remind us that you are our rock.
**Hosanna in the highest!** (clap three times)
The crosses remind us why you came to Jerusalem.
**Hosanna in the highest!** (clap three times)
The banners remind us to praise your name.
**Hosanna in the highest!** (clap three times)
We will not be silent, the cross will be held high,
and we will praise you and tell your story.
**Hosanna in the highest!** (clap three times)**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

May God grant you
exuberance of the Palm Sunday crowd,
and the humility of Jesus riding a donkey;
the energy and excitement of the crowd,
and the calm holiness of Jesus;
the expectation of the crowd,
and the understanding heart of Jesus
who journeyed to Jerusalem for love of us all. **Amen.**

1. <https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/praying-for-peace-in-ukraine/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ian Barclay, Credo, The Times, Saturday March 26th 2022 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Tom Wright in Craig Evans and tom Wright: Jesus the final days, SPCK, 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)