**Palm Sunday 2023**

**Call to worship**

Let us come before the Lord today,
lifting our hearts in praise.
May we be ready to follow him
with ‘Hosanna!’ on our lips
and love for him in our hearts.

**A gathering prayer**

Heavenly Father, help us to recognise Jesus
as the one who comes in your name,
as the one who blesses and saves us.
As we explore your Word this morning,
may we offer true praise and adoration in our worship,
may we be open to learn more about your ways,
and may we resolve to walk the road with Jesus every day.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Today, we meet to remember
that triumphal journey into Jerusalem.
Churches all around the world
will be gathering to do the same.
**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!**

The whole city was stirred,
and came together to bless God.
We long for our cities, towns and villages
to unite in similar fashion.
**Blessed is he...**

The whole city took part in the celebrations,
improvising as they went,
cutting palms and spreading cloaks.
May we be open to share
what our Lord needs from us,
to celebrate as a gathered community.
**Blessed is he...**

**A prayer of adoration**

King of kings and Lord of lords! There’s nothing like a bit of splendour, a bit of majesty, to lift our spirits. Nothing like coming together with a common purpose of worshipping you. You are enthroned on high. You look down on us as we worship. You love us. We love you. **Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

The crowd honoured Jesus.
For the times we, as a crowd, don’t honour you,
when we don’t even want to be in the crowd:
forgive us, gentle Jesus.
**Forgive us, we beseech you, O Lord.**

For the times we don’t mark Christian festivals
the way we should.
When we don’t recognise you as Son of David,
when we go along with the crowd,
perhaps not even knowing why:
forgive us, gentle Jesus.
**Forgive us, we beseech you, O Lord.**

For the times we aren’t ready to do what you ask,
when we don’t want to share with others,
when we try to go it alone:
forgive us, gentle Jesus.
**Forgive us, we beseech you, O Lord.
Amen.**

 **Assurance of forgiveness**

Gracious God, you always know our hearts,
even if sometimes we feel lost in our wrongdoing,
lost in the crowd, you are always there –
to pick us up and put us back on the right track,
to teach us to improvise even when we feel bogged down,
to bring new life and forgiveness in your wings.
So we can truly rejoice in travelling with you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We praise you, Lord,
that you travelled the road that led to your death,
not with armies but gently, riding on a donkey.
We thank you that, wherever you call us to travel,
into whatever situation, we too can go gently.
Surrounded by your love and your community,
we go out today in your name, singing
**Hosanna in the highest heaven.**

Research shows that young children’s cognitive and motor skills were stronger if they received group care during the pandemic. We grow and flourish as human beings not only through individual attachments to those who care for us at home but also through forming emotional bonds with social groups. We must be thankful that our churches are communities where people of all ages can come together, where children and adults can interact with those other than their own families. Matthew’s story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem continues as he enters the Temple, ‘a house of prayer’ where ‘amazing things’ happen and where children cry out ‘Hosanna’.

A prayer for all ages together

Lord Jesus, (*take up palm crosses*) these palms are our prayers
for those we love, (*wave palm crosses*)
for those we care about, (*wave palm crosses*)
for those in need. (*wave palm crosses*)
We pray also that all we and everyone (*look around at everyone*)
would know the blessing of hope, joy and peace in their lives,
today and every day. **Amen.**

**Matthew 27.32-54**

**Sermon**

My Lent group has been reading the Archbishop of York’s Lent book entitled ‘God forsaken.’ Stephen Cottrell has written the book reflecting on these last words of Jesus from the cross: ‘My God my God why have you forsaken me?’

They are uncomfortable words he says for they challenge our understanding of Jesus and they stir the deepest pot of our darkest anxieties.

He quotes the poet Philip Larkin who famously and also despairingly described religion as that *‘vast moth-eaten musical brocade, created to pretend that we never die*’. When we hear Jesus saying that he is forsaken, even those of us who place our trust in God, but who are still, of course, fearful of death, doubt the comforts and creeds of our faith as we move inexorably towards our own death, what Larkin also calls in the same desolate poem, *the sure extinction that we travel to… nothing more terrible, nothing more true.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

We want a Jesus who is in control. A Jesus who heals the sick and helps the poor. The Jesus of Palm Sunday, popular and successful who the crowds cheer and welcome.

Yet on the cross Jesus utters words of abandonment.

Many people are turned away from the Christian faith because they don’t understand why Jesus had to suffer and die and what relevance it is to them. It seems to make God vindictive and cruel. Or they cannot love a God who calls himself love yet appears to permit such terrible suffering in the world.

And I don’t need to tell you about the suffering in the world, just watch the news. Listen in to the anxious conversations in homes up and down the country, fears for children and their upbringing, worries about jobs and the future, climate change and the environment, addiction to gaming, gambling, pornography, alcohol, drugs.

Where is God we say? On the cross, does Jesus stop believing in God? Does he stop reckoning himself as the Messiah. Does he think that despite his wonderful ministry, healing the sick, helping the poor, challenging injustice, finally he has lost. He has met his match in the Roman Empire, and he is strung up on a cross with no God in sight to help him out?

The cross is real, it is horribly real.

Elie Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, wrote the book Night, describing his imprisonment in the Nazi camp of Birkenau, reception centre for the concentration camp at Auschwitz. In it, Wiesel remembers many prisoners being executed, but none had more impact on him than the hanging of a young boy.

Inmates were divided into camps, and this sad eyed angel had been a servant of one camp leader who was trusted by the Germans. When he was found to have blown up the local power station, the leader was tortured and transferred to another camp. The boy was also tortured but then sentenced to hang alongside two adults. The rest of the inmates were forced to watch the execution, powerless to help.

As the three prisoners stood on the gallows, waiting to be executed, Weasel heard a voice behind him ask ‘where is God? Where is God?’

‘Long live liberty’ the two adults cried out in defiance of the execution. The child said nothing. The signal was given and the three were hanged. The adults died instantly, but the boy was too light, and as a result, it took more than half an hour for him to die. During this time all the inmates were forced to march past and look at the executed men. As he passed the boy, still barely alive, Wiesel heard the same voice behind him ask ‘Where is God now?’

Wiesel heard a voice within him answer ‘Where is He? Here God is. Hanging on the gallows.

At the foot of the cross people mock Jesus. He saved others but he can’t save himself! He trusts in God let God save him! Jesus knows what it is like to receive the insults and the mockery. His cry of dereliction ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ is a deep cry of anguish. Who hasn’t felt let down, abandoned, defeated. Who hasn’t, on receiving bad news, let out the cry ‘Why me God?’

When Jesus called his followers to take up their cross and follow him, he was pointing to the costs of discipleship. It may lead to suffering and sacrifice. Giving yourself for a higher cause than self interest and your own comfort can be costly. Those of you becoming church members today and next week – you ae joining a struggle. You are signing up for a battle. A battle for your soul and the soul of the nations. A righteous, non-violent battlel of love , truth and justice. I cant promise you that it will be easy nor that it will not involve sacrifice. There may be times when you feel abandoned, forsaken. But the Lord promises to be with you. He knows what it is like to go through this.

Will you join the ministry of reconciliation that is the way of Jesus? The way of sacrificial love?

The Good Friday agreement is 25 years old this week.

David Smyth the head of the Evangelical Alliance in Northern Ireland wrote this week of his experience of growing up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and considers the role of the Church in sustaining peace[[2]](#endnote-2)

He wrote: ‘Growing up during the Troubles, I remember my father taking turns on ‘car-park duty’ at church each week. This was to make sure no one stole our cars while we were worshipping – or so I thought. I only found out years later that the real reason was to deter anyone from attaching bombs to the vehicles of the police officers in the congregation. Alongside others, he was helping to create a literal safe space where, for a short time at least, policemen and women could worship without fear.

Thirty years of violence had grated on the people of Northern Ireland’s souls. They needed the violence to stop.

It was with the support of the U.S. government there was an agreement was made between the British and Irish governments as well as the eight Irish political parties. Only one of the eight parties opposed it, yet all signed in the end. It wasn’t that they all agreed or changed their ideologies. They were just done with the violence and wanted to learn to live in peace again. So, they signed the agreement. They agreed to stop the violence, and they did so on Good Friday.

The day picked was intentional. Good Friday is the day when God made peace with humanity. The curtain in the temple is symbolically torn in two in the gospel reading – to represent how there is now no barrier to humanity having access to God, nothing can separate us from God’s love. It is judgement on a corrupt temple system and a uniting between God and humanity.

It could be argued that based on the terms of the Good Friday agreement, almost no one actually got what they wanted, outside of peace. All they really gained was an end to ‘the troubles.’ There would be no more violence. Which means they didn’t get what they wanted, at least not exactly. The same divisions between them were there. Some still wanted to be an Irish republic. Some still wanted to continue to be part of the United Kingdom.

They both had to die to their desires in order to make peace. They had to stop with the tit for tat, and just let the damage stay where it is. They had to decide to absorb the violence that was thrust upon them rather than look for means of retaliation. When you do that, when you forgive, it is always a sort of death.

**THEY HAD TO DIE.**

They had to die to their violence.

They had to choose forgiveness.

They had to choose peace.

There are all sorts of ideas about what Jesus did on the cross. Stories about an angry God who had to punish someone because of all of us sinners. A loving Jesus who took that punishment on himself. There is some truth to this. But we can only see this truth if we trust that Jesus is what God looks like.

Jesus doesn’t save us from God, Jesus reveals God as love, God as Savior.

What we see on the cross is not Jesus taking on the wrath of an angry God, but instead taking on the violence and wrath of humanity. He absorbs our violence and then refuses to retaliate. At the cross we hear the words, “Father forgive…” It is there that we meet the real God.

**JESUS DIES TO BRING PEACE, BY TAKING ON THE WORST WE CAN THROW AT HIM AND FORGIVING IT.**

When we see humanity taking steps towards peace that look more like a cross and less like a sword, I have hope that our ‘troubles’ can come to an end.

Like our Savior we can take up our cross and die rather than retaliate. We can choose peace, love and forgiveness over violence and retaliation.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement was a seminal moment in the short history of Northern Ireland. But peacemaking must become a core part of the everyday discipleship and witness of the Church. No law can force you to forgive or to love your neighbour, let alone reconcile with your enemy. That’s the domain of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for the justice and forgiveness we see displayed on the cross, and the power and new life we see in the resurrection to come afresh in Northern Ireland.

That cry of forsakenness by Jesus on the cross comes from Psalm 22. The psalm describes a person experiencing immense suffering and intense hostility. He feels abandoned by everybody, even God. He fears he is near death. Indeed he feels so near death that the onlookers are beginning to divide up his possessions, like self-obsessed relatives who are working out the will before the person has died.

But if you read on in that psalm the desperate suffering and anguished abandonment of the first half becomes in the second half a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance and vindication. It reminds us that you may be suffering, it may be your Good Friday, but Sunday is coming, a new day, a day of resurrection. Like Jesus, in all our pain and agony - hang on to faith as God hangs on to you.

Tony Campolo tells a well-known story of a preaching convention at his home church where he was asked to preach before his senior pastor also spoke. Campo preached a great sermon which had the congregation hanging on to his every word. As he sat down next to his pastor he simply said ‘Top that!’

The older black pastor looked back at him and said ‘watch and learn’.

It was a simple sermon, Campolo recalls. It started softly but it built slowly in volume and intensity until the entire congregation was completely involved. It went something like this:

‘It’s Friday’ Tony’s pastor whispered. ‘Jesus is arrested in the garden where he is praying. But Sunday’s coming!’

‘It’s Friday’, he began again, raising his voice slightly. ‘The disciples are hiding and Peters denying that he knows the Lord. But Sundays coming.’

‘Its Friday’ he repeated louder again. ‘Jesus is standing before the High Priest of Israel silent as a lamb. But Sunday’s coming!

‘It’s Friday. Jesus is beaten, mocked and spat upon’. At this point, the preacher paused and looked out across the congregation who all responded simultaneously with the cry, ‘But Sunday’s coming’.

That was it, Campolo writes, He had them. Now each clause of this sermon just got louder and louder and the response grew correspondingly in volume and enthusiasm.

‘Its Friday. Those Romans soldiers are flogging our Lord with a leather scourge, tearing his bones and flesh. It’s Friday but Sunday’s Coming’

‘Its Friday. Jesus stands firm as they press a crown of thorns down into his brow. Its Friday but Sunday’s coming’

‘It’s Friday. See him walking to Calvary, the blood dripping from his body. See the cross crashing down on his back as He stumbles beneath the load. It’s Friday but Sunday’s coming’

‘Its Friday. Jesus is hanging on the cross bloody and dying. It’s Friday but Sundays’ coming.

Its Friday and the sky grows dark, the earth begins to tremble and Jesus cries out ‘My God, My God why have you forsaken me? What a horrible cry. It’s Friday but Sundays’ coming’

‘Its Friday and Jesus is dead, and his followers are beaten’.

Silence descended on the church. People looked at the pastor. They looked at Campolo. They looked at each other and then , as with one voice they shouted ‘It Friday but Sundays’ coming’

And that’s the point. Without the resurrection, the physical raising of Jesus from the dead, the cross is a bitter blow, not just for the original followers of Jesus, the people of Israel, but for all humanity and for creation itself. Its message is that violence wins, might is right, the weak will always be oppressed, downtrodden and abused by the powerful. Power, privilege, position, money, and the gun may rule. But the truth is, Sundays’ coming! The events of that first easter turn the table. Love is stronger than death. The God of love takes on the power of darkness and evil on their own terms and wins. There is hope.

If you are in Christ you are on the winning side. It may not feel like it at times, but the spiritual reality is there.

Jesus was born into a messy world. The cross is often portrayed as a bridge over the chasm that separates heaven and earth. It is our means of escape. But the reality is that it stands at the centre of our broken world – thrust into the dirt to proclaim that God is here.

**Prayers of intercession**

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today.**

Lord Jesus, we come to you today to celebrate that you are the King. Help us imagine you riding in front of us as we celebrate together who you are.

We thank you for all the aspects of your glory that we see in the world around us right now: spring flowers; new buds on bushes and trees; lighter evenings; birds building nests; baby animals being born on farms; birds singing their joy from the treetops. We pause for a moment to add anything we have seen this week that reminded us of new life in you.

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today.**

Lord Jesus, we know that you are the King, reigning in heaven as you promised you would. But when you look at our world, you must feel so sad. We bring before you the parts of the world that are hurting, oppressed and afraid. We pray for:
The people of Mississippi who have lost homes and loved ones in the tornado.
The people of Turkey and Syria still suffering after the earthquake.
The girls of Afghanistan denied an education.
The people of Ukraine, ravaged by war.
The people of Yemen and other nations who are facing starvation.
*Any other world issues….*

Lord, we know that you have promised to make all things new. We pray that you will bring healing to the nations.

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today.**

Lord, we celebrate the fact that you have placed us in communities.
Communities of nations.
Communities of cities, towns and villages,
Work and school communities.
Family units.

We lift our nation to you. We pray for King Charles as he prepares for his coronation next month. We pray for our leaders, both locally and nationally with all the decisions they need to make.

We pray for those who have had to leave their countries because of war, famine or persecution. As they seek safety in other lands, we pray for them.

We think of our local community: the places of work and leisure; we pray for the shops and schools; surgeries and health centres. We think of our favourite places and celebrate them now.

We thank you for our friends and colleagues at school and work. We pray for any who need special help and love from you today….

And, Lord, we thank you for our families. Help us to celebrate each member of our household, even when we might find them annoying or difficult. Help us to be peacemakers as you were. Help us to be people of love, putting others first in humility as you did.

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today.**

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this church community. We pray for our leaders; for those who clean and make the coffee; those who decorate our church with flowers or music; for the older folk; the children and those in between. We pause for a moment to lift to you those sitting near us today, whether we know their names or not. We thank you that we have this church family to be a part of. Guide us as we welcome those around us who are different from us but loved by you just the same. Help us to be people of humility, wanting what is best for others and not for ourselves. May this church be known in the community as a place where love, acceptance and joy are found.

We pray for any in this community who are sick or hurting or sad right now…. Help us to support them with our love.

And we rejoice with those who are joyful due to good news or a birth or for whatever reason…

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today.**

Lord Jesus, as we go forward into this most important of weeks… as we follow you through holy week, your betrayal, crucifixion and death help us to celebrate what you did for us. We will never truly know the depths of love you went to for us. But we thank you with all our hearts. As we look forward to celebrating the most wonderful thing ever - your resurrection - help us to see signs of resurrection and regeneration everywhere we go this week and in whatever we do.

Hosanna, hosanna: **we celebrate your majesty today. Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Go with us, good Lord, on our journey to the cross and beyond.
Help us to pass on our enthusiasm to others.
Keep us faithful to Jesus, our saviour and friend.
Stir up our praise as we look forward to Easter Day.
**Amen.**

1. Stephen Cottrell, Godforsaken, Hodder, 2023 p66 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.premierchristianity.com/features/25-years-on-from-the-good-friday-agreement-the-church-still-has-a-vital-role-to-play/15196.article [↑](#endnote-ref-2)