

## **Palm Sunday | Passion Sunday | Reflection on Holy Week**

### **Palm Sunday | Passion Sunday – 24 March 2018**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Roddy Hamilton, Minister of New Kilpatrick Parish Church, for his thoughts on Palm / Passion Sunday and his reflection on the journey through Holy Week.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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## **Mark 11:1-11**

Surely there is a story behind this story of Jesus arriving Jerusalem? There is the whole intrigue of secret passwords, as if there is a network of Jesus followers. Clearly, if this is so, Jesus movement was seen to be quite at odds with the Romans. We may see this as obvious but we don't often tell the story as if there was danger to those who lifted their heads above the crowd.

Though this is what Jesus does, because the other story behind the story is the alternative parade into Jerusalem that day of Pilate arriving for Passover, Pilate who rarely came to Jerusalem because it was too hot. That would have been the bigger parade, with standard bearers and a crowd shouting because they were compelled to do so rather than because they wished to do so.

Contrast that with Jesus' much smaller parade, but that was clearly seen as a counter-kingdom parade to the Romans'. Jesus' entry doesn't seem to be supported necessarily by the residents of Jerusalem. Jesus' support consisted of outsiders, people not resident in Jerusalem and they hail Him from outside the city. Only after the mock parade and the hosannas does Jesus enter the city and go to the temple. Only there He simply looked around and turned on his heels.

The big thing about the triumphal entry is that it isn't. Nothing happened. It's one of the great anti-climaxes in the gospel. We have all the street theatre, and the mocking of the Roman governor, but in the end, Jesus just turns round and goes back to Bethany. People's expectations are unmet. They are crying for some kind of revolution in the shape of the historical past but it doesn't materialise. Perhaps this disappointment in Jesus is the beginning of the turning of the crowd.

## **Isaiah 50:4-9**

In contrast to the happy hosannas and the cheerful parade that normally accompanies Palm Sunday, Isaiah offers an entry into Holy Week in a far more stark way. This is the story behind the populism of Palm Sunday. Here are the words we perhaps need to hear to shape Holy Week.

This is Isaiah's third 'servant song'. The servant songs were written at the end of the Babylonian exile and over time, especially in the Christian era, the songs have been given many diverging interpretations. But what is clear is that the servant is Israel charged with keeping true to Yahweh. The way Israel is to do this, given the history of exile and

oppression and invasion, is not to respond to the conflict with conflict. Quite the opposite. 'Do not cry or lift up your voice' says God. Your attempts at power have all failed and to return power with power will fail once more. Instead listen to God, listen and learn. Do not turn away from learning about God: this will sustain you. Keep the faith alive, speak of it, teach it, even when people attack you for it.

It is easy to see why the early Christian applied this to Jesus: it seems to mirror his life. Both Israel's and Jesus' lives were in parallel: our journey through Holy Week is similar to Israel's journey through exile.

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

There is a lot written about the nuances of the words of this hymn, a hymn that was possibly written before Paul included it in this letter. We could, and many have, used a lot of paper defining and redefining what these words mean. But that turns it into an academic exercise and worship is hardly the place to dance of such pinheads.

This hymn is a great long word about Jesus as Christ. It hardly breaks for breath and takes us through the vast journey from incarnation to death and how Jesus now reigns throughout the universe.

It begins with Christ becoming human and emptied all the 'god-stuff' (that universal reign) and became a slave in human terms, bound in skin. When that happened, when Jesus became human, the sacrifice was great: God to human. How small it must have felt to be limited in skin, but that's the point. That is the first sacrifice. The second sacrifice is giving up even that, in love, for others.

Such giving of self is what we are called to model. Slaves to the limits of our humanity which ends in death which as we all know is a fixed moment for us. There is a point when we die.

Except for Jesus this is not fixed, or so we believe. The hymn at this point moves onto exaltation of Jesus and so every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. In effect the whole of creation praises Jesus.

It might be worth reading further to the next few lines that say, "For it is God who is at work in you," because this great hymn, and all the exaltation it speaks of, and the wonder of self-emptying that leads to resurrection, this God who does all that, is at work in you. That's the

bit, surely, to hang on to. All that praise to a God who is involved in all of that redemption is in you. Preach it right in the heart of the passion!

### **Mark 14:1-15, 47**

Most of our truth is contained in story. Only in the west do we imagine truth is about facts. Many more cultures see truth in story. Given that this week of all weeks is the week of the greatest story in our faith, then perhaps that is what to do: tell the story.

In many ways to theologise about it is easier than to hear the bare story without explanation. We can play with words and their many nuances of meaning but that hardly welcomes the kingdom of God. We are welcomed into the kingdom by our witness to the story of Jesus and what happened over those days.

So as bible background, very little is offered here because it cannot do justice to what went on. To imagine that we can understand it and do so by hiding behind the particular prejudices of those who always try and explain from a particular point of view, is to lose the truth of the story.

Simply, and daringly, strip it all back and offer the gospel unplugged in its stark reality as Mark tells it, rather than how we might tell it.

### **Sermon ideas**

1. Perhaps it is a day not to offer a sermon but a journey through the week and the reflections and prayers below might help in shaping such a journey, offering people the drama and the questions that arise from the Passion. Using different voices from different places in the worship space might bring more drama and a sense that the story moves from place to place.
2. Palm Sunday is a great anti-climax because Jesus simply looks round the temple and leaves again, as if getting His bearings, but the donkey ride comes to nothing. What must that have been like for those who saw Jesus as the great deliverer? If it was you, might you find yourself slipping away from Jesus, being a little more cynical? It is like election time: a promise and no delivery. Is this what motivates Judas – because something does? Something shifts in him from putting his whole hope in Jesus. Now if I could just force Jesus' hand... How might that be true for us in our efforts to steer God towards our own longings and hopes?

## Time with children

Print out expression words such as:

Troubled, Amazed, Overjoyed, Confused, Angry, Sad, Afraid

and ask some volunteers to pull a face that shows that expression. All these expressions help tell the story of Holy Week. Where might we find each of these in the story?

Jesus facing Jerusalem: Troubled

Triumphal Entry: Overjoyed

Jesus predicting what was about to happen: Confused

Judas: Angry

Last Supper: Confused

In the garden: Afraid

Crucified: Sad

We've missed one out: Amazed. Perhaps we need to come back next week to see that emotion being used.

You could also talk about how emotions change so quickly throughout the story. But even in the darkest parts of the story when people are hurt and sad, such feelings can change and be transformed.

## Prayers

### Telling the Story

Given the day it is, the prayers that are offered are not necessarily the practised pattern of our 'traditional' worship, but prayers of reflection that cover many of the main parts of the story. This is deliberate, as this day recognises that what Jesus did does not fit a pattern but disrupted all our normal routines and all we thought familiar and inevitable.

### Palm Sunday Gathering

Donkeys at dawn  
Messiahs on a mission  
palm branches propelled  
crowds crying  
people parading  
Jerusalem jousting  
disciples departing  
gateway giving way  
hosannas being hurled  
a salvo of shouts  
and a king on a colt  
starts the slippery slope  
that ends the enterprise  
of hosanna headlines  
with a cross and crucifixion  
when the words weary  
and silence descends  
and there is nothing left to say

Welcome to the beginning of the end  
or the end of the beginning...

## **Prayer at the Triumphal Entry**

Lord Jesus

this is not Your fight

this is not the moment for quiet revolution

Love will kill You

if You hang on to it

How often we have felt like that, O Jesus,

when love is too great a sacrifice

and the world borrows laughter

and uses mockery to weaken

and conflict to destroy

what seems weak

and what seems to oppose what it wants

Lord Jesus

It is a long way to heaven from here

from this choice You make

this decision to go on from here

We want the certainty of power

we need the security of defence

we trust in the banding of nations

the axis of right

the arc of morality on our side

This is our world You protest against, O Jesus

this world we have defined to keep us safe

and You ride through it on a donkey

This is hard, Jesus

This is a difficult thing for us

How much more difficult for you

Lord Jesus

in the breaths between each decision You make

may we dare trust You

May we find enough faith  
to trust this choice to love  
to let nothing stop You loving  
to put no conditions on such love  
but love right through to the end

Lord Jesus

May we say yes  
to such love  
and choose the kingdom  
in Your name

So be it  
Amen

### **Palm Sunday Reflective Prayer**

Lord Jesus  
may we stop  
and give You the time  
You need  
to make this choice  
to turn every word about love You have ever uttered  
into commitment and example  
for here the words run out  
and all that counts  
is trust in a way  
that gives of itself  
and whose way is broken  
and consequence is death  
and the choice cannot be done easily  
this must milk the soul  
of everything it believes

So may we stop  
and give us the time  
to know  
this day of palms and processions  
is the day the kingdom changed



and all talk was finished  
and the word  
became flesh again  
not ready to be born  
but ready to die

So may we stop  
and give heaven time  
to gather what light is left  
and care for You  
in this moment of decision  
to trust love  
fully

So let the palms fly  
the high hosannas be sung  
Hear them, O Lord Jesus  
it is what we know to be true  
in Your moment of decision

May You choose  
the way of love

## **A reflection for the journey through Holy Week**

Here the shadow-line curves towards the cross  
and the dust  
shapes our footprints  
which hold the stories  
of all those who travel this way  
daring to follow  
beyond the questions  
and towards a truth  
that is restless with the way things are  
where death seals tombs  
and bandages wrap dead

Dare we believe  
this is not how it might be

there is more to wonder at  
than Lazarus breaking free  
and a Saviour weeping

Dare we believe  
there is more to Judas  
than forcing the hand of heaven  
and paying his way to hell

Is there more to it than this?

and in such a place  
the answer comes:  
Yes!

and after such a yes  
what miracle shall we yet meet?

### **A dramatic reflection for the betrayal of Jesus**

Have thirty coins and either as a group or as an individual, throw the coins, one at a time, at the beginning of each line.

1 for the kingdom  
2 for the saviour  
3 for the messiah  
4 for the revolution  
5 for the women  
6 for the disciples  
7 for the poor  
8 for the hungry  
9 for the leper  
10 for the forgotten  
11 for the marginalised  
12 for the oppressed  
13 for the uprising  
14 for the revolt  
15 for the rebellion  
16 for the exploited  
17 for the destitute

18 for the mistreated  
19 for the overburdened  
20 for the Good Shepherd  
21 for the Lamb of God  
22 for the Prince of Peace  
23 for the redeemer  
24 for the son of man  
25 for the King of Kings  
26 for the dominion of God  
27 for the kingdom of love  
28 for the time to force God's hand  
29 for the start of the new era  
30 for the betrayer.

### **Prayer at the table of the Last Supper**

Lord Jesus  
as the light thins  
and the world conspires  
may we tell Your story

When hope seems gone  
and the future broken  
may we tell Your story

When the hungry need fed  
and injustice is rife  
may we tell Your story

For this night  
it seems it is all we can do

Yet may we retell it  
not just in this place  
but every place we find ourselves  
for this story  
is the hope of the world  
this bread the means of a new world  
this wine the promise for all  
this table a meeting place

for terrorist and terrorised  
for war monger and peace maker

May this story  
be the one we tell  
that plants hope  
and sows longing  
into the fabric of the world

So we come as we are, O Lord Jesus  
with all the worry we have  
the ability to change sides so easily  
the fear of the future  
and the hurt of the past  
what is broken in us  
and what is a burden

We come as we are  
and all that we have done  
and may we trust this symbol of this table  
and the story it tells  
renew us  
refocus our vision  
dare us to believe  
call us anew  
and name us  
Your body  
in the world

Lord Jesus  
as the light thins  
and the night thickens  
may we be here  
because there is no other place  
to be  
and remember You

So be it  
Amen

### **In the garden**

Now in the garden  
all the light has been stripped away  
yet still there is Jesus  
light still shining through the tears  
and shaped in prayer

Everything else is in shadow  
the words are used up  
the birds have gone  
the gnarled olive branches  
twist around the soldiers  
lurking among them  
the betrayer  
now staring at the ground  
trying not to be recognised

but you can recognise his shoulders  
hunched against the darkness

And Jesus  
holds this last moment  
before heaven is bound  
and crushed  
and crucified  
Judas raises his eyes  
and finds Jesus looking into him  
and is flooded by the deeper  
longer look of love

Judas' spirit snarls  
for he recognises still  
that unconditional look

and before the pain becomes too great  
and before the moment is lost  
and before heaven can choose to back away  
he ends it all  
with the greatest irony in history

he moves on Jesus  
and finishes him – with a kiss.

### **Reflection when Jesus is before the council**

I knew a different man  
from the one we follow today  
on the way to the cross  
along the alleys of shadows

I knew Him  
when He was crammed with life  
when laughter erupted from Him  
and stories were filled with colour  
and He was ever ready for an argument

I knew Him  
when He had time  
to touch the untouchables  
and speak the unspeakable  
and love the unlovable

I knew Him  
when the words seemed hopeful  
when the future seemed possible  
when the moment seemed prophetic

but now  
the rumour is tarnished  
the saviour is broken  
and the promise spent  
silenced by a world  
caught in a snarl of darkness

yet I cannot help believe  
if this is the same man  
He will not leave it here  
this is not where it will end  
so come  
let us follow on.

### **The death of Jesus**

And now silence falls  
on the last work of the world  
even the word of God  
has run out of words

When such a silence falls  
there is nothing left to say  
all that is holy is soured by fear  
and love is put to death

What more can heaven do  
The chaos before creation  
has returned  
the darkness before God spoke  
has taken hold again  
the face of the deep  
is dark and long  
the stars have gone out  
and everything is void

The cross is being raised  
and the son of man is bound  
and all heaven can do is wait  
and repeat those first words again  
spoken over the chaos  
on that very first day  
and believe they hold a promise  
of a second Adam  
a new creation  
and from the returning chaos  
a new day might dawn.

### **Statement of Faith for Holy Week**

a: some shout hosanna  
b: some shout crucify  
a: some shout Jesus  
b: some shout Barabbas

a: some wave palms  
b: some shake their fists  
all: today we choose...

a: some break bread  
b: some break silence  
a: some proclaim Jesus  
b: some deny Jesus  
a: some carry the cross  
b: some run from the cross  
all: today we choose...

a: some are angry  
b: some rejoice  
a: some anoint with costly perfume  
b: some complain at the waste  
a: some like the light  
b: some prefer the shadows  
all: today we choose...

a: some weep  
b: some conspire  
a: some follow  
b: some hide  
a: some believe  
b: some betray  
all: today we choose

a: to shout for life  
b: to follow the cross  
a: to break bread  
b: to hold belief  
a: to trust love  
b: and tell the world  
all: we choose to follow Jesus



## Epilogue

I wish for you  
a cross that is not padded  
but one that breaks  
the easy hopes we are given  
and finds new reason to believe

I wish for you  
a crown that is not comfortable  
but one that challenges  
the biased powers of the world  
and begins a new kind of kingdom

I wish for you  
a robe that is not purple  
but one that is torn and dirty  
from sheltering the poor  
and shape a new way to live together

I wish for you  
bread that is not whole  
but is broken and divided  
enough to feed the hungry  
and offer a new justice to all

I wish for you  
wine that is not sweet  
but one that is sharp  
and reminds us of the sacrifice  
that newly opens the gate of heaven

I wish for you  
a garden before sunrise  
that you may be first to see  
footprints of the gardener  
and exclaim anew: 'My Lord, it is You!'

## Musical suggestions

- CH4 14 – “The Lord’s My Shepherd” – given it is so often used at funerals, perhaps this week it is all the more appropriate
- CH4 83 – “I rejoiced when I heard them say” – entering Jerusalem through the Psalms
- CH4 67 – “Let all the people’s praise you O Lord” - In response to Palm Sunday yet also as a lament in response to other parts of the story
- CH4 367 – “Hosanna loud hosanna” – retelling the Palm Sunday story
- CH4 461 – “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds” – a challenge to sing in response to Jesus being betrayed
- CH4 577 – “Christ be beside me” – a reflective hymn gathering at the table
- CH4 572 – “So much wrong and so much injustice” – from a different culture that speaks into today
- CH4 730 – “From the Falter of Breath” – sung towards the end of the story of Holy Week