



From **PASSION**
and **PROMISES**
to **PRESENCE**



Reflections for Holy Week

From Passion and Promises to Presence

Holy Week is a time not just for observation but also an opportunity for transformation as we enter into those days of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. The gospels give far more detail about the events surrounding Jesus' death than about his birth and so there is opportunity to track those closely in the coming week. However, if at its end we have merely recalled what we already knew then we have missed opportunity for challenge and change for ourselves, our families and communities.

Let faith and feelings be stirred as we read again the familiar scriptures. Tracing the promises and passion of Jesus may we encounter His risen Presence afresh during and beyond this Holy Week.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
give us grace to grow in holiness,
to deny ourselves,
to take up our cross
and follow you.*

AMEN

(N.B. It is the practice in some Christian traditions to read the whole narrative of Matthew, Mark and Luke on each of the three days, Monday to Wednesday, at the beginning of the week. These are indicated in addition to a set portion for those who wish to draw on fuller scripture.)

Rev Lily Twist

Palm Sunday: St John 12:12-26

'Thanks be to God who, in Christ, always leads us in triumph and through us to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere.' (2 Corinthians 2 v 14)

The scene of Jesus' 'triumphal' entry into Jerusalem brings to my mind Liverpool F.C.'s homecoming after winning a championship trophy. (When we see an end to the Coronavirus, we may see this again.) The team would enter the city on an open topped bus and even families such as ours having little interest in football would turn out to line the route. There was joy and excitement for everyone in celebrating their victory and inspiring hope for more victories to follow.

Far be it from anyone to trivialise the importance of the game (described by some as 22 pairs of legs chasing a bag of air!) but these people were looking for far more than a match victory. No red and white scarves or flags but palm branches being waved; no passionate shouts of 'Hoorah!', 'Well done!' but of 'Hosanna!', 'Save us now!'. This was no mere carnival but a political outcry for a new king to lift the burden of Roman rule and taxation. As a boy in the Temple, Jesus had announced fulfilment of the promise made in Isaiah's day of the Messiah coming to relieve oppression. As a man Jesus was now enacting Zechariah's foretelling that he would come humble and riding on a donkey. Later he would answer to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world for His salvation was not in political triumph but in winning hearts and minds by love.

The remembrance of God's promise of deliverance fulfilled in freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt was foremost at Passover. His ultimate plan of deliverance was about to unfold in Jesus, so named because He would save the people from their sins.

Reflect on where God's salvation can be seen or is needed today.

Pray for renewed passion, anticipation and confidence of faith in God's saving acts for us and all the world.

Monday: Mark 14:1-10

(Complete: Ch 14, 15, 16)

'... present your bodies as a living, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12 v 1)

Yesterday's passage ended with Jesus hinting at his death as he does also in today's reading. As an unnamed woman abandons her public image, letting down her hair and crying copiously then pours expensive perfumed oil over Jesus' head, he said she was anointing his body for burial. It might have been reserved for her marriage but instead she lavished it upon him. Jesus' host Simon, a respectable man, had not paid him the common courtesies of hospitality in giving water to wash his feet. In contrast this woman acts not out of duty but from heartfelt devotion as she washed them with her tears. Her passion sprang from deep gratitude.

Throughout the ages God's people have often lost the heart of worship and wrongly emphasised the outward form of ritual and sacrifice. Sincerity of worship is always a challenge for individuals and the church. The first Sunday 'service' for atheists held in a redundant church building recently gives food for thought as to how that differs from a Christian 'service of divine worship'. There are questions also regarding the different aspects which enrich worship in the various traditions. Music is an important element for me 'tho a piece of piano music by G.F.Handel which I learned in childhood reminds me also of the need for 'Silent Worship'.

Judas responds with indignation that this was an extravagant waste which could have better benefitted the poor. Although Jesus' reply seems dismissive of such charity, it is placed in the context of his teaching that 'in as much as you do it unto the least of these ... you do it unto me'. Holy Week is for deepening personal holiness expressed in inner devotion and outer actions of generosity and kindness.

Reflect on your whole-life, personal and public worship of God.

Pray for opportunity to express your worship of God in action for others today.

Tuesday: St Luke 22v39-45 (Complete: Ch 22 -24:12)

'.....we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.' (Romans 8 v 26)

Jesus had delegated the practical arrangements for the Passover celebration to his disciples but afterwards he had to make his own preparations of another kind. In an atmosphere of foreboding he withdrew to Gethsemane where he prayed earnestly for direction and strength. Just as he had withdrawn to the wilderness to prepare for his ministry so he was now alone with God preparing for what lay ahead.

The Khouds of North India pray 'Lord we don't know what is good for us. You know what it is. For that we pray.'. This accords with Jesus' 'Not my will but yours be done'. And it was. Prayer is not a summoning of our own resources but a turning towards God and drawing on His, aware of His mighty power and marvellous love which give promise of help. Living through prayer prepares us for anything.

There is an African proverb which says 'When you pray move your feet'. Jesus moved his feet to take up his cross and walk to Calvary but it didn't just happen. Through His intimate prayer relationship with God His Father He was strengthened for any circumstance. On the principle *'Tell me and I shall forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand.'* Jesus taught His disciples to pray so that they would be too.

A 10-year old boy held hostage with classmates in a Russian school was interviewed on radio through an interpreter. When asked what he did as the captors strapped explosives to him he replied immediately that he had prayed to God. How good that he was prepared in the practise of prayer.

Reflect on how you have been directed and strengthened through prayer.

Pray for others facing challenging circumstances.

Wednesday: Matthew 26:20-35

(Matthew 26 – 28:15)

Then Peter came up and said to Jesus "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18 v 22)

It is hard to be let down by an acquaintance but much harder to be deserted by a friend. Even 'tho he pledged absolute obedience, refuting Jesus prediction of his disloyalty, Peter failed to stay true to his word. Yet Jesus called him, and the other disciples who all deserted him, his friends and pledged the ultimate act of love to lay down his life for them.

Today is known as 'Spy Wednesday' in Ireland in remembrance of Judas' betrayal. His was a deliberate act of conspiracy with the Jewish authorities which he came to deeply regret and which led him to commit suicide. Peter's denial was one of weakness, fear and self-protection but he had opportunity to rise from his remorse through the forgiveness of Christ. Ironically it was Peter who, in Luke, asked Jesus how many times he ought to forgive, little knowing how great his own need for mercy would soon be.

Not being able to trust or depend on friends can provoke us to harden our hearts or seek retribution but not so with Jesus. To the soldiers who beat and crucified, the crowd who railed for his death, the disciples who deserted him He showed forgiveness and gave opportunity for transformation of their lives. The profound effect of mercy is shown in 'Les Miserables' as a convict's life is transformed by a simple act of generosity. (The latest film version is well worth watching!)

A Chinese proverb states 'He who seeks revenge must dig two graves'. I knew one gentleman who discovered that his two younger children belonged to another man then, in his understandable anger, spent the following years pursuing numerous legal actions. His passion for revenge sadly destroyed his business, his friendships, his life. As in any experience we can choose to become bitter or better.

Reflect on your friendship with Christ and with the people in your life.

Pray for those living with bitterness or guilt that they might find release.

Thursday: John 13:1-17, 34, 35

"If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1 v 9)

Three gospel writers describe the sharing of bread and wine at the Last Supper. Instead, John recounts how, in the absence of other volunteers, Jesus took off His robe, picked up a bowl and towel then proceeded to wash His disciples' feet. The symbolism of both acts conveys the cleansing from sin in the shedding of blood and washing with water as signified in the two sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism. Today is often referred to as 'Clean Thursday'.

Like most children I liked to go to the beach. On leaving, I would be sat upon a wall whilst Mum or Dad poured water to get rid of the discomfort of the clinging sand. With feet washed I felt clean all over and ready to walk.

Just as Peter had to let Jesus wash his feet so we have to allow God's Holy Spirit to be poured into our lives to make us clean within and ready to walk in the way of holiness. We cannot do it for ourselves no matter how hard we try but God delights to cleanse us as we confess our need of His grace. Jesus spoke of the

At the Mansfield Traquair Centre in Edinburgh's former Catholic Apostolic Church are magnificent murals painted by Scotland's leading Arts and Crafts artist, Phoebe Anna Traquair, in the 1890's. One depicting the foot-washing shows Jesus kneeling at the feet of Peter whose head is turned away in abhorrence as he is unable to look upon his Lord performing such menial service. Shortly, Jesus would stoop even lower in suffering degradation and humiliation by soldiers' mocking and spitting then finally hanging, nailed to a cross. There was no depth to which he would not go.

With the cleansing came the new commandment (*'mandatum novum'* hence *'Maundy Thursday'*) that they should love one another as He loved in service and sacrifice.

Reflect on your own baptism and receive God's inner cleansing afresh.

Pray for those who are trying to make a clean break.

Good Friday: John 19:1-30

'In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which he lavished upon us' (Ephesians 1 v 7)

Life was cheap to the Romans who could save or end it by the gesticulation of a thumb. Death by tortuous crucifixion was commonplace. It is also today with recent news of South African police accused of a young man's death after being dragged through the streets tied to the back of their car because he had committed a parking offence. Such instances instil anger, pity and a quest for compassion and justice as does the crucified Christ.

There has been much research and experimentation to understand better the horrific details of such an act, enabling us to enter a little into the emotions and pains of this experience as many try to do on this day. When Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162, was murdered in the cathedral in 1170 by followers of King Henry II, it was found that he was wearing a hair shirt which was teeming with lice. This was a vivid way of remembering and encountering the sufferings of Christ as is self-flagellation, barefoot pilgrimage or crawling to a cross on one's knees.

Perhaps during Lent you have made your own attempt to align yourself with Christ's suffering and self-denial through acts of penance. In its true form, penance is a means of deepening our devotion not of self-punishment or a pay-back to God. As Lent began, the priest would give absolution for confessed sins then *shrive* (write down) forms of penance to be carried out for the next forty days. Forgiveness had already been received *absolutely* and what followed was a focussed response to that.

There are many explanations of the significance and theology of the cross but all are inadequate. At its simplest and yet most powerful it is God in real flesh and blood entering into the suffering for love of the world.

Reflect on what the crucifixion of Christ means to you & for the world.

Pray for Christians in Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria suffering for their faith.



Michelangelo's 'Pietà', St Peter's Basilica, The Vatican

Easter Saturday: John 19:31-42

Jesus said 'Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted' (Matthew 5 v 4)

The magnificent craftsmanship of Michaelangelo's sculpture 'the Pieta' captures the poignancy of Mary holding the lifeless body of her dear son draped across her knees as she sits gazing down in sadness, love and longing. It is evocative of the depth of a mother's grief.

How often we say 'I know just how you feel' but we really don't because every death is different and so is every grief. Yet we can expect that on the day after Jesus' crucifixion there would have been sadness, shock, disbelief, denial, inability to think or act, disappointment, anger and perhaps guilt in wondering if they could have done something to prevent His death. Now nothing could be done, promises of bringing in the Kingdom were unfulfilled and hope for the future was gone with no happy ending in sight.

In the darkness of the day there was a need for sympathy and empathy but also for comfort of the sort which gives strength and hope to carry on. Grief must not be dismissed but has to be worked through 'tho ultimately not allowed to stop life altogether. The same is true of guilt. Homer Simpson unexpectedly gives some good advice in respect to this: 'Don't keep blaming yourself. Just blame yourself once then move on'. Grief, depression and guilt can put a brake on life which needs to be released.

One scene from the Bayeux Tapestry (probably made around 1070 in England not Bayeux and not a tapestry but an embroidered cloth!) depicts Bishop Odo, comforting King William's troops. He does this not by putting his arm around them but raising a cudgel to goad them into action! It is a true depiction of the word 'comfort' or '*com forte*' meaning '*with strength*'.

Those mourning the death of a loved one or loss of employment, health, or estrangement of a friend or family member need such comfort.

Reflect on your experiences of loss and how you found comfort.

Pray for those in times of loss that they will find hope and strength.



*Bishop Odo comforts the King's soldiers
(Bayeux Tapestry)*

Easter Day: John 20:1-23

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit' (John 12 v 24)

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem which commemorates the hill of crucifixion and the tomb of Christ's burial was originally built by the mother of Emperor Constantine in 330 A.D. Some years ago on Easter Day I stood inside the church which was packed tightly with people speaking in many languages. From the loud babbling I heard the clear English voice of a tour guide saying: "Yesterday we saw the garden tomb where Christ is said to have been buried. Today we see another burial site. But he is not there or here. He is risen!"

Latest scientific techniques have confirmed that the heart of King Richard I (The Lionheart) of England, kept at Rouen Cathedral after his death from a war wound in 1199 in central France, was embalmed with daisy, myrtle, mint and frankincense to keep him sweet-smelling as a saint in hope of his speedy ascent from purgatory to heaven. DNA testing of a skeleton found beneath a Leicester car park recently has identified it as that of King Richard III who was killed in battle in 1485. No such discoveries will ever be made of any bones or organs of Jesus!

Familiarity can dull our senses so we are no longer thrilled and amazed at Christ's resurrection proved by His appearance to the frightened disciples and manifest in their transformation from the despair of disbelief to the ecstasy of enlightenment. He was not merely a great prophet, a moral teacher, a good man, a role model but the Son of God in whom all can find acceptance with God and fulfilment of the promise of everlasting life. Jesus promised that His Presence would be with them always and He has been ever since, asserting God's victory of good over evil and life over death. His triumph far outweighed the palm-waving Jerusalem crowds' imagination!!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Reflect on your Lent experiences and what difference they make.

Pray to see Christ's risen life's power in you, the church & your community.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem



The Garden Tomb, Jerusalem