

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Fifth Sunday in Lent – 7 April 2019

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank the Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison, Minister of Orwell and Portmoak, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

Introduction.....	2
Isaiah 43:16-21.....	2
Psalm 126	4
Philippians 3:4b-14.....	5
John 12:1-8	6
Sermon ideas	7
Time with children	8
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	11

Introduction

In the liturgical calendar of some Christian churches, this fifth Sunday of Lent is known as Passion Sunday. As such, it is celebrated as marking the beginning of the two-week period known as Passiontide, culminating in the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

In preparing the following notes, I have found it helpful to keep in mind the Collect for Passion Sunday traditionally employed in the Methodist communion:

O God, who by the passion of thy blessed Son hast made the instrument of shameful death to be unto us the means of life and peace: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ that we may gladly suffer shame and loss; for the sake of the same thy Son our Lord. Amen.

The whole period of Lent and Holy Week is intended to advance our formation as disciples of Jesus. It is a time of challenge and encouragement to follow more faithfully Jesus' way, in light of, and response to, His saving achievements on our behalf. Today that challenge and encouragement are intensified as our focus moves to the events leading to Jesus' 'triumphant' entry into Jerusalem, culminating by the end of that week in His crucifixion and burial.

Today's rich lectionary readings help us to think through what these imminent, dark events were all about and their implications for our discipleship to Jesus as King and Saviour.

[Isaiah 43:16-21](#)

This passage finds its place in the sustained and theologically rich poem we know as Isaiah 40-55. Its message – a proclamation of deliverance – was addressed to Jews who had been captives in Babylon since 587 BCE, the year in which Jerusalem and its temple fell and the exile began. These chapters assume a situation in which the captives were about to be given their freedom and permitted to return to the homeland. For this purpose, God had already appointed Cyrus of Persia to defeat the Babylonians and liberate the exiles (see Isaiah 44:24-45:7).

A central, over-arching theme of these chapters is that of the saving king of God's people, who is coming to demonstrate God's authority and power on their behalf. It is a thrilling announcement of salvation and in that context contains valuable material for the preacher.

'Thus says the Lord,' in verse 14 introduces a 'salvation oracle,' which continues to 44:6. Its main thrust is that God will rescue Israel from its Babylonian exile in a new exodus. In this

way they will rediscover their identity as the people of God and again fulfil their true vocation from which, with disastrous consequences, they had turned away – namely, to declare God’s praise among the nations (v.21).

The promise of salvation is earthed in, and guaranteed by, God’s character, as disclosed in the divine names given in verses 14 and 15. They highlight the true relationship between God’s people and God, in particular as ‘the Creator of Israel’ (v.15), who initiated their distinctive life in the first place; ‘your King’ (v.15), who therefore has sole legitimate authority to rule their life, and all life; and ‘your Redeemer’ (v.14), who had already rescued God’s people from slavery and was about to redeem them again.

Following on, our passage thus becomes a gripping affirmation of God’s promise of release from Babylonian exile in terms of a new exodus, a theme that appears throughout chapters 40-55.

Verses 16 and 17 contain a vivid allusion to the earlier exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea at the nation’s birth (Exodus 14-15; cf. Isaiah 51:9-11), a foundational episode for Israel’s life and which throughout the Old Testament ‘is considered the principal redemptive act of God, paralleling the importance of the cross in the new Testament’ (Elizabeth Achtemeier).

In that light, the summons and announcement of verses 18-21 are extraordinary. ‘Do not remember the former things’ (v.18). The new exodus will surpass in glory the former one, as God leads the people home to Palestine across the wilderness.

The new exodus theme is closely linked to that of new creation. Verse 20 brings God’s ultimate redemption of all creation into view – God’s ‘new thing’ becomes a transformed world with harmony restored at every level, all united in the joyful praise of God’s glory (cf. Isaiah 11:6-9. For examples of the development of the theme in the New Testament, see Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21:1-5a.

Psalm 126

This psalm, a community prayer for help, is one of a collection (Psalms 120 -134) known as 'Songs of Ascents'. It is widely believed that these poems were drawn together for Jewish pilgrims to use as they made their journey to Jerusalem for the great annual national festivals.

The psalm is composed of two stanzas. In the first (vv.1-3), the psalmist and community look back to a great past act of mercy by God who had thereby 'restored the fortunes of Zion'. The experience of deliverance was well-nigh unbelievable. 'We were like those who dream' (v.1), recalls a mood of 'delirious happiness and relief' (Derek Kidner). As in many psalms there is a tantalising absence of background information. It is likely, however, that the joy referred to was occasioned by the return from Babylonian exile, beginning in 538 BCE. The return from exile may even be viewed here (as in Isaiah 40-55) as a new exodus. Moreover, as then, God's deliverance of God's people was witnessed by the surrounding nations. Astonishingly, they were constrained to acknowledge Yahweh's marvellous act of salvation for Israel. Here was one of the ways in which Israel was made true to its calling to be a witness to the nations to the being and character of their God. (See Psalm 96:10; Joshua 4:24; Ezekiel 36:23.)

The second stanza (vv.4-6) implies that the exuberant joy of this deliverance gave way to less happy times. In the context of the return from exile, the prophet Zechariah speaks of a following 'day of small things' (Zechariah 4:10). The prayer of the community is that God would come once more to their help in distress and, through bringing about renewal, give them joy again. Memory of God's marvellous saving intervention in the past in this way provides impetus to prayer and hope.

Two striking images of the prayed-for renewal are given (4b, 5-6): the dry *Negeb* turned into a torrent in the time of rain; and the harvest that is the reward of patient labour. 'The first of them is all suddenness, a sheer gift from heaven; the second is slow and arduous, with man (*sic*) allotted a crucial part to play in it.' (Derek Kidner)

Either way, the psalm as a whole wants to affirm that the God whose faithfulness and grace have been experienced in the past will continue to bless a trusting people, even in times of distress, with deliverance and joy.

[Philippians 3:4b-14](#)

This is one of the most engaging passages in the Pauline letters. For one thing, it is a rare personal narrative in which Paul provides fascinating autobiographical details. Further, what he writes about himself is modelled on the pattern of Christ as depicted in 2:5-11. He can thus call his readers to imitate the example of living which he himself offers (3:17), as an embodied instance of the 'new thing' God has accomplished through the humiliated and exalted servant (2:8-9; cf. Isaiah 53:3-5).

Paul begins by recalling his past within the Jewish world in which he was reared. His credentials, Paul tells us, were impeccable (vv.4b-6). Both through inheritance and attainment he has more reason than others to boast of his status (vv.5-6). Paul's loyalty to Israel's God was unsurpassed. Paul's very persecution of the followers of Jesus bore witness to his deep desire to please God.

It was Paul's life-transforming encounter with the living Christ that led to the re-evaluation of the status he had enjoyed. As Tom Wright comments on 3:7-11, 'If we want to know what drove Paul on and what the Damascus Road event had done to him, this is perhaps the clearest statement we have.' Paul speaks of having more than knowledge *about* Christ – he claims to know Him personally ('the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord', v.8). This 'knowledge by acquaintance' relativizes and renders by comparison worthless all the badges of membership he had previously possessed and exploited. Being now 'found in Him' (v.9), Christ's renunciation of status and commitment to the life and death of a 'slave' become the necessary pattern of his own life. His goal in life now is to know 'the power of [Christ's] resurrection', experienced only by walking the same road of suffering that He walked (v.10).

In Jesus the Messiah, Paul recognises the whole story of Israel (including the contents of Isaiah 40-55) to have been fulfilled. Paul has died with Him, and Christ now lives in him (cf. Galatians 2:19-20). The past is forgotten in the joy of the 'new thing' God has done (cf. Isaiah 43:18-19). He eagerly strains forward into the beckoning future, 'toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' (v.14).

Paul has a definite purpose in sharing his story with the Philippian Christians. It is in order that the overflowing generosity of grace, shown in God's suffering servant and at work in and through Paul, might overflow also in their lives, as they imitate him in imitating Christ (v.17). They too must forget the past and embrace the 'new thing' of the servant's death and resurrection. Like Christ, and like Paul, they must choose the way of the cross. God wants not only to do a new thing in us but through us, so that our service of obedience may

be God's channel of extravagant grace for the transforming of other lives and of the world that God has redeemed.

[John 12:1-8](#)

This account of the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany casts its shadow forward over the events of Holy Week, commencing with the paradox of Jesus' triumphal entry and culminating in His crucifixion and burial (12:7-8).

The raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had a two-fold outcome: many came to faith in Jesus (12:10-11), and the chief priests resolved and plotted to eliminate both Lazarus and Jesus (12:10 and 11:45ff). The anointing at Bethany serves as a bridge between the Lazarus narrative and the account of the final week of Jesus' life.

These eight verses are replete with a sense of the irony of God's way of making everything new. The occasion itself was one of celebration – a dinner given by friends in honour of Jesus the life-giver (12:1-2). At some point during the meal, Mary proceeded to anoint Jesus' feet with a large quantity of fragrant oil (nard being a perfumed ointment imported by the Romans from northern India). Its value has been reckoned as about the annual income of a manual labourer (see 12:5).

We are not given access to Mary's thought processes as she undertook this wildly exuberant and intimate act of celebration. Her action, however, sets the terms for our approach to Holy Week. Among other purposes, oil was used to anoint kings (see, for example, 1 Samuel 16:12). This anointing is an implicit recognition and dramatic announcement of the kingship of Jesus, anticipating the 'triumphal entry' (12:12-19) and Jesus' conversation with Pilate (18:33-38a). John also intends us to see its significance in relation to the death of Jesus (12:7). It was customary for the dead to be anointed for burial (see Mark 16:1). The irony lies in the same action representing both Jesus' kingship and preparation for burial.

The inscription over Jesus' head on the cross ('Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews', 19:19) would represent profound truth. God's king comes to make everything new by a radical redefining of kingship. The redemptive, self-giving love of the cross is the way in which His kingship is established (see John 12:20-26). The moment of triumph over the power of darkness is at hand, the *hour of glory* when 'the great victory is to be won that will enable the nations of the world to be freed from their slavery and to worship the true God' (Tom Wright).

Mary's extravagant act represents for John the only appropriate response to the generous love embodied in Jesus' suffering kingship. Judas, on the other hand, represents the way of sensible prudence – a way that can conceal the most unworthy of motives (12:4-6). It is a response which demonstrates a complete failure to grasp the immensity and glory of God's new thing incarnated in the king who reigns from a cross. 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.'

Sermon ideas

Each of today's readings provides an abundance of material for one or more sermons. Given, however, that this is Passion Sunday, and given that various important themes run through each of them, it may be best to take John 12:1-8, in all its intensity, as the central text and illumine its fuller significance by reference to the other three passages.

Over the whole scene in Bethany hangs heavily the shadow of Good Friday. It is clear that John wants us to reflect deeply on the nature of discipleship in light of Jesus' coming cross. Through the main characters involved, the passage helps us to do so in a number of ways.

Firstly, there is the theme of Jesus' own identity and mission as the anointed king who is about to suffer. Disciples need to grow in knowledge of the leader they follow. Readers of John's gospel know that what Mary did to Jesus, He was shortly to do to His own disciples (13:5) and so Jesus is portrayed by John as the suffering servant-king. This resonates deeply with our Isaiah reading in its Isaiah 40-55 context. The suffering servant-king of Yahweh (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12) is God's agent of new exodus and new creation, and becomes so through identifying fully with the sin and suffering of Israel. Reference to the nearness of the Passover (v.1) also serves to direct our minds.

At a time when the Old Testament is often neglected in the church, the preacher has a great opportunity here to introduce the rich relevance of themes in Isaiah 43:16-21, in context, for our understanding of Jesus and His work. Disciples need to grow in knowledge of the person they follow. In our Philippians passage, Paul writes of 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (3:8) and says, 'I want to know Christ ...' (3:10). It will be worth spending some time in showing this desire to be at the core of authentic Christian discipleship. By what means might we seek to develop our personal knowledge of Jesus?

Secondly, the Bethany scene encourages the preacher to develop the theme of the appropriate response to the extravagant love incarnated in Jesus. That response, beautifully illustrated in Mary's action, is one of a correspondingly extravagant outpouring of faith and love. God's new thing which we celebrate at Passiontide is so overwhelmingly

wonderful that only a response which fills ‘the whole house’ with the fragrance of answering love makes any sense. Viewing in Christ the ‘great thing’ ‘done ...for us’, we might well be ‘like those who dream’ (Psalm 126).

How might this response of generous love be encouraged in the church today? What might it look like? How does a grasp of the ‘new thing’ done for us in Christ affect our inherent love of (religious) status (Philippians 3:4b-14)? What further reflection and challenge does the contrasting and yet apparently cautious and prudent example of Judas suggest (12:4-6)?

Time with children

Based on John 12:1-8

Bring several paper bags, each containing something different and that smells strongly enough for the children to be able to guess what is giving off each smell. For example: coffee, cinnamon, mint, garlic, strong cheese, etc. One bag should contain a nice smelling lotion that you can use.

Gather the children around. Ask, “Do you have a favourite smell?” Take answers. Tell them that you have brought some things for them and you want them to guess what they are by the smell. Open the bags and pass them round one by one, inviting them to close their eyes and guess. (There will likely be time to pass round only two or three bags.)

Speak of the power of our sense of smell and how one smell can make us vividly recall a whole situation, place, event or person. You may have a personal example to share. Tell in simple terms the story of Mary’s pouring the expensive, scented nard over Jesus, how it pointed to Jesus’ dying on the cross because of His love for us, and how it expressed Mary’s love for Jesus. The smell of the nard filled the house. Suggest that after Jesus had died and risen, that smell would continue to remind Mary and the others who were with her of God’s amazing love shown in Jesus. (Just like the smell that was important to you still reminds you of XXXX.)

Say: “I am going to give each of you a little squirt of nice-smelling lotion. I hope that when you smell this on your skin throughout the day, it will remind you how much Jesus loves you.”

Finish with a brief prayer.

(Adapted from ‘Faith Formation Journeys’ material. See faithformationjourneys.org)

Prayers

Approach to God

Eternal and wonderful God

We come together in Your presence now,
bringing to You our united praise and adoration.
You are a great God beyond all measure
and we bow in awe before the dazzling brightness of Your being and glory.
We join our heart and voice with the seraphs
in Your presence who call to one another,
'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.'

We worship You, God of creation
and stand in awe before the myriad ways
in which the vast universe and the world of nature around us
display the wonder of Your wisdom and love, generosity and beauty.
Open our eyes to the signs of Your presence everywhere.
Fill us with delight and gratitude as we remember how in love
You gave to each of us our being
and the ways You have enriched our lives from our earliest years.

King of salvation,
we praise You that You have not kept at a distance from our human predicament,
but in Jesus You have come into our fallen, broken world fully
to share our humanity and to bring us redemption.
We marvel again at Jesus' willingness in love to identify in this way with us,
to share our sorrows and to walk the long and painful road
to a new exodus in the achievement of the cross,
gaining for us freedom from sin and pain and death.

Confession

At this time, when we are called to reflect on our own path of discipleship,
help us in Your presence
to face the truth about ourselves with honesty and openness.
We confess that we have all come far short of Your glory,
that too often we have compromised rather than confessed our faith.
Forgive us
that we have been narrow in our vision and self-centred in our concerns

and have not loved You and others as You have called us to do.
Look on us, gracious Father,
not in ourselves but as found in the Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us.

As we focus in these coming days
on the wonder of what Jesus Christ, Your suffering Servant, achieved for us,
give us a new heart to follow Him more fully,
to take up our cross and in serving Jesus our Lord,
humbly to serve others, especially those most in need around us,
with the same self-emptying mind which Jesus displayed.

Intercession

Lord Jesus Christ,
as we think of the testing to which You were subjected in the wilderness
and throughout Your ministry to its very end,
we bring to You all who today are struggling with life's trials and pressures.

We remember those who are facing tough choices and hard situations;
those enduring physical or mental pain;
those striving to come to terms with painful loss – of a loved one, of employment, of
cherished hopes;
those facing challenges for which they feel hopelessly inadequate.
Hold them in Your love and let them know Your peace
and the sufficient strength of Your grace
which is able to turn even calamity into a blessing.

We pray for all who find themselves wrestling with powerful temptation:
those who struggle with things that are destructive,
those tempted to give up on God in light of life's harsh realities;
those who wonder whether life is worth living at all in face of the bleakness of their
prospects.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You are familiar with the wilderness of life.
Through that wilderness, in all its desolation,
You have made a way and You are leading Your people by a new exodus to a new creation,
a perfect world of peace, justice and love.
Help all who today are worn down by the trials and temptations of life
to turn their face to Jesus, the suffering servant.

Let us all find in Jesus the joy of liberation,
the assurance of unfailing companionship on the journey home from exile
and the sure hope of a new heavens and a new earth, in a future more glorious than we can
begin to imagine.

We offer these our prayers in Jesus' name. **Amen**

Musical suggestions

- CH4 192 – “All my hope” – Celebrating God’s faithfulness and love
- CH4 159 – “Lord, for the years” – God of past, present and future
- CH4 405 – “We sing the praise” – A focus on the centrality of the cross

The following three hymns express in praise our response to the love revealed in Christ:

- CH4 392 – “When I survey the wondrous cross”
- CH4 662 – “Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts”
- CH4 490 – “Jesus, lover of my soul”

The following two hymns express our desire and the need to imitate Christ in love for others:

- CH4 694 – “Brother, sister, let me serve you”
- CH4 544 – “When I needed a neighbour”
- CH4 512 – “To God be the glory” – a classic celebration of God’s ‘new thing’

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