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