

## **Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday – Year A**

### **Palm Sunday – 2 April 2023**

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Tom Gordon, writer, retired parish minister and former hospice chaplain, for his thoughts on Palm/Passion Sunday.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the [Sanctuary First website](#).

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Introduction

This Sunday finds us at the beginning of Holy Week, and, depending on how it is approached, focuses us on the “Palm Sunday” entrance to Jerusalem or the beginning of the Passion of Christ. If there is to be a pattern to Holy Week – i.e. something which fills each day (or most days) between this Sunday and Easter Day – I would be inclined to see Palm Sunday as the opening bracket of this significant week, a week which could unfold in stages – including Holy Saturday – to the wonder of Easter. If, as I suspect is the case in most churches, Holy Week itself will contain little more than a Maundy Thursday Communion and Good Friday reflection, I would be inclined to expand our thoughts into The Passion of our Lord, and so offer an overview of the concept of “passion” in anticipation of the Cross and Resurrection.

What follows will be an unfolding of both of these approaches, utilising the Lectionary readings for both themes.

The Palm Sunday thread has Matthew 21:1-11 as the Gospel reading. There are significant symbolic aspects of this – given the context of the timing of the event and the subsequent ‘theological’ analysis by Matthew in the presentation of the story to the Early Church. We have the mock procession, the reaction of the disciples, the role of the crowd, the questions the event poses, all of which I will touch on in what follows. The approach to Jerusalem takes us back to the Psalms, where we find the triumph concept – “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” – familiar from our Communion Liturgy, for example. The idea of triumph will be explored later.

The Passion approach utilises Old Testament readings (Micah and the Psalms) and the Epistles (1 Corinthians), which point us to the idea of sacrifice (the “burnt offerings” of Micah), the “unworthiness” of the worshipper (Psalm 15) and the “foolishness” of such self-giving as the world might see it (1 Corinthians), all of which move us to the meaning of “The Passion”, the Cross and the sacrifice of Christ, and the extensive – and dramatic – passion narrative.

*[Note: In all the materials that follow, where sections – new and previously published – are written by the author, copyright permission is granted.]*

## Liturgy of the Palms

### [Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#)

The symbolic significance of the procession on Palm Sunday as outlined by Matthew would not be lost on the people of his day. Familiar as they would be with the background texts of their Jewish faith, Matthew's account would immediately create resonances of what they knew and understood of their relationship with their God.

Psalm 118 is the last in the series of what scholars call the Egyptian Hallel psalms (Psalms 113-118). As such, it describes a celebratory procession to the temple to offer praise and sacrifice to the Lord. This, historically, was a re-enactment of the celebration of the people when the walls and gates of Jerusalem were restored in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah following the return from captivity in Babylon. Here we find communal thanksgiving, individual praise and liturgical responses.

God is loyal to God's people ("His steadfast love endures forever", vv1&2). God has restored the people after a period of tribulation ("You have answered me and have become my salvation", v 21). Here is God's love for God's people, and themes which point us to the meaning of Palm Sunday and, indeed, to concepts which were fundamental to the infant Church to which Matthew would be speaking: the sacrifice (the ultimate tribulation of our Lord) of Christ on Good Friday; the triumph even over the grave on Easter Day.

And here are phrases and ideas which have come down through the years to our age and generation: "This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it"; "The stone that the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone"; and the liturgical chorus – "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures for ever." This is festivity at its height ("Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar", v27). God is good! Suffering is worth it! Triumph is our way! Rejoice, for it has all come right!

One commentator (studylight.org) writes: "As the final psalm of the 'Egyptian Hallel', sung to celebrate the Passover[...] this psalm may have pictured to those who first sang it the rescue of Israel at the Exodus, and the eventual journey's end at Mount Zion. But it was destined to be fulfilled more perfectly, as the echoes of it on Palm Sunday and in the Passion Week make clear to every reader of the Gospels."

## [Matthew 21: 1-11](#)

This is the beginning of the last act of the drama of the life of Jesus.

The context is Passover. The whole of Jerusalem would be packed with pilgrims. The concept of 'procession' (the celebratory re-enactments of significant elements of Jewish history) would be in everyone's psyche. William Barclay suggests that, from historical records, the Romans reckoned that around a quarter of a million lambs were sacrificed in Jerusalem at Passover time. And as a Passover regulation stipulated that there should be a party of ten to accompany each lamb, that suggests upwards of two and a half million people in Jerusalem and its environs. (Compare the crowds at the Hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and you'll have a good idea. 65,000 at a Scotland / England match at Hampden isn't even close!)

### **The Preparation**

This was no sudden decision that Jesus made. It was something He had clearly prepared in advance. "The master needs them" would be a pre-planned code.

Rather than seeing the chosen donkey as the beast of burden as we would know it, a donkey was a stately – and important – beast, not a downgrade from a horse (on which a Roman might ride) but a familiar and key element of the life of the people of Jesus' day. According to Jewish teaching, an unredeemed donkey was considered holy, set apart for God. So Jesus, the Holy One of God, specified a donkey that had never been ridden to fulfil this requirement for sacred use.

### **Jesus' Intention**

In the two and a half million crowd, this procession was small and insignificant. But it is packed with symbolism: the crowd spread cloaks, as they did when Jehu was proclaimed king (2 Kings 9:13); the greeting of the crowd for their 'king' – "Blessed is the name of the Lord for him who comes" – a familiar greeting exchanged by all pilgrims; "Hosanna" is added – a familiar cry of distress which means "Save now!" This, therefore, was the cry of the people for deliverance, for help in their time of trouble.

It had always been the custom of the prophets to express their message in dramatic action.

### **Kingship**

The people would also have in their mind the concept of the Roman Triumph, where an emperor, following a victory or the conclusion of a campaign, would enter Rome (and other cities under Roman occupation) in a great celebratory procession (witness the great Cecil B

de Mille movie epics). So here was courage, that Jesus would offer what some might see as a mockery of a Roman Triumph that would risk the wrath of the occupying forces. And here also was a triumph that made sense: “he is one of us,” they might say – a king to be borne by an ass, as a symbol of humility and peace.

## Liturgy of the Passion

### [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)

The passage begins (v4) with a reference to “the tongue of a teacher”. The implication in Hebrew is that this means the tongue of those who are taught. The teacher, who brings the interpretation of God’s Word, is already one who has heard and processed that Word – having been taught – which gives the authority to proclaim that Word to the hearers. While this might be obvious – in the case of the preacher, for example – it points us to Christ and all that follows in the Passion Narrative. For Our Lord is the one who knew supremely the will of God, and therefore had all the authority required to show that to His people.

The servant – the teacher or preacher – must have an open ear. How can the Word be shared if it has not been listened to and understood? (vv4-5). How, therefore, could Christ follow through on His Passion unless He was totally attuned to the way and will of God? This is complete concentration in God’s purpose and absolute obedience to God’s call. What does this say to our discipleship?

Such obedience will be misunderstood and rejected by the world. It’s the concept of the willing back (v 6). Literally or symbolically – as is the case in the Passion – the servant willingly accepts opposition to living out the Word of the Lord. This does not mean that proclaimers of God’s Word should go out of their way to provoke opposition. Nor should we assume that opposition necessarily means that we are faithfully proclaiming God’s word. But if we teach, preach and witness with integrity, opposition will likely come. When we pay a price for faithful speaking, we should pay it willingly.

The servant’s face has experienced pain (v6b), but it still reflects a determined commitment – he sets it “like flint” (v7b). Determination is based on God’s helping and vindicating action.

As the early believers grew to understand the ways Jesus fulfilled His role as Messiah and Saviour, they found guidance in Second Isaiah’s servant songs. The prophet knows from their experience that the willing witness that leads to suffering and rejection at the hands of people, ultimately offers vindication through the power of God. This, therefore,

foreshadows Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – the Passion drama. Those who follow Jesus can expect to suffer for it too. Jesus tells the disciples that He is a suffering servant – and is the Passion Narrative not supremely about suffering and service? “The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.” (v5)

The more we listen, the more we'll know. The more we know, the more we'll serve. The more we serve, the more we'll learn.

### [Psalm 31:9-16](#)

Any prayer for help is predicated on a return to trust that defines the purpose of the prayer. It matters little whether this is part of a regular prayer life or a one-off, but trust, and a willingness to act on that trust, is fundamental.

This is at the heart of Psalm 31, and, in verses 9-16, you have the cry for help arising out of an understanding of deep need, with the prayer indicating deep trust. Deep need and deep trust go hand in hand.

Verses 9-16 are the 'need' part of the prayer – “terror all around” (v13). The source of such terror is, on the one hand, the physical distress of the Psalmist, and the feeling of being an object of scorn, distress and the plotting of enemies.

The call for help, therefore, emerges first from the psalmist's distress, grief, sorrow, and miserable sighing (v10). Deep emotional distress manifests itself, as is often the case, in physical suffering: “my eye wastes ... my soul and body also ... my strength fails ... my bones waste away.” But, alongside that, and equally important, is the spiritual pain. A “broken vessel” in both the physical and spiritual sense.

The trust which is the balancing of this cry for help is simple, yet profound. “You are my God,” says the Psalmist, and “My times are in your hand.”

There are two things to take from this. Firstly, as a pointer to the Passion Narratives, this is clearly an image of Christ: the physicality of His suffering – up to and including the Cross – and the challenge to His purpose, His spiritual conviction – “Take this cup away from me”, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”.

Secondly, while we may not experience the physical pain of Christian service (see the Isaiah passage above) many – if not all – of us will experience spiritual pain – anguish, doubt, anger, loss of faith. These are all real, and normal, and should, therefore, be both

acknowledged and worked with. Christ was fully human. Therefore, the physical *and* spiritual effects of His Passion were real, normal and important.

And the wonder of it all is that the Psalmist can still say: “My times are in your hand” (v15). For here is the trust that is required, echoing Jesus’ own words in His Passion for earlier in this Psalm, (v 5) “Into your hands I commit my spirit”.

## [Philippians 2:5-11](#)

One of the problems for the preacher on this Sunday is that there is so much to pack into one day – or even into one week – and so much text in the Passion Narrative to draw upon, that other significant and informative readings are often ignored. Such is the case with the Epistle reading for this day.

Compared to the drama of the Gospel text, themes typically drawn from Philippians 2 may spark little excitement for preacher or hearer. Yet there is much here to draw upon. The text of this passage is almost like a hymn. And the purpose of this hymn is in the opening words: “Let the same mind be in you [or me] that was in Christ Jesus”. In other words, as the Passion Narrative is unfolded, it shouldn’t merely be seen as a “drama”, to be watched from afar, to amaze and inspire us, to be wondered at and analysed. The text should draw us into the story, so that its purpose becomes a template for how we should be and can be as followers of Jesus.

Jesus “emptied Himself”, “humbled Himself”, “became obedient”. Here is our model, “born in human likeness”, “found in human form”. Here is our supreme example, right before our eyes.

Jesus, in faithfulness to the true nature of divine power, practised the outpouring of the self, not self-assertion and domination. This would mean that Philippians 2, far from being a touching portrait of a self-effacing Jesus, speaks of Jesus’ radical embodiment of divine redemptive and restorative power, as self is poured out in service.

The truth is, Jesus as God-in-flesh is, and remains, fully part of the divine life. This reading calls for nothing short of a radical reimagination of the world-restoring power of God. If Jesus’ self-giving servanthood was the truest embodiment of God’s redeeming power, this has profound implications for the Church’s witness in the world.



## [Matthew 26:14-27:66](#)

The Gospel reading as it is given to us in the Lectionary is the whole of the Passion Narrative as offered by St Matthew. In total, there are 127 verses, and, of course, the preacher will not be expected to cover all of this in one act of worship. There is even more of a problem if this Sunday focusses on Palm Sunday issues, with the fullness of the Passion Narrative being confined to a couple of additional acts of worship in Holy Week.

In some fashion, therefore, if worshippers are not to remain observers of the drama that unfolds, but participants in the meaning of it – as indicated in the three readings (Isaiah, the Psalms and Philippians) which precede this – opportunities should be given to cover more of the narrative than could even be considered on one Sunday.

If this Sunday, therefore, is chosen to be the opening bracket at the start of Holy Week, further themes or acts in the drama might be explored during the remainder of Holy Week.

These might be (following the pattern of the Matthew narrative):

1. Palm Sunday evening – The Betrayal: Matthew 26:14-16, 21-25 – an opportunity to reflect on how, in our living, we often give the lie to our commitment.
2. Monday / Tuesday / Wednesday – The Call to Prayer: Matthew 26:31-46 – Jesus wrestling with His calling, and Jesus' understanding of the frailty of His people. Looking at the call to commitment, human frailty and Christ's own human agonising of His purpose and obedience.
3. Thursday – The Last Supper: Matthew 26:17-30 – drawing from the symbolism of the event, that in brokenness there can be restoration, in sacrifice there can be meaning.
4. Good Friday – The Crucifixion Narrative: Matthew 26:47-27:50. This lends itself well to a lessons / readings / music / silence / hymns act of worship, with a minimum of interpretive input. The sections might be:
  - a. The Arrest – 26:47-56
  - b. The Trial – 26:57, 27:11-26
  - c. The Denial by Peter – 26:58. 26:69-75
  - d. The Realisation of Judas – 27:1-10
  - e. The Suffering – 27:27-34

f. The Cross – 27:35-50

If there are not likely to be acts of worship which follow these themes specifically, it might be possible to offer a hand-out of brief reflections as a guide to people during Holy Week – the verses, a thought and a short prayer [*see the series of short prayers at the end of the Prayers section*].

5. Holy Saturday – The aftermath, and The waiting: Matthew 27:51-66 – a focus on the not knowing or a lack of understanding of what might happen next.

## Sermon ideas

### A: Palm Sunday

There are two directions a sermon might take.

#### The traditional processional entry into Jerusalem

- a) Here is a piece of street-theatre that captures the imagination – and the enthusiasm of a tiny section of a massive crowd in a small, cramped area of Jerusalem, coming down the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kedron Valley to the Walls of Jerusalem. It could be compared with what happens regularly on the Royal Mile during the Edinburgh Festival – a spontaneous event with a crowd that quickly gathers to see and follow a piece of action.
- b) It would not be lost on the crowd that this looked like a parody of a Roman ‘triumph’, a grand and staged entry of an Emperor or Governor entering a city. But here were people close to the action rather than being policed and kept at a distance, able to participate – throw cloaks, shout and cheer – and feel the meaning and excitement.
- c) Yet, here was Jesus on a donkey, and not a white charger. Here was fun and not fear. Here was humility and not arrogance. Here was a man of the people and not a distant king or emperor.
- d) Finally, Did Jesus know what He was doing? Was it staged, planned, contrived, offered with purpose? I suspect not. Spontaneity can also offer meaning. It is awareness that matters. We might know it at the time, or we might only figure it out in reflection later. Either way, God took this event and made it work for God’s purpose. And if not, why would this relatively small happening be given a prominent part by the Gospel writers?

#### Looking at the different people who participated in the event

In the action of the story, we might do well to notice the folk who are there, what their significance might be, and which of them we might identify with right now.

- a) The disciples – not a homogeneous bunch ... some who get it and some who don't ... those who have sourced the donkey worrying whether they might be accused of theft ... those who were blindly obedient and did as Jesus directed them ... all human, but different ...
- b) The children – (often integral to the way we approach Palm Sunday Worship nowadays) spontaneity ... excitement ... not really understanding, but letting themselves go anyway ... high as kites ... the innocence and newness and carefree nature of faith we often lose as adults ...
- c) The crowd – the ones who push to the front to get involved ... or who go along for the ride because they don't want to miss out ... or those who stand back and watch ... or who haven't a clue what's happening ... or who walk away ... or who're frightened by it all. We are in all of them in one way or another or at some time or another. Which one are we now, and which would we like to be?

## **B. Passion Sunday**

I do not intend to offer a sermon outline as such, as there is so much to cover in the Passion Narrative and it can be difficult to know where to start. If the themes can be separated out and explored separately during Holy Week – as suggested in the thoughts above – this is perhaps the better way to proceed. However, if the Passion of Christ is to be our sermon or reflective theme for this Sunday, it could be used to highlight the rises and falls of the drama that follows.

We can do this in a few ways, looking at the people we meet on the 'stage' of the drama and their roles and attitudes – and how they might relate to who we are and what we would like to be as followers of Christ ...

- a) The crowd on the way to Jerusalem – picking up some of the diversity identified in the Palm Sunday sermon idea above;
- b) The disciples – similarly looking at the contrasts in the band of disciples: from denial (Peter) to betrayal (Judas); from obedience (getting the donkey and preparing the upper room) to scepticism (“Surely, not I, Lord ...”); from promise (“I will never desert you”) to failure (“and found them sleeping”) ... and so it goes on. There's lots of material to work with here.

- c) The authorities – Pilate (bemused); the chief priests and elders (going by the book and looking for political expediency).
- d) The crowd in Jerusalem – the mood turning ... baying for Barabbas (might there be the mob mentality, as in the storming of the US Capitol Building in Washington DC in January 2001?)
- e) The mocking people at the cross ... (compare today's sceptics).
- f) The thieves crucified with Jesus (what does forgiveness mean?)
- g) Simon of Cyrene (whose cross might we be called – or offer to – carry today?)
- h) The onlookers ... the women ... the disciples ... those who wept ... the anger ...
- i) The believers ...

There is mileage in seeing both the whole of the human condition represented in this drama as well as the panoply of the reactions – historical and current – to the Christian faith and the Church in our midst.

So let's not just look at all of this to ask "Who are *they*?" so we can criticise and judge. But to ask, "Who are *we*?" in this drama. Can we be honest about our humanity, identify our weaknesses and look to what we can and should be?

## Prayers

### Prayers for Palm Sunday

#### Call to worship

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love endures for ever. (*Psalms 118:1*)

#### Prayer of approach, thanksgiving and confession

(Based on themes of *Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29*)

Living God,

today we give thanks, as we should, and as we must.

For You are a good God; Your steadfast love lasts and lasts and lasts.

We see it in the beauty of this day.

We know it in the warmth of welcome in this Christian family.

We feel it in the blessings of singing Your praise and reflecting on Your love.

We believe it in the message of salvation,

that Christ is here, and now, and real.

Yet this is the Christ the world will reject;

this is the cornerstone that will be torn down  
so that the building of hope, and wellbeing,  
and righteousness is threatened with destruction.  
This is the Christ the world will take, and crucify  
and seek to get rid of for good.

Yet, this is the very Christ who will rise again,  
the very Christ through whom we will find  
Your forgiveness, and acceptance,  
and a beginning again for us.

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”  
Hear the blessing from this very house of God,  
from the depths of our being, from the core of our faith.  
Hear and hear and hear again – that we are grateful;  
that we are made new;  
that we are thankful we are loved by our God.

So, with the Psalmist,  
we give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.  
We give thanks to the Lord, that His steadfast love endures for ever.  
We give thanks to the Lord, as we should and as we must.

**Intercession** (*on the theme of Palm Sunday*)

Living God,  
in the image of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem when the Passover was coming,  
we see all the people around Him,  
just as we have countless numbers who crowd into our thoughts as we turn to You in  
prayer.  
So, as Christ placed Himself in the midst of the crowd,  
let us be aware of the centrality of that same Christ to the people for whom we pray,  
that they, and we, might know they are close to our Lord and that He is always with them.

We pray, with the excitement of the children,  
for all who celebrate today: the newness of a birth;  
the fresh start of a marriage;  
good news about their health;  
the success of a task;  
a new way love has been expressed and felt.

Let our voices join with theirs, as we shout, “Hosanna! Christ is here!”

We pray, with loyal disciples,  
for those who show their commitment,  
who prepare for Jesus’ presence,  
who give their cloaks for His service,  
who make the way clear so that others can follow the procession.  
Let our voices join with theirs, as we shout,  
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

We pray, with the people in the crowd,  
for those who watch and wait:  
for the ‘not so sure’ people;  
for the silent majority;  
for those who have little to celebrate;  
for the many who don’t see the point.  
Let our voices not drown out their silent prayers,  
but, in being aware of their needs,  
let our prayers carry their yearnings to our Lord.

We pray, with those who know nothing of this,  
who live with anger and not expectation,  
with pain and not Hosannas,  
with scepticism and not acceptance.  
Let our voices not condemn them, but pray for them and with them.  
For the unknown, yet needful, people we pray, as we look beyond the crowd and see ...

*(Here there might be a short litany of the world’s needs ... followed by)*

*Silence*

Let us be aware on this day of rejoicing  
that many cannot or will not rejoice.  
But let us also be aware, that Christ comes into the midst of all of this,  
to understand, to be fully present, to die and to rise,  
for each and every one of them.  
Amen

## Prayers for Passion Sunday

### Call to worship

My times are in your hand ... Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. (*Psalm 31:15a & 16*)

### Prayer of approach, thanksgiving and confession

*(Based on themes of Psalm 31)*

Living God,

be gracious to me.

Yet, as soon as I utter these words, I know I am wrong.

For I do not need to ask for Your grace, when it is so freely given.

I do not need to call upon You to be a gracious God, when You have not changed.

“Steadfast” is what the Psalmist calls it.

And steadfast is what I know You to be.

So today I pray, with all the commitment I can muster,

to be open to Your grace and goodness,

to understand and accept the love of a gracious God,

and to be as steadfast in my acceptance

as You are in Your giving to me.

I thank You that You are already listening to my prayers,

that I have already entered the gates of righteousness

as I come to You in my time of need.

I hear the whisperings of the people around me,

for they are not happy that I stand up for You.

And I hear the whisperings of my own soul,

telling me I'm not good enough to be Your servant.

But above the whisperings,

I hear Your voice: to calm my fears;

to forgive my failings;

to affirm my worth and value.

And, along with Your tender voice,

I see You stretch out Your loving hand,

to lift me up, to restore me to wholeness.

Living God,

I put my trust in You.  
My times are in Your hands;  
my life is in Your hands;  
my service is in Your hands;  
my hope is in Your hands.  
Let Your face shine upon me now,  
and hold me in Your steadfast love.  
Amen

**Intercession** (*with a Passion theme*)

Living God,  
in the fullness of our humanity we are passionate people:  
passionate when we love someone;  
passionate about our football team;  
passionate about our chosen charity;  
passionate about our community;  
passionate about the Church;  
passionate about our faith.  
Take all our passions, and use them well,  
that we might be fully alive in giving our all to Your Kingdom.  
And remind us, that in Your Passion,  
Your commitment to the end, through pain and suffering,  
You were fully human, one of us.  
And so, even through suffering and death,  
You understand and know the passions and pains,  
the purpose and practicalities of Your people,  
here, now, in this very place.

Be with those today who face the passions of life,  
especially when such passions bring pain and heartbreak:  
the passions of those who are coping with loss because they have loved so much;  
the passions of those who are journeying to their own Cross or watching those on a painful  
journey;  
the passions of those who give their all and have little left to give;  
the passions of those who are cast down by doubt and fear;  
the passions of those who have lost their faith and struggle to make sense of life.  
And in our passionate concern for them, we name them before You in our prayers ...



*It would be appropriate here to be specific about people (if that is appropriate) and for situations of need. And it would also be a suitable place for a time of silence.*

Loving God,  
make us passionate people for You.  
And, as we travel with You in the week that lies ahead,  
let us draw strength from the passionate people who have walked this way before us,  
the great Cloud of Witnesses, the Communion of Saints,  
all of Your Pilgrim People, whose passions for Christ are our example and guide.  
Amen

**Closing prayer and blessing** *(for the themes of both Palm and Passion)*

God is good.  
The way ahead is ready.  
Christ is ours.  
The truth is there to follow.  
The Spirit is with us.  
New life is offered now.  
So go now, in the goodness of God, to walk the Way,  
in the presence of Christ to follow the Truth,  
in the embrace of the Spirit, to accept New Life.  
And be blessed, and be blessed, and rejoice. Amen

**Short thematic prayers for Holy Week**

Beginning with Palm Sunday, and following the themes of Holy Week up to Holy Saturday.

***Palm Sunday – the Collect:***

Almighty and ever living God,  
in Your tender love for the human race  
You sent Your Son our Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
to take upon Himself our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross,  
giving us the example of His great humility:  
Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of His suffering,  
and also share in His resurrection;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

***Palm Sunday evening – The Betrayal***

Ever present God,  
forgive me for pointing the finger at Judas,  
and, in condemning his betrayal,  
believing that I could never be like him.  
Help me to look at myself,  
to acknowledge the times when I sell you short,  
to turn to you again,  
and know Your healing and restoring love. Amen

***The call to wait and pray (Monday)***

God, ever with us,  
You call us, but more than that,  
You insist that we wait and pray.  
And we say we will, and believe we will.  
But in human weakness, we let You down.  
With human tiredness, we don't stay awake for long.  
Wake us up, Lord.  
Renew us in body, mind and spirit, and keep us focussed on You. Amen

***Jesus wrestling with His calling (Tuesday)***

Loving God,  
You call me and You know me.  
You believe in what I can do for You.  
Help me to believe in myself, to trust in the wisdom of Your call,  
and to know You will be my guide and strength. Amen

***Jesus understanding our frailty (Wednesday)***

Living God,  
You call us, and we respond.  
We make promises, then we let You down.  
Yet You wait when we fail;  
You watch when we are tired;  
forgive us when we don't do well;  
You accept us and offer us a new beginning. Amen

***The Last Supper (Maundy Thursday)***

Living Saviour,  
You laid down Your life for us,  
a broken body and spilled blood offered for our salvation.

You held nothing back.  
So, strengthen us in communion with You,  
that our broken lives might be made whole,  
so we might serve You with all we have and are. Amen

***The Cross (Good Friday)***

Lord,  
in our humanity, we weep before the cross,  
and we wonder what will come from the horror of death.  
But, in You, the very grave is conquered.  
Death itself has lost its sting.  
Be patient with us while we figure that out.  
Be tender with us as we seek to move from doubt to faith. Amen

***Waiting (Holy Saturday)***

Wait with us, Lord,  
while we fear the future.  
Stay with us, Lord,  
while we regain our hope.  
Keep blessing us, Lord, as we wonder what it all means.  
Keep us expectant, no matter what. Amen

## **Additional material**

***It happened (Adapted from "A Blessing to Follow" by Tom Gordon)***

I happened on a Sabbath morn, or so the story goes,  
When crowds arrived to line the city streets,  
And children waved their branches high, and grown-ups threw their cloaks  
Upon the ground, their Saviour King to greet.

True happiness embraced the crowd as halleluiahs rang,  
And passion cries became their welcome prayer.  
The time was right, the day was good, and hearts rejoiced anew,  
As praise conveyed a joy beyond compare.

It happened on a summer's day, or so the story goes,  
When happiness to someone's life was given ...  
A peace restored; a hope renewed; a King of Love come close  
To offer a transforming a glimpse of heaven.

That happiness has had its way, not only then, but now,  
As halleluiahs ring across the years.  
And songs of love, and cries of peace, still echo in the heart,  
And praises still make laughter out of tears.

It happens on this Sabbath morn, or so the story goes,  
When crowds arrive to celebrate a day  
Of palms and passion, pride and praise, and cloaks cast on the ground,  
As Love is humbly carried on its way.

So come, rejoice! Sings psalms of praise! Let halleluiahs ring!  
Wave palms with joy! Once more a gift is given!  
Our peace restored ... our hope renewed ... a King of Love brings close  
True happiness – another glimpse of heaven.

***The parade*** (From “*Welcoming Each Wonder*” by Tom Gordon)

Brenda was very proud of the basket on her bike. It wasn't by any means a *new* basket. She'd been given it by her Nan, who'd been given it by her next-door neighbour, who'd rescued it from his daughter's old bike that was going to the skip since she'd got a new one for her Christmas. But an old basket went well with an old bike – and Brenda's bike was certainly old!

It was what she'd heard called a 'hand-me-down', and having come down to her through the several hands – and some pretty severe usage – of a succession of older brothers and sisters before it got to Brenda, there was no doubt that the bike had seen better days. But with a coat of shiny, black paint, and with a few stickers of her favourite pop-stars on the frame, Brenda was happy enough with her old bike. Maybe she'd get a new one some day ...

The basket was just what she'd needed to make her bike special. Like the bike itself, the basket had seen better days too. It had been bashed around a fair bit and the canes at one corner were in danger of coming apart. But the two leather straps were still sound, and so, with them holding the basket firmly to the bike's handlebars, Brenda was dead chuffed. She used her basket to carry her ballet shoes when she went to her dancing lessons in the church hall. It was just the thing to hold the shopping her mum sometimes asked her to collect from the village store. She popped her granddad's Sunday papers in it when she took them round after church each week. And it would be just the ticket for her own paper-round when she was old enough. Yes indeed, Brenda was very proud of the basket on her bike.

When she joined the parade on a Spring Sunday afternoon, Brenda, like several of the other kids, took her bike along. Actually, it wasn't much of a show, because the village wasn't really big enough for a proper parade. But when the school football team wins a cup for the first time in years, well ... you have to do something. So the instruction was to assemble just before two o'clock in the school playground, and the 'parade' would leave from there and make its way to the church hall – about ten minutes away! School to church – about a quarter of a mile. But, still, it was something. And when the school football team wins a cup ... well ...

When Brenda got to the school gates she saw that Bill Jenkins, one of the local farmers, was there with a tractor and trailer. Liberally bedecked in the school colours of gold and black, and with straw bales on the back as make-shift seats, the trailer was soon the means of transport for the whole school team, all kitted out in brand-new football tops. Some of the parents had their cars, with balloons (in gold and black, of course) tied to their roof-racks and aerials. The headmaster was in the back of an open Land-rover with the team captain beside him carrying the cup. Parents, teachers, a couple of photographers, kids in buggies and a fair number of local people followed behind. And with Brenda and other kids on their bikes, the parade was complete.

On the stroke of two the entourage began to make its way out of the school yard and down the village street. More local people filled the pavements, stood in doorways and hung from first-floor windows. They clapped and cheered. It wasn't a great parade, but when the school football team wins ... well ...

Brenda was just about to mount her bike and join the others at the back of the procession when she saw Mrs Stewart running towards the gate. Mrs Stewart was Brenda's class teacher, and Brenda had never seen her so hot and bothered before. She almost skidded to a stop right beside Brenda and, quite out of breath, spluttered, 'Brenda. Be a good girl and run into the school to our classroom and fetch the white poly bag that's on my desk. Quickly, because I need it now.' 'But, Miss,' Brenda protested, 'I'll miss the parade.' 'It won't take you long if you're quick.' 'But, Miss,' the reluctant Brenda continued, 'the janitor won't ...' 'Don't worry. Just tell him you're doing an errand for me.' 'But, Miss,' Brenda tried again, 'what if ...' But she never had the chance to finish. 'Go, now! Go! Quickly! The poly bag. Bring it to me. I have to catch up with the ...' And in an instant the harassed Mrs Stewart was off to join the parade, leaving a bewildered Brenda to be about Mrs Stewart's business.

So, leaning her bike against the railings, she went in search of the white poly bag. She had to get past the inquisitorial janitor. 'Why?' 'A message for Mrs Stewart ...' 'Who?' 'Brenda

Smith, one of her class ...' 'What?' 'A white poly bag ...' 'Where?' 'On her desk, in her classroom ...' 'When?' 'Now ...?' 'Why?' 'Don't know ...' 'What's in ...?' 'Don't know ...' 'What's so important ...?' Silence. 'What if ...' Silence. 'OK, but quickly, 'cause I should be locking up now.'

Brenda was indeed quick, and, within moments, the object of her quest had been discovered – just as she'd been told – and she was back in the playground ready to return the mysterious white poly bag to the agitated Mrs Stewart. But the parade had gone. 'Oh, bother,' Brenda muttered to herself, 'and I was so looking forward ...' There was nothing else for it. She would just have to catch up. So with her precious cargo dropped deftly into her bike-basket, Brenda was up and on board and pedalling off down the village street as fast as she could go.

By the time she'd caught up with the parade it was over, and the whole crowd was milling about outside the church hall. 'Strange,' thought Brenda, dismounting at the back of the gathering, 'I thought they were all going inside for ...' But her musings were interrupted by the shrill, instantly recognisable voice of Mrs Stewart. 'Brenda! Brenda! Did you find it?' Brenda gave a thumbs-up. 'Well then, child, don't just hang around at the back. Come down here and give me the bag.' Within moments a still bemused Brenda was handing over a white poly bag to a clearly relieved Mrs Stewart who immediately delved inside it, obviously looking for something important. And triumphantly she unearthed – a large, black key. Turning to the assembled company she announced, 'Here it is folks. The hall key! We'll be inside in no time.'

And in no time, that's just what happened. With the hall door now opened – courtesy of a Mrs Stewart with a key from the bottom of a white poly bag – the crowd streamed inside to begin the end-of-parade festivities. A still bewildered Brenda was the last one to join the party. And as she laid her old bike beside the other bikes against the church wall, she found it hard to believe that she and her bike's basket had been carrying the key to celebrations all the time – and she'd never even known.

***But ...*** (From "Welcoming Each Wonder" by Tom Gordon)

I was asked to go.

The instructions were clear;

the command was compelling;

it appeared I had no choice.

And I kept thinking, 'But ...'

I returned as I was bid.  
The duties had been completed;  
diligence was duly reported;  
everyone was pleased.  
And I was still thinking, 'But ...'

I joined in with the crowd.  
The gathering moved on;  
the preparations had worked;  
my part had been important.  
And I still dwelt on the, 'But ...'

I was told there would be more –  
instructions to follow;  
duties to fulfil;  
obedience to offer.  
And always the, 'But ...'

I'm still on the go.  
I'm playing my part;  
I'm doing my bit.  
I'm offering myself –  
including the 'But ...'  
that never goes away.

## Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

- A suggested playlist of songs for the [Season of Easter](#) can be found online.
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.
- CH4 59 – “Oh, come, and let us to the Lord”

- CH4 64 – “Sing all creation”
- CH4 65 – “Jubilate”
- CH4 78 – “Oh, set ye open unto me”
- CH4 83 – “I rejoiced when I heard them say”
- CH4 364 – “All glory, laud and honour”
- CH4 365 – “Ride on, ride on in majesty”
- CH4 366 – “Come into the streets with me”
- CH4 367 – “Hosanna, loud hosanna”
- CH4 368 – “Shout hosanna”
- CH4 369 – “Here comes Jesus on a donkey”
- CH4 370 – “Ride on, ride on, the time is right”

The following new hymns are suitable for Palm Sunday worship and beyond.

- “Someone in the Crowd” – to the tune of “Wir Pflügen” (CH4 229). Suitable for Palm Sunday, widening the context to imagine people with different responses to the event.

It wasn't just the children who shouted out his name,  
And followed the procession through the streets when Jesus came  
Astride a humble donkey, on that amazing day ...  
It wasn't just the children to cheer him on his way.

*Waiting with the children were some who couldn't sing.  
It wasn't just the children there with songs of joy to bring.*

It wasn't just disciples who raised us on to cheer,  
And chanted their 'Hosannas' and 'The Son of God is here';  
'The royal line of David'; 'God's servant has been blessed' ...



It wasn't just disciples with praises being expressed.

*Watching with disciples were some who made no sound.  
It wasn't just disciples there when people gathered round.*

It wasn't just the faithful who cheered him loud and long,  
And cast their coats before him as they jostled with the throng  
When Jesus caused a rumpus, and turned things upside down ...  
It wasn't just the faithful who welcomed him to town.

*In amongst the faithful were some who didn't know.  
It wasn't just the faithful there who joined in with the show.*

It wasn't just the certain who waved their branches high,  
Who let their true 'Hosannas' ring, but never questioned, 'Why?'  
A king who rides a donkey, ignoring power and fame?  
It wasn't just the certain who watched as Jesus came.

*Here I am processing, more humble here than proud,  
Just hoping I'm accepted now – as someone in the crowd ...*

- “Come you people” – to the tune of “Ave Virgo Virginum” (CH4 414). For many, Palm Sunday has become an act of worship focussed on children. This hymn looks at Palm Sunday through different lenses – seeing the meaning from an adult perspective.

Come, you people, swell the throng!  
Leave your doubts and questions!  
Wave your branches! Sing your songs!  
Follow the procession!  
Hear the children shout and cheer  
With excited voices.  
Join their cry, 'Our Lord is here!  
All the world rejoices.'

Come, you people, praise His name!  
'Glory in the highest!'  
Shout 'Hosanna!' Sing His fame!  
Lose your fears and shyness!  
'Blessèd is the one who comes

From the Lord above us.  
Crash your cymbals, beat your drums!  
Jesus is among us.

Come, you people, make the way  
Fit for one so holy.  
King of kings, yet on this day  
Humbly bourn, and lowly.  
Set aside your worldly thoughts  
And your expectations.  
Greet His coming as you ought.  
Here is your salvation.

Come, you people, don't depart  
When this pageant's finished.  
Let the passion of your hearts  
Still be undiminished  
When hosannas die away –  
They just start the story.  
Come with Jesus all the way  
To His Easter glory.

- “The sound of praising” – to the tune of “Lewis Folk Melody” (traditional, but based on the arrangement in CH4 510). A hymn reflecting on the excitement of the Palm Sunday story.

Listen to the sound of praising!  
Something great is happening here!  
Little children cry, ‘Hosanna!’  
Crowds of people shout and cheer.  
What procession's this that's coming?  
No triumphant lord it brings,  
But, instead, a humble Jesus  
Coming as a servant king.

Crowds of people press and jostle;  
More and more soon gather round.  
‘Make some room for this procession!  
Cast your cloaks upon the ground!’

So I join in all the cheering,  
Wave my branches with the rest,  
Throw my coat to make a pathway  
Fit for such a special guest.

Jesus, on a donkey riding  
Down this royal thoroughfare ...  
Does he fear what fate awaits him?  
Well he knows his Easter's here!  
Will I only stand and watch him  
As he travels past today?  
Or will I begin a journey  
With his friends along his way?

Now I know the waiting's over,  
I'll step out beyond the throng,  
With the faithful and the doubters,  
Offering my 'Hosanna' song.  
No more watching from the sidelines!  
No more standing in the wings!  
Now I'll start my Easter journey,  
Following Christ, my Servant King.

- "Halleluiah Day" – to the tune of "St Asaph" (CH4 745) or "Forest Green" (CH4 304). A hymn which anticipates, or is suitable for, Easter Day.

Sing loud! Your joyous voices raise,  
And cast your gloom away!  
Sing loud! Come, fill this house with praise  
On this most glorious day.  
Let halleluiahs greet the sun  
That brings an end to night.  
The grave is conquered! Life has won!  
Come, meet the Lord of Light.

Sing softly then, in questioning tones;  
With reverent hearts, bow low.  
Sing softly, though your faith conceals  
The doubts you dare not show.

“Where is He now?” “What does it mean?”  
You ask with yearning hearts.  
The grave is empty – so it seems.  
Is this the place to start?

Sing on! Despite your deepest fears  
You’ll not be cast aside.  
Sing on! Even with your heartfelt tears  
You will not be denied.  
Your Easter’s here! Despite your doubts  
New hope begins today.  
The grave’s the signpost, facing out  
To show the pilgrim way.

Sing loud once more! The time has come  
To shout the glad “Amen!”  
Sing louder still! Step out as one  
To follow Christ again.  
The time is now! Let Christians sing  
And walk the Easter Way.  
The grave’s forever lost its sting  
This halleluiah day!

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.

- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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