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Sunday 2nd April 2023

Palm Sunday

The Rev’d

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**Note**

Large Sections of the Church, and the Lectionary have, since the 1970s, tried to unite, in Palm Sunday, the joy and exuberance of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and Jesus’ death on the Cross. Given that, for most worshippers, the next time they will be in church will be Easter Sunday it’s useful, on Palm Sunday, not to skip the cross. There can be a tendency to go from the joy of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter morning without passing through the rest of Holy Week. The Passion reading is dramatic, long, and poignant. It can be made more so through dramatic reading in three voices. The joy of the Palms can be increased through imaginative processions and activities around them. Combining both palm and passion is good liturgy and good pastoral practice.

**Call To Worship**

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

**Hosanna to the Son of David!**

Blessed are those who honour God!

**Hosanna in the highest heaven!**

Blessed are they who follow Jesus to Calvary

**Hosanna to the Son of David!**

Blessed are we who hope to rise with Him in glory.

**Hosanna to the Son of David!**

**Liturgy of the Palms**

**Reading**  *St Matthew 21: 1 – 11*

**All Age Activity**

You may wish to have palm branches which you turn into palm crosses – lots of resources on how to do this on the Internet but I’ve never managed it successfully!

Or, gather the congregation, and youngsters outside the church for the first reading, then get the young people to lead the congregation in putting palms (get some larger ones) and cloth on the floor maybe in the aisle and in the sanctuary area.

Have the Passion Reading read in three voices – Narrator, Jesus, and Others and get the youngsters to play the crowd scenes crying “crucify him!” at the relevant moments.

**Blessing of Palms**

*You may wish to ask the younger people to bring a tray of palms up and to give them out after the blessing.*

Eternal One,

from before the ages you loved the world

and yearned for creation’s reconciliation with you.

Embodied One,

in the fullness of time You came to show us how to live,

challenged the powers, upset the religious, worried the authorities,

and on this day, entered your city as its rightful king.

The people acclaimed you with joyful shouts and strewn palms.

May we acclaim You as our king, and follow You in Your work.

Holy One,

bless now these palms,

let them remind us of the ways in which Jesus unsettled the status quo,

showed a different way of being royal,

and undermined the powers of His age.

As we keep these palms at home,

remind us of the radical nature of Your call to us, now and evermore, Amen.

**The Liturgy of the Passion**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

We come to worship You O King of the Ages,

but puzzle at this thing called kingship.

Aren’t kings meant to be powerful?

Shouldn’t they have security and attendants?

Surely they ride in state - in horse and carriage?

Yet you rode on a donkey – hardly befitting a king!

Your attendants were a rag bag of assorted fools,

no red carpet, no preparation,

just the shouts of fickle crowds with makeshift palms.

And where, O King, was your security?

Kings aren’t supposed to be put on trial and executed.

What type of king are you?

As we ponder your crucified victory, we confess that we’ve failed to understand You.

We’ve acclaimed you as king without thinking about what You mean by kingship.

We’ve grumbled about crucifixes without thinking of the pain you endured.

We jump to the empty tomb but skip Gabatha and Golgotha.

We sing hosanna and hallelujah, but forget your pain and passion.

Forgive us O Wounded King, give us time to change,

that as we follow You, we learn to count the cost of Your terrifying triumph. Amen.

Our help is the name of the Lord, who is making heaven and earth!

The Eternal One is our strength and joy and forgives us when we turn around.

So have faith –

faith that you are forgiven,

faith that you can follow,

faith that the crucified triumph of Calvary is yours too,

faith that you can have the grace to forgive yourself and find freedom. Amen

**Prayer of Illumination**

Open the power of your Word to us, O Most High,

that we may hear and ponder

Your gracious love, Your fierce tenderness

and Your insistent call

to recognise the powers of our age are overthrown,

that we may acclaim Jesus, our crucified God,

as our subversive yet victorious king. Amen.

**Reading** *St Matthew 26: 14 – 27:66*

This reading is powerful when set for three voices: Narrator, Jesus, and Other. You can buy this in the Jerusalem Bible translation from Waterstones or Amazon – search for “The Passion Readings for Three Voices” (You’ll need three copies). You can also find Matthew’s Passion reading here <https://www.oremus.org/liturgy/lhwe/matthew.html>

which you could cut and paste into a new document. This site

<https://www.lectionarypage.net/Resources/PassionGospelsInParts.html>

allows you to download each Gospel’s version of the Passion, set for three voices, as a Word document.

**Sermon**

*There is a great temptation to try and explain things when we read of Jesus’ death. The horror of it means we search for meaning, interpretation, and reason where, sometimes, it’s best just to ask and wrestle with questions. What follows is the sermon prepared for the Daily Devotion service. It has also been set with images and could be downloaded from here*

[*https://youtu.be/YvmJji48P74*](https://youtu.be/YvmJji48P74)

*and shown in worship. Email me via* [*andy.braunston@urc.org.uk*](mailto:andy.braunston@urc.org.uk) *if this link doesn’t let you download it. Alternatively you might like to read the text that follows (use a puzzled voice) or you may like to take the themes and craft your own sermon.*

What kind of King are you Lord? We’ve got a king again now; and we’ve known of kings for years. Kings wear crowns, have retainers and flunkeys, command armies, live in unimaginable wealth, have stories fed to the press to keep the positive news flowing – though that doesn’t always work of course. Kings have families who we are taught to honour and respect. Kings have security – discrete agents, hidden weapons, and security vetting.

Yet none of that seems to be accurate for you. You were born in a stable, not a palace. Your first years were spent in exile not private school. You didn’t wear a crown – you seemed to own nothing except your clothes. When you were crowned it was with thorns as a cruel mockery of your reign. You had disciples not flunkeys – and some of them weren’t very reliable. You had no armies to command, no weapons to rely on. No press in your day of course but I can’t imagine you having stories planted on the sly. You had heaven’s armies to protect you - but they didn’t do a good job now did they? What type of king are you Lord?

What type of priest are you Lord? We know about priests – though we have lots of different names for them – ministers, vicars, pastors, presbyters – but the job’s the same. They have to look holy, often wear odd clothing, tell of God’s actions, be a bit distant, mix with the right people – marry the type of person who is acceptable in a range of settings. They have to balance being radical with being careful, navigate a plethora of difficult people with tact and, often, seem to follow establishment lines. They have to be creative in liturgy honouring both tradition and change.

Yet none of that seems to be accurate for you. We don’t know where you trained but your command of the Bible and its teachings is second to none. You didn’t seem to look that holy, you didn’t keep that professional distance that ministers are supposed to have. You really mixed with the wrong people – sex workers, collaborators, and dirty gentiles. Your marital status would have led to some questions at a ministry interview – close to John **and** Mary; that would have raised some eyebrows. And what about tact? You really can’t call people “white washed tombs” and get away with it! You can’t call the king a “fox”! (See my earlier comments, Lord, about kings.) I learned very early on in my ministry not to call the church members “morons” - yet you always seemed to be doing that. You called the religious people “snakes and vipers” and implied some people are pigs. All I can say is it’s good you didn’t have a difficult Eldership to work with! You’d not have lasted long. And your preaching….not very focused on the Establishment was it? You seemed to sit fast and loose with tradition – stretching laws to breaking points, reinventing liturgy, bringing new meanings and offering mystery not explanation. What type of priest are you, Lord?

What type of leader are you Lord? Leaders have to be slick, they need mission statements and visions for the future. They have focus groups quietly working out what’s the best way to get a hearing. Leaders now avoid saying what they really think but want, instead, to please their base. Leaders offer cheap tricks where they blame outsiders for the ills of the world and build themselves up. Leaders need to be popular – don’t you know that Lord?

Yet none of this seems to be accurate for you. That nice rich guy who wanted to follow you – you told him to give away all that he had! Come on, wouldn’t a nice donation been good enough? Your message is memorable, I’ll give you that, but would it get through a focus group. Turn the other cheek? Love your enemies? If asked for our coat we have to give our shirt as well! See you in the poor and naked and hungry and imprisoned! And then there’s all that stuff on money. You just wouldn’t get a hearing now Lord. Couldn’t you offer a bit of cheap grace now and again – Your Church often does after all! You didn’t seem to please your base either – you were nasty to the Pharisees and often told Jewish people that gentiles were more righteous than them. You didn’t find a scapegoat for social problems did you Lord? Look where that ended you up. What type of leader are you Lord?

What type of victory did you win Lord? Victory is, well victorious Lord. It involves, often, bloodshed, stunning military or political tactics, the vanquished foe being left to slither away, or being put on trial for their crimes. Victory is about triumph, noise, joy, pomp, marches, celebrations.

Yet none of this seems to be accurate for you. You let yourself be captured. You let Judas, of all people, betray you. You were rude to the High Priests and so wilful to Pilate. You could have summoned the angels and have had a bit of smiting there. That would have been a victory; that would have unseated the might of Rome – imagine the songs your mum would have sung then! Instead you let them release the insurgent and drag you off to Calvary. You let them strip you naked – where’s the victory there? Where’s the dignity? You let them nail you to the Cross and then be left to slowly suffocate. That’s not victorious! You let them mock you, hang a sarcastic sign over your head, torment you with temptation to summon High Heaven’s Host – that would have shown them if you’d done that! Imagine their faces if Michael had been let loose there on Calvary; imagine if Gabriel had done his thing with the Chief Priests! That would have been victorious. Yet you forgave the centurion and his guard. You promised paradise to a good for nothing thief – you didn’t even check he believed the right things.

And then you cried with anger, pain, and desolation, turning the ancient Psalm back on God, knowing you’d been forsaken. That’s not victory. What type of victory is that?

**Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in God, the Eternal Majesty,

**source of all light and love, in whom we live, move and have our being.**

We believe in God, En-fleshed Word,

who proclaimed the coming Kingdom,

preached good news to the poor

and release to the captives.

**He healed the sick, bound up the broken hearted,**

**ate with outcasts, forgave sinners, and called all to repent and believe.**

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,

Jesus was tortured, crucified, and made to suffer unimaginable pain.

**On the Cross Jesus defeated the powers of evil**

**that seek to rule our world.**

**God, the Eternal Majesty, raised Jesus from the dead,**

**vindicating his crucified victory.**

We believe in God, Abiding Spirit,

who calls us to be Church,

**who binds us together in the waters of baptism,**

**and who sustains through the Lord’s Supper.**

We pray and work for the coming Kingdom,

**and know, at the last, that God is our ultimate comfort in life and in death.**

**Amen.**

**Intercessions**

We bring our prayers to You, our crucified God,

knowing that You hear us as we pray for our world.

Eternal One, before the ages You loved our world and all that is in it,

you formed us from stardust, and set us in this place,

giving us all that we need to sustain life and flourish.

Teach us, O Most High, to live in harmony with creation,

to cherish what You have given us,

that we may understand and reverse climate change where we can,

and learn to live with a new climate where we can’t.

*pause*

In Your mercy, God, **hear our prayer.**

Crucified One,

we bring before all those who are tortured today,

and those who torture;

we pray for those who are condemned to death this day,

and those who condemn them;

we bring before you all who steal this day,

and those who limit human flourishing.

Give us grace to understand your forsaken victory,

that we may challenge the powers that seek to rule our world,

and remind them, and us, that they stand defeated.

*pause*

In your mercy, God, **hear our prayer.**

Powerful One,

we bring before you the crowds and peoples of our age,

swayed by social media, charismatic leaders, and corrupt politicians,

as easily as the crowds in Jerusalem were so long ago.

Help us to stand firm when we waver,

help us to maintain truth when all around are lies,

help us to love when the voices bay for hatred.

*pause*

In your mercy, God, **hear our prayer.**

O Most High,

in silence we bring to you places of pain and people in need….

Accept our prayers, Eternal One,

for the sake of Your son, our saviour, Jesus Christ,

who taught us to pray saying: Our Father…

**Offering**

Today we think of the paradox of money. Judas could not live with the reward for this treachery and the priests could not easily use blood money; yet money as a means of exchange is necessary in our society. We know that the notes in our pocket have been used to pay for weapons, people, drugs and misery yet also are used to relieve pain, bring joy and abundant life. Through giving we wean ourselves of our fear of having no money and give to causes greater than ourselves.

Eternal One, we ask you to bless our gifts,

of time, talent, and treasure, that we may use them wisely,

and that we may be freed from our need to worry,

and come to trust You, who count every hair on our heads. Amen.

**Blessing**

As we have watched our wounded lover suffer betrayal and unjust trial,

all for the love’s sake,

be ready to defend the cause of justice in the face of tyranny.

As we have seen our wounded healer be nailed to the Cross by human hatred,

be ready to love, even in the face of hate.

As we have seen our broken victor die a death of ignoble nobility,

be prepared to live valiantly.

And the blessing of our almighty, yet crucified, God:

Father, Son ***or*** Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word

and Holy Spirit, and Abiding Presence

be with you all, now and always, Amen.

**Music**

Tracy Chapman’s Change, which asks how we’d change if we knew this was our last day on earth, is a good track to gently start worship with whilst Michael Franti and Spearhead’s track Hey, hey, hey asks some questions about good and evil and is an interesting track to end worship with. The Performing Rights Society waives any payment for music used in worship. You can find the pieces easily online.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Palms | | | | |
| All Glory Laud and Honour | 208 | 364 | 262 | 9 |
| Ride on Ride on in majesty | 209 | 365 | 265 | 580 |
| Ride on Ride on the Time is right |  | 370 |  |  |
| Passion | | | | |
| Come and See, Come and See |  |  | 270 | 85 |
| Here Hangs A Man Discarded | 225 | 385 | 273 |  |
| Come Wounded Healer Your Sufferings Reveal |  |  | 271 |  |
| From Heaven You Helpless Babe | 522 | 374 | 272 | 162 |
| O Sacred Head Sore Wounded | 220 | 382 | 280 | 520 |
| Lifted High On Your Cross |  | 386 |  |  |
| This is your coronation |  | 391 |  |  |
| What Wondrous Love is This |  | 395 |  |  |
| Sing My Tongue How Glorious Battle | 228 | 398 | 268 |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* StF – *Singing the Faith* MP – *Mission Praise*