

“Words On The Word”

Reading the Readings with Revd Stephen Froggatt

Sunday 5th April 2020

Lectionary Passages for Year A Lent 6:

Old Testament: Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Psalms: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29, Psalm 31: 9-16

Epistle: Philippians 2: 5-11

Gospel: Matthew 21: 1-11, Matthew (26: 14-27:10) 27: 11-54

Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday

The Second Sunday of the Passiontide sequence, the period immediately preceding Easter, is called Passion Sunday. The Sunday also marks Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem accompanied by the waving of palm branches, which is why today is also called Palm Sunday. Certainly, of the two choices, Palm Sunday makes for a more child-friendly Sunday Service theme on this day, but if we are not careful we risk going straight from the jolliness of Palm Sunday's cheering to the jolliness of Easter Alleluias without any contemplation of the Passion of Christ at all, especially if we do not observe Good Friday.

Today (or rather tomorrow!) is also the beginning of the final week of Lent, the week we call Holy Week, so if you have been making any Lenten observances since Ash Wednesday (back on 26th February, when the world was very different), then you are finally on the home stretch. Just 6 more days to go! Holy Week is the week of Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper) and Good Friday (Jesus' Crucifixion), and in many churches there is a special service each day.

Our readings today cover both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday.

On the pages that follow, first come the various Bible readings, then the reflections on the readings.

This week's six Reflections start on Page 11.

Readings for Today

Old Testament - for Passion Sunday

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Isaiah 50: 4-9a (NRSV)

Psalm (1) - for Palm Sunday

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29 (NRSV)

Psalm (2) - for Passion Sunday

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.

For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbours, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.

I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.

For I hear the whispering of many— terror all around!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.”

My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Psalm 31: 9-16 (NRSV)

Epistle - for Passion Sunday

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with
God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in
human likeness. And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that
is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven
and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the
glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2: 5-11 (NRSV)

Gospel (1) - for Palm Sunday

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Matthew 21: 1-11 (NRSV)

Gospel (2) - Optional Part 1 - for Passion Sunday

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and

arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" The high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?"

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money." After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

Matthew 26: 14-27:10 (NRSV)

Gospel (2) - Main Reading - for Passion Sunday

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realised that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a

place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Matthew 27: 11-54 (NRSV)

LENT 6 - Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

The Suffering Servant

It has been said that Charles Jennens' libretto for Handel's Messiah - essentially just a selection of verses from Scripture - was in fact 'the work of genius'. His skilful selection of a handful of Biblical passages to state the central truths of Christian theology "has its own right to exist as a work of art", in the words of the theologian Roger A Bullard. This Old Testament reading provides the text for the line "He gave his back to the smiters".

As Christians, we read the Old Testament "through Jesus eyes" - meaning we look back and ask every book what it says about the God revealed in Jesus. The passages of "the suffering servant" in Isaiah, especially, are viewed as prophetic words about Jesus' own suffering. In this passage today, we can read these words and feel the pain Jesus would have felt at the hands of his tormentors.

The passage goes further, of course. The writer speaks of the help that the Lord provides in these times of trial, and the confidence that he then has to "set his face like flint" and face with future without fear.

In what ways is this passage like a Psalm?

TEXT STUDY: Highlight the words and phrases of weakness in one colour. Highlight the words and phrases of strength in another. What does this show?

How helpful do you find it to think of Jesus while you read this Old Testament passage?

What words of confidence and faith can you take from this passage and claim for your own situation?

Psalm 118

Hosanna!

This first Psalm is the Palm Sunday Psalm. The word “Hosanna!” literally means “Save us we beseech you”, as translated in the version here, and can be used as a form of adoration. In Jesus’ time the Psalm would have been used during the post-harvest Festival of Shelters (Sukkoth). Now the harvest had been gathered in, this was a prayer for the rains to return. “Save us!” literally implied “Give us water so that we don’t die!” As part of that rain-prayer, branches of willow and palm would have been waved and beaten on the floor.

Look also at the confidence expressed in this Psalm. Not once or even twice, but *three* times do we read “his steadfast love endures forever!” The phrase is repeated even more times in the section of the Psalm we have left out. This is a joyous Psalm, and clearly expresses great trust in the Lord.

Jesus would have know this psalm very well, and indeed quotes the verse about ‘the stone that the builders rejected’ in order to apply it to himself - in a way that only becomes clear after he himself has been rejected, crucified and resurrected.

John also links back to this Psalm with the reference to Jesus saying “I am the Gate”. Again, reading this Psalm “through Jesus eyes” we find ourselves anticipating much of the New Testament.

What parts of this Psalm are familiar to you, if any?

What does this Psalm tell us about what God is like?

WORD STUDY: Find out what the words “Blessed” and “Bless” mean in a Bible Dictionary if you can get hold of one.

Are you reminded of any hymns or songs?

Psalm 31

My Bones Waste Away

This second Psalm is the Passion Sunday Psalm. It is an example of a “Lament Psalm” - in fact there are more lament psalms in the book of Psalms than any other category.

TEXT STUDY - highlight the passages about suffering in one colour, and highlight the positive phrases in another. How does this compare with the passage from Isaiah 50?

The lament psalms remind us that it is OK to shout out to God when we are distressed, angry, overwhelmed and sorrowful. We're good at singing praises to God, and we're very good at asking for things (trying hard not to make them 'shopping list prayers'). We're not so good at lamenting - naming the pain, asking Why? and not getting an answer. Bishop Tom Wright makes precisely this point in his most recent [article](#) this week for Time Magazine.

This particular lament Psalm is the Psalm of choice for Passion Sunday because Christians read it and find within its verses the experience of the suffering Messiah. The One who prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane for his Father to 'take away this cup of suffering - yet not my will, but yours be done'. We can even hear this Psalm in Jesus' thoughts as he prayed for his persecutors, looking beyond the assault of the crucifixion to the fulfilment of his 'hour' (to use the term in John's Gospel) in his resurrection from the dead and his ascension back to the Father.

Did Jesus know he would be raised again after his death? He certainly spoke of it to his disciples, but I'm sure the anguish of the cross was still as real as ever. As a Jew who would have learned the Psalms by heart, Jesus would have been able to look beyond the suffering and simply to offer himself in complete trust to God, just like the Psalmist in this psalm.

TOPIC STUDY - find out about Psalms of Lament. Perhaps see if you can identify some of the others as you read through the Book of Psalms.

Why do we tend to avoid those whose suffering is beyond what we can imagine?

Compose a Lament Psalm of your own for today.

Epistle At The Name Of Jesus

I've always had a very soft spot for Philippians 2. I've always loved the associated hymn and its triumphant tune CAMBERWELL (which is a joy to play). It was the passage I chose for my service of Admission as a Local Preacher, and the passage I chose when called upon to lead an impromptu Bible Study, with no preparation, on holiday once in Scotland. It was the passage we studied closely in our Intermediate Greek classes at College, and the passage I chose to speak on at my last Wesley Guild invitation.

TEXT STUDY - Look at the 'shape' of the verses.

Commentators have noticed the "high-low-high" shape of the passage, with words of exaltation at either end, and the central depths focused on the word 'Cross'. Can you see this?

This passage is humiliating. We see Christ stripped of his divinity not just to the point of humanity, but further than that. To the point of a slave, but further than that. To the point of a criminal, but further than that. To the point of a crucified criminal, but further than that. To the point of a dead, crucified, criminal slave. There is no lower place to go. This is God entering into our humanity so fully that even the lowest of the low are included. God knows what it is like to be you.

You have to pause and reflect before you go on. The text then accelerates, like a rocket, from the very depths to the highest heights. The silence of death to the shouts of Easter. From the nameless dead criminal to the Name above all names. From humiliation to Lord of all, to the glory of God the Father.

Some commentators think that Paul is quoting an ancient Christian hymn here. What do you think?

In what way would this passage be appropriate as a CHRISTMAS reading?

Jesus as slave - we are called to be like Jesus. What aspects of slavery/servanthood do you find helpful or unhelpful?

Gospel (1)

The Triumphant Entry Into Jerusalem

For the past three years or so, Jesus has been causing an unprecedented commotion. You can almost hear the urgent whispers - is this really the Messiah we have been waiting for all these years? Is this really the Messiah of whom the Prophets spoke centuries ago? Now he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey! This singing, dancing crowd is wonderfully portrayed in the film "Jesus Christ Superstar" as the crowds sing "Hey-Sanna! Ho-Sanna!"

Conquering heroes rode into the city on a large horse, full of pomp and majesty. Jesus deliberately chose humility instead, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The quote from 'the prophet' is a reference to Zechariah 9:9 - recognising this, the crowd (who would have known that quote well) realised that this WAS the Messiah, and so began shouting "Save us!" ("Hosanna!") and all the associated paraphernalia of the Psalm 118 Palm Procession was pressed into action.

It's interesting that in churches we often wave our palm crosses on this day. Partly because we don't have easy access to real palm branches, but also because, like the crowd, we are a fickle bunch. What we hold in our hand is both a palm branch and a cross. Palm waving on the Sunday is followed by shouted demands for Crucifixion before the week is out. As we hold our palm crosses, we have to ask ourselves how we can reconcile the rejoicing and the condemning - the palm branch and the cross - as we hear our own voices in both crowds.

BIBLE STUDY - If you have access to a Study Bible, find out what it says about the events of Holy Week in the life of Jesus.

This passage contains a quote from Zechariah 9:9 - what does the rest of that chapter tell us about the Messiah?

Find a palm cross from a previous church service, or make a paper one using instructions online. As you hold it in your hand, meditate silently on both the palm waving and the shouts for crucifixion, and on your own part in both crowds.

Gospel (2)

Thursday of Holy Week

More is written in the Gospels about Jesus' last week than about any other period in his life. In fact, John's Gospel can be divided into two halves - "The Last Week" and "Everything Else". In the church year, this is the time when we have the longest Gospel readings. We need to read right through them. We need to enter into them. We need to feel the discomfort.

The Gospel for Passion Sunday includes the optional first part of the events of Thursday evening, the day before Good Friday. We read about the accounts of Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, the Last Supper, the Gethsemane Prayer, the sleepy disciples, Jesus' arrest, the disciples' desertion, the trial before Caiaphas and the leading away of Jesus to Pilate. By the end of this optional section we are into the small hours of Friday morning.

The main passage includes the trial before Pilate, the torture by the guards and Jesus' crucifixion.

Set aside an hour this week, perhaps on Good Friday, to read the whole Passion narrative in one of the Gospels. If you read quickly, read it again. Read it in time with your breathing. Let it speak to you.

Hold silence after your reading.

Find a cross in your house - you could even draw one - and meditate on it.

Sing quietly "My Jesus, My Saviour" or "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross"

Hold silence or pray as you feel led.