

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Lenten & Passiontide Hymns



Sunday 15th – Saturday 29th March

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Sunday 15th March Psalm 140

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

1 Save me, O LORD, from evil men;
From vi'lent men protect my way,

2 For evil schemes
are in their hearts,
And war they stir up every day.

3 Like snakes, their tongues
have sharpened tips
With vipers' poison on their lips.

4 Keep me, O LORD,
from wicked hands;
From men of vi'lence set me free,
For they conspire to trip my feet.

5 The proud have hidden snares
for me;
They spread the meshes
of their net,
And on my pathway traps are set.

6 O LORD, I say, "You are my God."
LORD, listen to my cry for aid.

7 O Sovereign LORD,
my Saviour strong,
In battle you protect my head.

8 Refuse the wicked their desire;
To shame them, make their plots
misfire.

9 O LORD, let those who hem me in
Be overwhelmed by their own lies.

10 May they be thrown into the fire
Or miry pit, and never rise.

11 May liars find no place to stay,
The violent be swept away.

12 I know it is the LORD alone
Whose judgment vindicates the poor;
It is the LORD who will uphold
And make the needy's cause secure.

13 To you the righteous praise will give;
The upright in your sight will live.

Reflection

This is a Psalm for a time of disorientation.

The Psalmist is lamenting. He has been viciously stung by venomous slander. He cries out to God to save him from the evil, violent folk who have campaigned against him with such malice, and who seek with callous determination to entrap him in situations of torment and harassment. And then he states in faith: "You are my God". And as he does so, the Psalmist remembers the ties of devotion that bind him to God, and turns in confidence to the divine warrior, his proven ally. His enemies are presumed to be God's enemies as well. He urges God to annul their plots and give the lying schemers their just deserts.

The language is strong. Imprecations such as here in verses 10 and 11, are often seen as an embarrassment to the Church and omitted from our lectionaries. Surely we are called to love our enemies, not to curse them! But is there not still a place for these verses in our scheme of things? After all, we too have to face up to fake news, abuse and calculated malice, both personal and public. We are indeed called to love our enemies but this calling must be exercised in the context of the claims of justice – if there is injustice, that must be made right.

The Psalm ends on a note of confident affirmation. God alone vindicates the poor and needy. God liberates those who lack security and comfort; God saves them even when there is no immediate outward sign of this happening. And so, this Psalm shifts the way things are. The opening list of complaints ends in the conviction that God will listen to the Psalmist and change his circumstances and those of his world for the better.

Prayer

God of all truth,
in the circumstances of my life today,
give me greater constancy in my love of you and of my neighbour.
May I be patient in hope through Jesus Christ
who for the joy that was set before him endured the Cross,
despising the shame
and is now seated at your right hand in glory. Amen

Jesus' death provides a 'permanent covenant between God and humanity that can never be broken' (The New Interpreter's Bible) because of that, we can sing, 'My Lord, thy grace receiving, let faith my fears dispel, that I may die believing, and in thee, Lord, die well'. With faith and hope we can die well knowing that there is a far better life ahead of us than we have already experienced, a life lived in the presence of our Creator God and our Risen Saviour.

Prayer

Lord of life and glory,
It is hard to think of our own death,
yet we know that we can live life now thanks to your death.
As we approach this Eastertide,
let us not be too hasty to avoid Good Friday,
instead let us sit with your death Lord Jesus,
meditating on the reality of its horror and pain,
but still knowing that death will lead to new life. Amen

3 For this thy dying sorrow,
O Jesus, dearest Friend,
what language shall I borrow
to thank thee without end?
O make me thine forever;
and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
outlive my love to thee.

4: Be near when I am dying,
and show thy cross to me
that I, for succour flying,
may rest my eyes on thee.
My Lord, thy grace receiving,
let faith my fears dispel,
that I may die believing,
and in thee Lord, die well.

St Mark 15: 17

And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.

Reflection

I have always wanted to preach on a hymn but never had the courage. Yet hymns can contain wonderful words and images – words and images we may find easier to understand than some Scripture and for me, this hymn is one of them. It speaks to what scares us most as humans, death. We are mortal; we have a finite time on earth and yet we don't like to think about it, let alone talk about it. We almost pretend that we will live forever, but despite medical advances - we won't!

We know we are not worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus yet still, Jesus died for me, he died for you; he died your annoying neighbour, he even died for that person in church you really don't like. But it's not just that Jesus died, it's what went with the dying – the torture, the mocking, the ridicule and the abandonment by his friends and by God too.

To an extent. Jesus death was a result of power politics and the Romans, well, they may mock his Messiahship - dress him as a pretend king in purple with a crown; they may even hail him as if he were Caesar, but still Jesus goes to his death as God's anointed.

Monday 16th March Led by the Spirit of our God

The Rev'd Dr Elizabeth Welch, is a retired minister, past Moderator of URC General Assembly and member of St Andrew's URC Ealing.

Led by the Spirit of Our God (Tune: Kingsfold)
Bob Hurd © OCP Publications

Led by the Spirit of our God,
we go to fast and pray
With Christ into the wilderness;
we join His paschal way.
"Rend not your garments,
rend your hearts.
Turn back your lives to me."
Thus says our kind
and gracious God,
whose reign is liberty.

3 Led by the Spirit, now draw near
the waters of rebirth
With hearts that long
to worship God
in spirit and in truth.
"Whoever drinks the drink
I give shall never thirst again."
Thus says the Lord who died for us,
our Saviour, kin and friend.

2. Led by the Spirit, we confront
temptation face to face,
and know full well we must
rely on God's redeeming grace.
On bread alone we cannot live,
but nourished by the Word.
We seek the will of God to do:
this is our drink and food.

4 Led by the Spirit, now sing praise
to God the Trinity:
the Source of Life, the living Word
made flesh to set us free,
The Spirit blowing where it will
to make us friends of God:
This mystery far beyond our reach,
yet near in healing love.

St Matthew 4: 1 - 11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,
and “On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Reflection

Halfway through Lent, we come to the re-telling of the time that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

Jesus wasn't on his own going into the wilderness. He was led by the Spirit, as the hymn reminds us. But this leading was not into a quiet and peaceful time away from all the challenges and rigours of daily life. It was into an even deeper time of testing, about Jesus' own sense of calling, how he understood this and whether he had the courage to live it out.

Our Scripture reading is the fourth ‘Servant Song’ from Isaiah, which is variously interpreted as a prophecy about Israel, or the Messiah. It picks up key themes of the Passion, and is at once both familiar and troubling - do we agree with Isaiah that God would want to crush anyone with pain? And I'm not happy with a ‘jam tomorrow’ theology that those who suffer in this world will be rewarded in the next. This is a reading to wrestle with, rather than gloss over due to its familiarity.

Prayer

Lord, we give thanks for the poets and musicians who help us explore, by looking at our faith through different eyes. We pray that they may be inspired by your Gospel to strengthen us in faith and service, and to challenge us to see familiar texts anew. Help us to step out of our comfort zones of familiar words and music, and open ourselves to new possibilities in our Christian lives. Amen

[Saturday 28th March O Sacred Head Sore Wounded](#)

The Rev'd Branwen Rees, East Wales Regional Minister

O Sacred Head Sore Wounded (Passion Chorale) RS 220

Paul Gerhardt (1607-76)

O sacred Head, sore wounded,
with grief and shame
weighed down;
O royal head surrounded
with thorns, thine only crown;
O Lord of life and glory,
what bliss 'til now was thine!
I read the wondrous story,
I joy to call thee mine.

2 What thou, my Lord, hast suffered
was all for sinners' gain:
mine, mine was the transgression,
but thine the deadly pain.
By this thy bitter Passion
Good Shepherd think on me;
vouchsafe to me compassion,
unworthy though I be.

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Reflection

It is hardly original to observe that a great poet can capture a thought in a few words that might take much longer to express in prose. I've long thought that Crossman captured something simple and striking not only about Christ's ministry on earth, but about our Christian calling in the phrase "Love to the loveless shown / That they might lovely be." But to turn great poetry into a great hymn (or even bad poetry into a good hymn - lots of scope for discussion there) you need a talented musician, and I suspect Crossman's verses would have been unknown not only to me, but many readers of this Devotion, had it not been for the twentieth century composer John Ireland. His tune 'Love Unknown' seems to me to capture the melancholy and loneliness of Christ's passion so well, with the flexibility to respond to the changing mood of the poetry as it is sung.

I wonder what drew John Ireland to these verses. Did the loneliness of the Passion had a particular resonance for him? His brief marriage was annulled unconsummated, and his private papers and biographers suggest he was a gay man at a time it wasn't possible for him to form a relationship with someone he loved.

The time of testing needed a time of preparation, a period in which all other concerns of daily living were set to one side, a space without the support of family and friends.

The time in the wilderness was counter cultural in terms of many of today's norms and values. So much was set to one side - food, possessions, home, companions on the way. It pushes against the present drive to fill each moment with activity or the internet, and to feel that it's a failure not to be busy.

In the wilderness Jesus finds himself, and the strength to resist the very real temptations offered to him, of food, of power, of worshipping a false God. From this base he receives the strength to live his life fully and courageously, even to the sacrificial end on the cross.

As I travel through this Lent, I pray to be open to the Spirit's leading, even when taken to strange and uncomfortable places. May I then be faithful to God in the temptations that come my way, so that I may better offer my life sacrificially in service.

Prayer

Oh God, may I follow where your Spirit leads. I give thanks for Jesus' courage in facing up to, wrestling with and resisting temptation. Grant me the courage to find the space in which I can be ready to wrestle with temptation. Give me the strength to resist the desires that lead me away from You. Prepare me that I may offer my life again in service to You. Amen.

Tuesday 17th March Christ is Our Light! The Bright and Morning Star
Jeff Newall, Lay Preacher, Christ the Vine Community Church, Milton
Keynes

Christ is our light! The bright and morning star (Tune: Highland
Cathedral) CH4 336 © Leith Fisher

Christ is our light! The bright and morning star covering with radiance all from near and far. Christ be our light, shine on, shine on we pray into our hearts, into our world today.	2. Christ is our love! Baptised that we may know the love of God among us, swooping low. Christ be our love, bring us to turn our face and see in you the light of heaven's embrace.
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3. Christ is our joy! Transforming wedding guest!
Through water turned to wine the feast was blessed.
Christ be our joy; your glory let us see,
as your disciples did in Galilee.

St John 2: 1 - 11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the

Isaiah 53

Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

My Song is Love Unknown (R&S) 207
Samuel Crossman (1624 - 84)

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?

2: He came from His blest throne
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know:
But oh, my Friend,
my Friend indeed,
who at my need His life did spend.

3: Sometimes they strew His way,
And His sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their King:
Then "Crucify!" Is all their breath,
And for His death
They thirst and cry.

6: Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine;
never was love, dear King, never was grief like Thine.
This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend

4: Why, what hath my Lord done?
What makes this rage and spite?
He made the lame to run,
he gave the blind their sight.
Sweet injuries! Yet they, at these,
themselves displease
and 'gainst him rise.

5: They rise and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
A murderer they save,
The Prince of life they slay.
Yet cheerful He to suffering goes,
That He His foes
from thence might free.

6: In life, no house, no home,
my Lord on earth might have;
in death, no friendly tomb,
but what a stranger gave.
What may I say?
Heaven was his home;
but mind the tomb wherein he lay.

bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Reflection

How often in life do we settle for second best or are we asked to accept something offered as a solution more in hope than expectation? Maybe we're happy with things that way as we're able to appreciate the eventual solution all the more when it comes. Maybe, on the other hand, if you're like me, you'd prefer an effective solution in the first place, one that is *expected* to work without the wasted resources and opportunities, not to mention the possible unnecessary suffering along the way.

Jesus was aware there was a problem to solve. People at a joyous occasion of a wedding were thirsty and the hosts will have been feeling embarrassed. The previous wine offering had been perfectly acceptable as far as it went but what Jesus 'brought to the party' was in a different league.

As Christians, why do we let those around us go about their lives in their own way in the hope that they'll be OK, whilst keeping to ourselves the real light, love and joy that relationship with Jesus brings?

Prayer

Gracious God,
help us to appreciate everything You have done for us,
particularly Your gift of Light, Love and Joy that is Jesus Christ.
Help us to share the Good News of Jesus at the earliest opportunity,
rather than as a last resort.
In Jesus' name,
Amen!

Wednesday 18th March Jesus Tempted in the Desert

The Rev'd Sue Henderson retired URC Minister member of Bradford on Avon United Church.

Jesus Tempted in the Desert (Ebenezer [Ton-Y-Botel])
Herman G Stuempfle © 1993 GIA Publications CH4 338

Jesus, tempted in the desert,
lonely, hungry, filled with dread;
"Use the power,"
the tempter tells him;
"Turn these barren rocks to bread!"
"Not alone by bread," he answers,
"Can the human heart be filled.
Only by the Word that calls us
is our deepest hunger stilled!"

2: Jesus tempted at the Temple,
high above its ancient wall.
"Throw yourself from lofty turret;
angels wait to break your fall!"
Jesus shuns such empty marvels,
feats that fickle crowds request;
"God, whose grace
protects, preserves us,
we must never vainly test."

St John 6: 35

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

3. Jesus, tempted on the mountain,
by the lure of vast domain;
"Fall before me! Be my servant!
Glory, fame you're sure to gain!"
Jesus sees the dazzling vision,
turns his eyes another way;
"God alone deserves our homage!
God alone will I obey!"

4. When we face
temptation's power,
lonely, struggling, filled with dread,
Christ, who knew
the tempter's hour,
come and be our living bread.
By your grace, protect, preserve us,
lest we fall, your trust betray.
Yours above all other voices,
be the Word we hear, obey

Closer to home, my late Jewish mother's father, who had received the military cross during the First World War fighting for Germany, perished at Auschwitz. Her great grandmother was shot at Theresienstadt. The Holocaust enigma remains an insoluble mystery for Judaism.

Our passage today from Luke as to the cost of following Jesus needs to be understood in the context of the "black and white" tonality of first century Rabbinic Judaism. Contrary to expectation, Jesus did not concentrate on the adventure of discipleship; its opportunities for personal growth, travel and evangelism; rather the tough, unconditional choices that would have to be made.

Any current organisation can only attract employees and promote company business by successful marketing strategies but candidates' success remains complex; as seen in Lord Alan Sugar's "The Apprentice!!" Travelling in obedience to God's call is one of the central tenets of Luke's Gospel; following Jesus is not easy - something the three "would be followers" in the text learned to their cost.

The lessons to be taken from this passage are that we should not base our security in material possessions alone but in our relationship with God; our priorities have to be assessed. Secondly that we should keep our earthly ties in perspective; continuing to respect our allegiances to our loved ones but prepared to live our lives in obedience to God. Finally, that in following Jesus we must be true to our word, refuse to be distracted and give our lives wholeheartedly to him.

Prayer

Teach me your ways, O Lord;
make them known to me.
Teach me to live according to your truth,
for you are my God, who saves me.
I always trust in you. Amen *Psalms 25: 4-5: (GNB)*

we seek release from illness, guilt, and death:
all people do, in faith or unbelief.

We turn to God when he sorely pressed,
and find him poor, scorned, without roof and bread,
bowed under weight of weakness, sin, and death:
faith stands by God in his dark hour of grief.

God turns to us when we are sorely pressed,
and feeds our souls and bodies with his bread;
for one and all Christ gives himself in death:
through his forgiveness sin will find relief.

St Luke 9: 57 - 62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

Reflection

The German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid the ultimate price for his faith and opposition to the ideologies of Hitler when hung at Flossenburg concentration camp on April 9th 1945. Bonhoeffer held that the Church, "had to share in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world" if it were to be the true Church of Christ. A similar price was paid by the Polish Catholic priest Maximilian Kolbe, put to death at Auschwitz in 1941.

Reflection

This hymn reminds us that in solitude Jesus wrestled with the world's standards and shunned them for those of God's kingdom. Jesus deliberately retired to this lonely place for a long time (which is what the term "40 days" means in Biblical terms).

All around him in this wild place were little broken pieces of limestone. They looked just like flat bread. The temptation came that he could feed not only himself, but he could win people over by giving them material things. In other words, bribe people into the kingdom. Jesus asserted people will never find real life in material things.

At the Temple pinnacle - a drop of 450 feet Jesus is urged to jump to be a sensation. Jesus declined knowing that you must not make senseless experiments with God's power. Jesus saw quite clearly the danger of being a nine-day wonder; sensationalism never lasts.

Finally standing on a mountain, from which the whole of the civilised world could be seen, the Tempter said; 'worship me and all this will be yours. I've got people in my grasp, you know. Don't set your standards so high. Just strike a bargain with me – just compromise a little and everyone will follow you.' Jesus replied showing there can be no compromise in the war with evil.

In the wilderness, stripped of defences and security, God and community come close. Wilderness is about struggle. It is in the choices made in the harshest times that we discover both who we are and the nature of the community to which we belong; it is where we wrestle with God. It is a place where God and ourselves can be found. It's the place where you discover your identity and vocation and God can meet us there.

Prayer

There have been times, O God, when we have given in to temptation. We have:

searched out the easy way;
longed for worldly things;
not followed your way and;
tried to live without you.

Help us to remember that:

people cannot live on bread alone;
we should worship You alone;
and not to put You to the test.

May we always guided by Your truth,
remembering you forgive and sustain. Amen.

[Thursday 19th March God of our Yesterdays](#)

The Rev'd Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Group

God of Our Yesterdays StF 241

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When we were in the darkest night
And wondered if our eyes would ever see the light
You were there Lord
When we were in the stormy gale
And wondered if we'd ever live in peace again
You were there Lord
You were there in the struggle
You were there in the fight
You were there all the time

and powerless, we experience a pain akin to “a sharp and piercing sword”.

Any consideration of Mary will ultimately point us to her Son. Mary points us to Jesus. We keep vigil beside her and, gazing upon him, know both God's sacrificial love and the cost of that love - both for the crucified One and his grieving mother. As we gaze, let us pray for a measure of her faithfulness and willingness to keep vigil with those who suffer and, with her, direct the gaze of all towards the One crucified.

Prayer

O God,
help me to stand with Mary at the foot of the cross:
that I might appreciate
the breadth and depth of your love.

I hold before you today
all who keep vigil beside those who suffer or are dying:
may they know comfort and strength in their heartache.

May those who suffer for their faith
find courage and resilience.

Inspired by the example of Mary
may I enable others to see you. Amen.

[Thursday 26th March We Turn To God](#)

The Rev'd Ian Gow, Minister, Eltham URC

We Turn to God When We Are Sorely Pressed CH4 393
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Tune, Eventide)

We turn to God when we are sorely pressed;
we pray for help, and ask for peace and bread;

3. For his people's sins chastised,
she beheld her son despised,
scourged and crowned
with thorns entwined,
saw him then
from judgement taken,
and in death by all forsaken,
till his spirit he resigned.

St John 19: 25

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Reflection

As a child we sang from *The Methodist Hymn Book* (1933) and I cannot recall an occasion when #185 (this hymn) was used. There is a Free Church tendency to minimise (if not entirely omit) the place of Mary. As we contemplate the manger, our eyes, hearts and minds are drawn to the One who is God incarnate. Similarly, as we gaze upon the Cross it is the One crucified who is the focus of our devotion. Yet in both of these scenes Mary, his mother, is part of the 'picture'. Her presence at the Cross prompts Jesus to commend her to "the disciple whom he loved" with the words, "Here is your mother" and "from that hour the disciple took her into his own home". (John 19: 26-27)

Here in this hymn – and the Gospel scene that inspired it – we see the ultimate heartache borne by Mary. It captures the tragedy and sadness of the scene: *Who, on Christ's dear mother thinking such a cup of sorrow drinking, would not share her sorrows deep?* Whilst our gaze is, rightly, is drawn to the One crucified we might also ponder his mother as she represents the countless number of parents, children, partners and friends who keep vigil beside the suffering of their loved ones. Helpless

4. Jesus may her deep devotion
stir in me the same emotion,
fount of love, Redeemer kind,
that my heart, fresh ardour gaining,
Near thy cross, O Christ, abiding,
and a purer love attaining,
may with thee acceptance find.

We praise You the God of our yesterdays
We praise You the God who is here today
We praise You our God
As tomorrow comes

2 So whatever lies ahead
Whatever roads our grateful hearts
Will come to tread You'll be there Lord
And we will fix our eyes on You
And know that there is grace enough
To see us through You'll be there Lord
You'll be there in the struggle
You'll be there in the fight
You'll be there all the time

Bridge

You're always closer than we know
Always more involved and in control
We will trust our lives to You
The One who was and is and is to come

St Mark 5: 21 - 43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for

she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Reflection

Some would craft our story today around the amazing healings of a girl and a woman. However, not everyone in need of physical healing can tell such an amazing story. I have recently spoken with a couple of people who have told me how God healed them. I rejoice with them.

burnout. Mental illness is rampant in the clergy community as it is in our world.

If the Church can cultivate a space where wounds and tears are welcome, those wounds may turn into stories and testimonies of God's love and care. Those testimonies need time to grow. Many need time and space in the soil. They need a community without judgement so that healing can spring forth new life. This is the practice of resurrection.

As William Cullen Bryant wrote, "Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again."

Prayer

Give us the courage to be unashamed:
of ourselves, of Your message, of You.
As You draw us to you in your suffering,
may our wounds call us to service, passion, and resurrection. Amen.

[Wednesday 25th March At her Cross Her Vigil Keeping](#)

The Revd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister of The Crossing (Methodist/United Reformed Church), Worksop & Wales Kiveton Methodist Church

At The Cross Her Vigil Keeping CH4 387 13th Century

At the cross her vigil keeping
stood the mournful
mother weeping
where he hung, the dying Lord.
for her soul, of joy bereaved,
bowed with sorrow, deeply grieved,
passed the sharp
and piercing sword.

2. Who, on Christ's
dear mother gazing,
pierced with anguish so amazing,
born of woman, would not weep?
Who, on Christ's
dear mother thinking
such a cup of sorrow drinking,
would not share her sorrows deep?

St John 12:24

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Reflection

In charismatic circles, “lifting Jesus up” has a tradition of meaning ‘praising God with great vigour’. Most times, that implies corporate praise within the safe walls of a tabernacle rather than where Jesus’ true “lifting up” occurs: outside.

The Greeks sought Jesus, thinking perhaps the best way would be to enquire within. Their answer was an affirmation that suffering and vulnerability brings reconciliation.

Nature’s best work seems to be in letting go of life in order to make room for life. In a time of climate emergency, a cracked open seed is a small sign that we have (maybe) a little time left to save the planet. If the seed remains uncracked, insular in the ground, it is dead to the world, and the world is dies without it. So it must crack open to give life.

Insular spirituality, no matter how charismatic, does not draw us to the truth of Jesus’ passion. Jesus brings the world toward the cross in suffering akin to the most vulnerable on earth. We are brought toward Jesus to be his body on earth.

“Without your wound, where would your power be?” is an Angel’s question to a bruised physician in Thornton Wilder’s alternative play about the pool of Bethesda called *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*. “In Love’s Service, only the wounded soldiers can serve.”

Church members and ministers alike carry wounds and hurts. Painfully too many recent stories in Christianity involve clergy who experience

On the other hand, I have spoken with person after person who have not had physical healing.

So instead of healing, I want to think about two encounters with Jesus in this story. Jairus had clearly met Jesus before. In his desperation to save his daughter’s life, he turned to Jesus, hoping Jesus would do what no one else has been able to do—bring health to his daughter. The woman with the flow of blood had probably also heard Jesus teaching or at least heard of his ministry of healing. In their need they turned to Jesus.

Both were people of faith, Jarius as the leader of the synagogue, clearly a man of faith. Jesus said the faith of the unnamed woman had made her well. They both have life-changing encounters with the divine.

Where have you encountered Jesus or the divine? Have your prayers opened space in you to encounter God? Have you seen God in a person who has gone out of their way to listen to you or help you with a task? Have you heard God speaking through the voice of a mentor or even a stranger?

Jairus and the unnamed woman sought out Jesus. The encounters with Jesus changed them. So whatever lies ahead, we too can seek God, and when we encounter God, in people and in Word, may we be open to deepening our faith, and to the healing and wholeness God brings.

Prayer

Living God,
in times of need and times of joy,
open our eyes to encounters with you.
Help us to see you in the ordinary
and in the extraordinary moments.
May our encounters help us grow in faith.
May those encounters bring us healing.
May our encounters bring us close to others who follow you. Amen.

Friday 20th March Ride on Ride On, The Time is Right

The Rev'd Ron Reid is a retired minister in the Mersey Synod serving as Link Minister at Rock Chapel, Farndon. He is a member at Upton-by-Chester URC

Ride On, Ride on, The Time is Right

John Bell © Wild Goose Worship Resource Group

Tune: Winchester New or Ride On CH4 370

Ride on, ride on, the time is right:
the roadside crowds
scream with delight;
Palm branches mark
the pilgrim way
Where beggars squat
and children play.

2: Ride on, ride on,
your critics wait,
intrigue and rumour circulate;
New lies abound in word and jest,
And trust becomes a suspect guest.

3: Ride on, ride on,
while well aware
that those who shout
and wave and stare,
are mortals who,
with common breath,
can crave for life and lust for death

St Mark 11: 1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany,
near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them,

4: Ride on, ride on,
though blind with tears,
though dumb to speak
and deaf to jeers.
Your path is clear,
though few can tell
their garments pave
the road to hell.

5: Ride on, ride on, the room is let,
the wine matured, the saw is whet;
and dice your death-throes
shall attend
though faith, not fate,
dictates your end.

6: Ride on, ride on,
God's love demands.
Justice and peace lie in your hands.
Evil and angels' voices rhyme:
this is the man and this the time.

From this place of darkness, the light of Christ burns still.

In this place, where we feel separated from God by our suffering, the curtain is torn in two.

He who seems like a clown, laughs in the face of hopeless death and dances with us in the potential of light-filled freedom.

Prayer

Loving Christ,
as we stand, watching,
dwell with us in our suffering,
hold us when we are overcome and find no hope,
inspire us to stand as friends, with all who suffer,
and fill us again, with the joy of your ever-shining light. Amen

Tuesday 24th March Lifted High On Your Cross

The Rev'd William Young, Minister, Essenside URC Glasgow and Morison Memorial Clydebank

Lifted High On Your Cross CH4 386

Ian Cowie (1923-2005) Tune Pulling Bracken

*Lifted high on your cross,
drawing all folk,
drawing all folk;
lifted high on your cross,
drawing all folk to you.*

Down you came to live among us
part of your creation,
knowing poverty and sorrow
sharing each temptation.

2: On the gallows
there they nail you
God despised, rejected;
deep within your earth
they hide you,
till you're resurrected.

3: Light and love
pour down upon us
healing, recreating;
you relive your life within us,
all life consecrating.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.' And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Reflection

Today we stand as his friends and 'acquaintances', at a distance, watching. With 2000 years of separation it can be hard to see the view Luke places before us, but we are, perhaps, brought close by our own experiences of loss.

Are faith and hope absurd phantoms in the face of death and pain?
Is life emptied of all meaning, drained out by times of bleak distress?
Is there hope to be found during national and global injustices?

Wren's hymn asks us to consider how we view this discarded man; as scarecrow, a nonsense, a clown?

Standing and watching this scene, viewed through our own lives of complex human suffering, we can be forgiven for descending to our own hidden depths as we suffer with him. We can be forgiven for seeing a discarded, hopeless nonsense with no hopeful word to say in our time.

And yet.

We stand here as his friends, in the knowledge of what is to come.

'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna!

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Reflection

The time is right

How often in our lives, and indeed in our Christian lives, do we prevaricate? There is always an excuse to put things off; anything for an easy life; it will cost too much; someone else might do it; it might not work. I write just before Advent. God judged that the time was right to gift Jesus to the world. Where would the world be today if, on that morning thirty or so years later, Jesus had turned over in bed?

Your critics wait

Always. Some people delight in saying "I told you so". Occasionally that might be encouragement, but more usually it's likely to be gloating. More than once over my life I have been guilty of this, so perhaps proving

untrustworthy. The Gospel stories suggest that Jesus never gloated; only encouraged; displaying trustworthiness; looking his critics in the eye.

While well aware

I am aware that when you read this the political landscape may have changed. Or it may not. You will know. One thing to thank God for is growing awareness of the existence of food poverty on our doorsteps. Those who use foodbanks are mortals too. Jesus was acutely aware of what he was doing and of the humanity of those in need.

Though blind with tears

What am I blinded to today? In childhood were we told “It’s no use crying over spilt milk”? Sometimes tears are all we have. But vision clears and the path ahead emerges. There might be trip hazards. Jesus did not trip.

The room is let

Plans can fall into place. Outcomes may be clear to some, but not to all. The trick is discerning whether we actually see clearly or are being deluded. Jesus could see.

God’s love demands

All. Jesus saw and knew the time was right.

Prayer

Let the same mind be in us as in Christ Jesus -
as he rode past beggar and child,
critic and shouter, confident that
the time was right.

Let the same mind be in us as in Christ Jesus -
when God demands of us justice and peace
and integrity to his creation
the times will be right.

watch what I say and think,
correct me when my thoughts are wrong,
let me be a soothing balm amidst strife
guide me to speak and think the truth
despite what others say, think or do.
Let me be a beacon of truth for you Amen

[Monday 23rd March Here Hangs a Man Discarded](#)

The Rev’d Martin Knight is minister of St Paul’s URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

Here Hangs a Man Discarded CH4 385

Brian Wren

Tune Shrub End (Passion Chorale works well if verses are doubled)

© Stainer and Bell 1975

Here hangs a man discarded,
a scarecrow hoisted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.

2: Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word
when faith and hope seem
phantoms
and every hope absurd?

3: Yet here is help and comfort
for lives by comfort bound,
when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound:

4: Life, emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,
can share in broken silence
our deepest emptiness;

5: And love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair,
can name our hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.

6: Christ, in our darkness risen,
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise,
till faith receives its sight.

Reflection

The Psalm starts with a cry to God in prayer. David is asking God to stop him being drawn into false arguments.

It can be easy to say something in the heat of the moment especially when, like David, we feel under pressure from our enemies. David had experienced many adversities and in 1 Sam 24 we read how David did not take an opportunity to hurt Saul despite many people encouraging him to do so. Instead, by not harming Saul, David gained respect from Saul. When we read the newspapers, or look at social media, we see people trading insults and virtual hatred of those with opposing views. Rather than being drawn into this, as Christians, we should pray that we are free from evil thoughts.

Sometimes we may see a friend doing or saying something that is wrong and we can rebuke them as long as we do it in love and let it be “a soothing balm” (v5). As you read this we will probably still be in post Brexit negotiations. This has brought out so much division and we should be looking to be that soothing balm.

How do we decide what to do and when? I was given the list of Devotions and chose to write about this Psalm because today is my birthday. Birthdays can be a time of excess and overindulgence, but the Psalmist reminds us to “Keep ... from taking part in what the evil do” (v3). We can celebrate and enjoy the good things of life, but we must not let anything come between us and God.

If we trust God He will protect us from the wicked and we will instead go free to rejoice in Him.

Prayer

Loving God,
like David I Cry to you,

Saturday 21st March *The Servant King*

Jonnie Hill, Ordinand at Northern College and member of Chorlton Central Church

The Servant King

Graham Kendrick (b1950) © 1983 Thank You Music

From heaven you came helpless babe Entered our world, your glory veiled Not to be served but to serve And give Your life that we might live	2: There in the garden of tears My heavy load he chose to bear His heart with sorrow was torn 'Yet not My will but Yours, ' He said
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<i>This is our God, The Servant King He calls us now to follow Him To bring our lives as a daily offering Of worship to The Servant King</i>	3: Come see His hands and His feet The scars that speak of sacrifice Hands that flung stars into space To cruel nails surrendered
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4: So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone Him
each other's needs to prefer for it is Christ we're serving

St Luke 22: 39 - 46

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

Reflection

The opening line of Graham Kendrick's song *The Servant King* could almost locate us in the season of Advent or Christmas. Yet the song could hardly be called a modern carol given that the journey from 'heavenly babe' to death is a pretty swift one.

Growing up in the evangelical tradition, I sang this song with gusto throughout much of my early worshipping life. As worship songs go, it is one I'm still happy to sing – not because of theology or anything so lofty, but because of the honesty of human emotions evoked by its words.

Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, surely was a 'garden of tears' when the weight of what lay ahead for Jesus bore down heavily upon him. For me, I'm not sure there is a clearer picture of Jesus' humanity elsewhere throughout the Gospels. Who of us in Jesus' position would not have felt similar and asked that the cup be taken from us?

Like Jesus' contemporaries who expected the Messiah to overthrow Roman rule, I suspect many of us too crave the triumphant and powerful image of God found in many contemporary worship songs. Who wouldn't want a God who rescues and saves us from the suffering imposed by our enemies? And yet, the story of our God made flesh is not one of conquest and victory, but of sacrifice and service.

I wonder if Jesus' life of sacrifice and service would meet the criteria for the social media phenomenon of 'living your best life'. I suspect not. Nevertheless, Jesus' call to follow him in love, sacrifice and service is as true now as ever. How will we respond?

Prayer

Servant God,
In humility you came to us as Word made flesh,
You who created the heavens and earth

showed us the way of love and sacrifice.
Help us to follow you,
and to live our best life in service,
and for the sake of the Good News. Amen.

Sunday 22nd March Psalm 141

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

1 O LORD, I call to you.
Come quickly! I'm in need!
And, when I cry to you for help,
to my appeal give heed.

2 Like incense may my prayer
before your face arise—
The raising of my hands be like
the evening sacrifice.

3 Keep watch, LORD, on my mouth
and guard my lips, I pray;
4 Let not my heart to evil thoughts
be drawn and led astray.

Keep me from taking part
in what the evil do;
Let me not taste
their choicest food,
lest I be false to you.

5 A righteous friend's rebuke
will be a soothing balm;
Such blows,
in kindness aimed at me,

will never do me harm.

Against the wicked's deeds
I make my constant prayer;
6 Their rulers
will be thrown from cliffs,
and they will perish there.

The wicked then will know
my words were spoken well.

7 Like ground that's ploughed, their
bones are strewn
before the mouth of hell.

8 But now, O Sovereign LORD,
on you I fix my gaze;
Do not deliver me to death—
you are my help always.

9 Protect me from the traps
the wicked set for me,
10 And let them be ensnared
themselves,
while I instead go free.