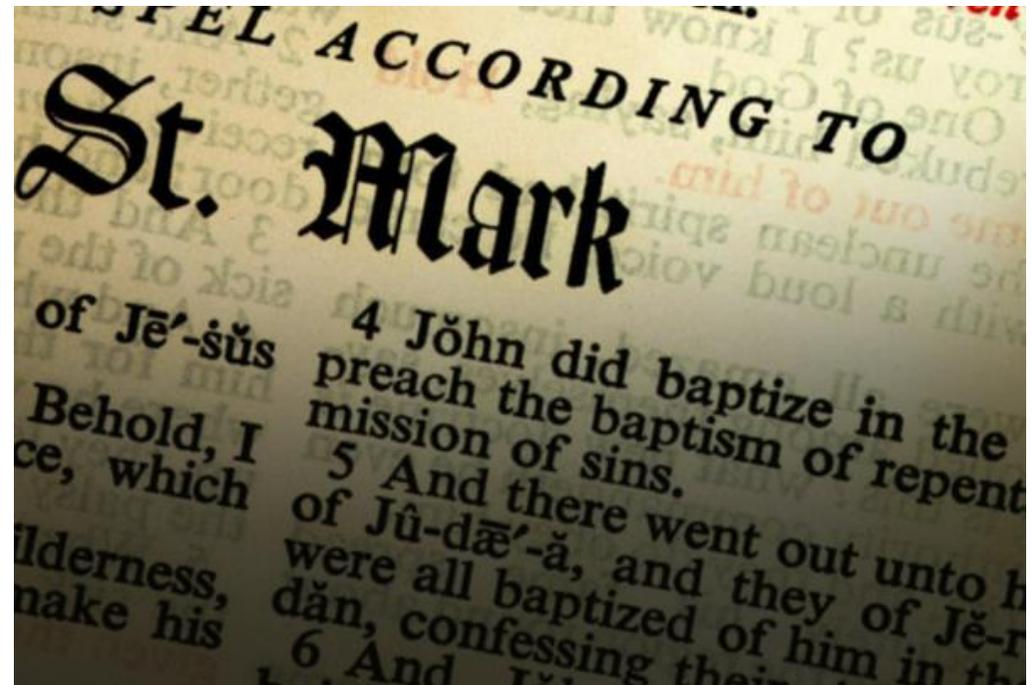


Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Mark's Gospel 5
Chapters 13:18 – 16:8



Sunday 14th March – Sunday 4th April

Introduction

Between now and Easter we will be reading through the fast paced St Mark's Gospel.

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Sunday 14th March Psalm 35

The Rev'd David Coaker serves with Grays URC in Essex.

O God, my faithful God, true fountain ever flowing, without whom nothing is, all perfect gifts bestowing:	2	give me a healthy frame, and may I have within a conscience free from blame, a soul unstained by sin.
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sacrifice.

Holy Spirit brighten our view of the world with renewed hope in the coming of your Kingdom.

Amen.

2 Give me the strength to do
with ready heart and willing,
whatever you command,
my calling here fulfilling--

to do it when I ought,
with all my strength; and bless
whatever I have wrought,
for you must give success.

3 Keep me from saying words
that later need recalling;
guard me, lest idle speech
may from my lips be falling:
but when, within my place,
I must and ought to speak,
then to my words give grace,
lest I offend the weak.

4 When dangers gather round,
oh, keep me calm and fearless;
help me to bear the cross
when life seems dark and
cheerless;
help me, as you have taught,
to love both great and small,
and, by your Spirit's might,
to live at peace with all.

from James 3: 9-10 and Psalm 35

Johann Heermann (1630); Translator: Catherine Winkworth (1858)

Public Domain

You can hear the tune here

<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/205841>

Reflection

Psalm 35 is a national lament using the voice of the king to call for God's aid against deceitful enemies. The military imagery is unmistakable asking God to take up shield, buckler, spear, and javelin. There are no shades of grey: the nation is blameless, the enemies are contemptible and are to be obliterated, and, if victorious, the nation and king will praise God.

Read the Psalm and imagine it being delivered to a mass gathering on the

eve of war. There is mention of rejoicing in God for delivering the weak and needy, and praising God's righteousness, but how would the crowd hearing it respond? How would the mood of the assembly shift as the enemy's crimes are outlined, their punishment described, over and over again? Would the natural reaction be shouts of 'Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!' or something much more brutal and life-denying?

At times of crisis subtly, nuance, and comprehensiveness are left behind, and binary arguments come to the fore. This pattern has been shaken in recent decades, but it remains the predominant one.

But a situation is named a crisis for a reason. A crisis demands a swift and definite response and we rely on the judgement of our leaders to see us through. You can't deal with a crisis in any other way, and our selection and retention of leaders needs to be based on their judgement.

Of course there is also the tendency to either amplify a situation to make a crisis, diminish an actual one, or ignore a potential one until it strikes. But yet again, this is all based on our leaders' judgements.

We all have a part to play in participating in debate, campaigns and elections. We need to be involved or else we end up with the leaders we deserve.

Prayer

Living God, when being involved can feel a relentless slog, light a spark of thankfulness.

When possibilities are being explored, may openness, respect, and tolerance fill the air.

When decisions need to be made, may equity, justice, and virtue burn.

When hindsight makes things crystal clear, may compassion, honesty and humility glow.

When forks in the road are before us, may tempers, grudges and disappointments cool. Amen

Reflection **Go and Tell**

In most, if not in all cultures, the thought of dying and coming to life is crazy. People don't rise from the dead after dying, back then and now. The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome had every reason to believe that Jesus would still be dead when they approached the tomb. Arguably we would have thought the same. As clearly recorded by Mark, these women didn't anticipate the resurrection. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us away from the tomb?" Unfortunately, none of them would even remember what Jesus said would happen. "It is necessary that the Son of Man suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day." As the story unfolds, you realise that people didn't expect Jesus to rise from the dead, even his own disciples. The attitude of the disciples was that everything had finished in tragedy.

The women's witness of the empty tomb is a message to be proclaimed: "But go and tell." Who are the audience here? It is the disciples, and Mark singles out Peter as the spokesperson. So someone has to proclaim this awesome story of the resurrection. We know from the other gospels that the women didn't stay silent forever. The message of the young man is addressed to us. Go and tell the world that Jesus is alive. Therefore, we must not merely celebrate the resurrection, but we respond to it. In short, Mark's gospel calls us to act and speak: Go and tell. On this Easter Sunday, as we gather at the tomb, it is up to you and me to make a decision. Will we live in fear, or will we go and tell?

Prayer

God give us new eyes to which to behold your glory and presence on this Easter Day.

Jesus give us the grace of Easter and teach us to be thankful for your

Joseph, Mary, and Mary probably felt there was nothing they could do yet their actions - seemingly meaningless at the time - are recorded for posterity and remembered every year as we wait at the tomb wondering what we can do.

Prayer

O God of our pain, our grief,
and our helplessness,
hold us when we wait,
comfort us when we feel there is nothing to be done,
and encourage us in our everyday love.
Amen.

4th April - Easter Sunday

The Rev'd Samuel Silungwe, minister, Rockingham Forest Group (London Road, Geddington and Brigstock URCS), in Kettering.

St Mark 16: 1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Monday 15th March St Mark 13: 28 - 31

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, retired minister worshipping at Thornbury URC

'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Reflection

The thing about fig trees is: they don't do what we in the temperate zones of world climate expect. During Spring the sensible farmer moves beehives around apple and pear orchards for the good of both fruit and bees - and that's it. When Summer is near in the Middle East, fig trees need attention to their fruit, specialist attention, so that the main crop will be good.

The overwintering, Spring taqsh or breba crop is okay if you are hungry (Mk 11:12-14, 19-25) but you don't expect the main Summer crop to be large and juicy unless the work of ensuring male flower-bearing branches are introduced into the female trees is done. These methods had been reliable for many centuries and continue to be used.*

Generally regarded as a collection of unrelated sayings rather than a complete parable and explanation, it may be that these verses were extended, post Easter, to convey an eschatological sense. Given that the lifespan of a fig tree can be hundreds of years, "until figs cease to bear fruit" might become, quite sensibly, "Until heaven and earth". Reading an eschatological perspective into the original sayings brings all kinds of confusion or, as one person asked, "you mean they grow figs in the Holy Land?".

These four verses make sense to fig growers, as Jesus' comment is a call to action: because the Summer is near you know there is work to do. It's also a call to reflect on what is taking place, even if you don't have a fig tree or feel the need to tend your fig tree, you'll see others at work; you can't ignore it and pretend nothing happens. "Don't get over-excited when you see the new Summer leaves: the specialist is coming. This crop of figs isn't ready for harvest until the work has been done, mark my words." Perhaps the original is a comment about tending and teaching new Christians - the five marks of mission.

Prayer

Creator God, as we tell the good news of the Kingdom, teach us to be prepared to do the work required at the right time, so that, tending need in loving service, we might seek to transform unjust structures of society treasuring all creation in order that earth is sustained and renewed.

* Comments on fig trees: *Ficus carica* is gynodioecious and usually needs a male fig (caprifig) nearby to pollinate (there are now some parthenocarpic varieties). It was normal to take branches from a male and tie them to female trees. This is hard and difficult work as the sap is a severe skin irritant. Taqsh - the small overwintering figs gradually drop off as the new leaves appear. *Ficus sycomorus* - is parthenocarpic in the middle East being a tropical specie which was exported or taken from (probably) Egypt as cuttings without the pollinator wasp specific to it. By "gashing" the young fruit it can be induced to act as if pollinated. This is hard and dangerous work.

<https://www2.palomar.edu/users/warmstrong/ww0501.htm>

Tuesday 16th March St Mark 13: 32 - 37

The Rev'd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith is a healthcare chaplain in Salford and

of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

Reflection

Sometimes we feel there is nothing we can do. In the face of illness, pandemic, and death we feel helpless. Today, the Church has nothing to do - except to watch and wait at the tomb. Today we recall when God died on the Cross and, in the terrible shadow of death, there is nothing, seemingly, we can do.

And yet things happened.

Joseph of Arimathea had the courage to go to Pilate to perform one last mercy for Jesus; to give him the dignity of burial after the indignity of naked crucifixion.

Joseph took Jesus' body down, tenderly wrapping him in a cloth and laid Him in a newly hewn tomb.

Mary and Mary watched and noted - no doubt planning to come back after the Sabbath to clean Jesus' body and prepare him for a proper funeral.

There is always something we can do in the face of illness, pandemic and death. It might not seem much but we can chat, offer the shoulder to cry on, look out for each other, find practical ways of support and stand with those who grieve.

On this day they call good, the man was frightened. It had been easy to be brave in that bright, warm room, saying that he had already been anointed for burial. Anointed now by his own sweat, blood and tears he was terrified, hanging there, filled with dread, aghast that he had been abandoned, crying out in fear: “My God, why did you abandon me?”

On this day they call good, he bore the torment; withstood the scorn; endured the pain; suffered in silence almost to the end. Not because he wanted to – but had to. Not pointless, mindless violence inflicted on him. He understood the point of it all too well. Our sin.

On this day they call good, he suffered with such dignity that a pagan soldier recognised him. “Truthfully, this man was a son of God.”

On this day they call good, they crucified a man and revealed our God.

That is why we call this day good.

Prayer

God, when we are misunderstood, grant us forbearance.

God, when we are injured, grant us assistance.

God, when we are in pain, grant us relief.

God, when we are frightened, grant us reassurance.

God, when we feel abandoned, grant us sustenance.

God, when we finally understand, grant us generosity of spirit.

[3rd April - Holy Saturday St Mark 15: 42-47](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom

member of The Church at the Centre, Tonge Moor

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

Reflection

I remember March 16th 2020 surprisingly clearly. It was the last day my partner went into work before Britain’s first Covid-19 lock down. My every sense was on high alert: noticing the drop in noise levels as fewer cars were on the road, being attentive to keep distance in a way that was not yet a new normal, feeling concern for those living homeless as the streets emptied, and seeing their shock too.

Even when we can feel change coming, when we are alert to the signs it has begun, we do not fully know the ways it will unfold. We become alert, vigilant, attentive as adrenaline changes our minds and bodies. We lay down memories more clearly. We weigh tiny pieces of data carefully, deciding whether to act or remain on guard.

Being constantly on alert is hard upon the body, eventually we must let ourselves drop our guard. When this cannot happen, when danger is constant, we risk becoming hypervigilant - a symptom of traumatic experience and some medical conditions – in which we stay alert to threat, change, and stimulation and are unable to let our defences down. To faithfully follow Jesus we have to balance his call to live alert to the signs of the times with the call to love abundantly. Staying alert to the leading of the Holy Spirit is not the same as hypervigilance. Let

watchfulness be tempered openness and vulnerability, the qualities needed to show love to our neighbours and enemies. Stay watchful, and let both your eyes and heart be drawn to what is unfolding around us. Stay safe, even so many months on, for protecting one another is an act of love. And for those blessed with sleep, enjoy that rest. We will be glad of your new energy again tomorrow.

Prayer

Wait for the Lord,
be strong, take heart,
says the Psalmist.

As we wait for dawn to break,
As we wait for change to come,
As we wait on Your Word to us,
Renew us with rest, with hope, with reassurance,
So that our hearts can love deeply,
As You teach us to love. Amen

[Wednesday 17th March St Mark 14: 1- 2](#)

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker, Ansty Road
URC, Coventry

It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, 'Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.'

Reflection

It's two days before Passover and the chief priests theoretically should be preparing for the festival, yet instead, they are scheming and plotting to have Jesus killed...not exactly the definition of right holiness...and they

afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Reflection

This is the day they call good

On this day they call good, they took a man like no other before or since. A man they did not understand; who spoke the truth when it hurt; who denounced; gave offence; defended the poor; healed the sick; touched the untouchable; befriended prostitutes but did not make use of them. A man of integrity – who loved.

On this day they call good, they killed a man. They stripped him naked; beat him with iron-tipped whips till the blood flowed free. They vilified, degraded and abused him, ramming thorns of a caricature crown deep into his skull.

On this day they call good, they tied the man to a rough-hewn wooden cross; drove nails deep into the beams through his wrists and ankles, the sound of ripping flesh drowned by shouts of "Crucify!" The pain of rough, cold iron tearing through sinew and vein lubricated by his blood flowing freely, dulled by the throbbing ache in every part of his body.

- Why was Simon picked from the crowd?
- Was he simply the closest to hand?
- Did he look like an outsider because of his clothes or skin colour (despite many Cyrenian Jews calling Jerusalem home)?
- Did he look most able to carry the heavy weight (or least able, if the soldiers were feeling particularly brutal)?

In the image from Cyrene Mission, Simon is carrying a cross through scenes of daily Matabele life. In our daily lives, in our culture and world, we will likely find ourselves forced to carry crosses not of our own making: stereotypes and injustices that have been heaped on our shoulders.

Before Jesus is crucified, he, the one who has washed our feet, will pick these crosses up again, saving us from their weight, freeing us to care for our cattle and to enrich our lives with creativity...and yet he is taunted and abused.

Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us,
today we choose to walk with you aware of the burden you carry.
We choose to walk with Simon
aware of the burdens we all carry, put on our shoulders by others.
We mourn this injustice, giving thanks for those who take and release the strain for us and for your showing us that there is life beyond such unjustified torment. Amen

[2nd April - Good Friday St Mark 15: 33-41](#)

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

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the

recognise that it could cause a riot if handled badly. This passage could have come straight out of a newspaper in the last 12 months...

You might be sitting there wondering “what can I do about how the world is now?” But I want to challenge you to make the small changes, read the news with a critical eye, ask what bias the writer, editor and paper have. If you see something derogatory on Facebook, challenge the author of it. If you think your local council has poor policies regarding homelessness, speak to others in your church and community, challenge the local council to change things. If you don't like the government's approach to asylum seekers and refugees, write to your MP, get your whole church to write to the MP for the area the church is in, join in a campaign and write to the Home Secretary. If you feel called, march in protests, remembering we may feel called to civil disobedience, shouting, chanting and waving placards but we should never resort to violence. Raise your voice with those on the margins, but never raise your fists.

We can't change the past, we can't stop the chief priests from plotting, we can change that Jesus was arrested, falsely charged, tortured and murdered by the state. We can't change this but neither should we, but we should do something about the injustices we see now. The chief priests were letter of the law folk but we have been called by God to be spirit of the law folk, we are called to walk an authentic, and holy life and to live with integrity with the world.

Prayer

God of Justice

Challenge us to live and act with integrity and authenticity.

Enable us to be spirit of the law people, and to act with love in all we do and say.

Help us each day, to see the world through the eyes of the marginalised, not through eyes of privilege so that we can hear the call of need in the world around us. Amen.

Thursday 18th March St Mark 14:3 - 9

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Moderator, East Midlands Synod and member of St Andrew's with Castle Gate, Nottingham

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

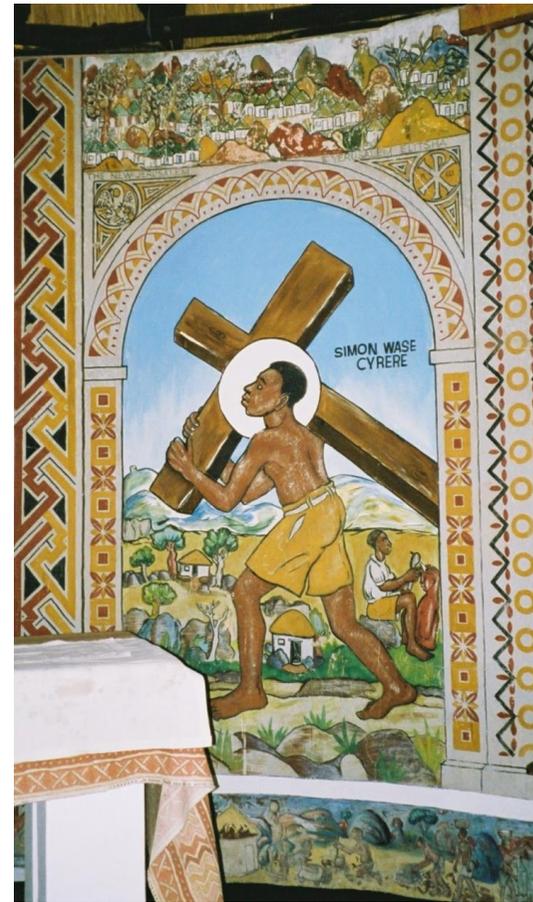
Reflection

Call me a pedant but I am careful to promise anyone "I will never forget you" (as I fear that eventually I will be unable to remember anyone!) In today's reading, however, Jesus responds to those angered by the woman's extravagance by saying, in effect, that what she has done will never be forgotten. Her response was deemed to be so significant that it merited serving as a memorial to her. And it is worth noting that in Mark's Gospel we are not her name. Hers is an act of sacrificial and extravagant generosity without recognition nor dependent on any expectation of receiving anything in return.

Her generosity provoked anger – masked as concern for waste – but generosity is not essentially about the monetary value but of attitude. I suspect they were embarrassed too – both by the intimacy of the act itself and that it highlighted their own meanness. In "A New Kind of Christian", Brian McLaren writes, "If we can't discipline ourselves to learn

Reflection

This Maundy Thursday, I find myself drawn to the character of Simon of Cyrene.



During a trip to Zimbabwe in 2002, I was able to visit Cyrene Mission, on the outskirts of Bulawayo; founded in 1939 by Edward 'Ned' Patterson, who was a pioneering art teacher. It was the first African school in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to have art classes. The chapel is full of the most beautiful murals and sculptures by the students, depicting moments in the life of Jesus, including an image of Simon of Cyrene set behind the altar (see attached, taken in 2002).

Ned's intention was that all students could be independent, 'able to care for his cattle, able to build his own home and to make it's furniture and even to enrich them by carving and design.'

Simon carrying the Cross is the 5th Station of the Cross and he is often portrayed undertaking an act of sympathetic generosity, but there is no Biblical basis for this. Simon's encounter appears in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) with him being 'compelled' to carry the Cross – we might ask ourselves why:

These times of Covid have put many into positions of weakness and caused feelings of helplessness and shame. People who were previously secure are now vulnerable. I pray we will not allow society to abuse their weakness; Not heap public shame or humiliation on them. And that we will reach out and help them to hold their heads high.

Prayer

Lord, as we remember the humiliation of your son, our Lord- His supreme sacrifice, we remember all those in this country and across the world who are also helpless, abused and exploited. May they feel your love as they struggle and may we find ways to reach out to them and show them your love.

[1st April - Maundy Thursday St Mark 15: 21 - 31](#)

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

They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

the joys of generous living, I think we're an embarrassment to the Gospel". It's a challenging thought: rather than being embarrassed by generosity there is an embarrassment to the Gospel when it is absent. We do well, therefore, to reflect on the extent to which our churches and their annual accounts display a generosity that is less focused on "us" and "our place" and more on people in places beyond our walls.

Generous living. And in our own personal resources – time as well as money – how willing are we to be extravagant in our generosity and without insisting that we are named and thanked? For ultimately, Jesus suggests, it is our acts that will be remembered more than our names. And, most crucially, ours is a God whose love for us is extravagantly generous.

Prayer

Forgive us, God of generosity,
when we succumb to the temptation to be mean-spirited and tight-fisted
and when we despise those who shame us by the breadth and depth of
their kindness.

Loosen our grip on what we own and our fixation on reward and make us
willing learners of the joys of generous living so that we may not be an
embarrassment to the gospel of your cross-shaped grace.
Amen.

[Friday 19th March St Mark 14: 10 - 11](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four URC congregations in and around Glasgow.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

Reflection

We don't really know why Judas betrayed Jesus. Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, in the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, suggested it was due to jealousy over Jesus' relationship with Mary. The theme of jealousy was picked up some years ago in the Manchester Passion where the actors playing Judas and Jesus sung, to each other, the Joy Division song *Love will Tear Us Apart*. Only St Matthew's Gospel gives a proper motive - money, St Luke and St John dodge the issue suggesting that Judas was possessed by the Devil, St Mark's Gospel gives no motive for the betrayal.

Betrayal is awful. To have loved and trusted another only to find that they've betrayed or turned against you is one of the worst experiences of life. The Church has betrayed many by its tolerance of abuse and its attempts to cover it up; politicians betray their voters; lovers betray their beloved; families betray each other. It's horrible and it's part of life and, as wounded as we are by all this, we find ourselves, wittingly or unwittingly, betraying our values and those we love.

We will never know why Judas betrayed Jesus; we may never fully know why others have betrayed us or why we have betrayed others. We can, however, seek to learn from betrayal - our own and when we've been betrayed. When we're betrayed we're tempted to skimp on love and trust, when we betray another we're tempted to despair. Yet just as Jesus forgave and restored Peter for his denial I'm sure that Judas too would have been forgiven and restored if he'd not fallen into despair. Like Jesus we need to learn to love and forgive, unlike Judas we need to trust in that love.

Prayer

O Love that does not let us go,
hold us when we are hurt,
forgive us when we betray,
that we may live up to the trust you put in us

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Reflection

This last passage before Jesus is led out to his crucifixion emphasises the totality of His sacrifice. To sacrifice your life for others is, in itself, amazing. To allow yourself to be abused, and humiliated; to be rendered helpless and defenceless makes that sacrifice total.

Up to this point, what has been done to Jesus was for public consumption. A show trial, a public appeal, a public flogging. Actions designed to preserve Roman authority and order, 'pour encourager les autres' and possibly to try to allow His release.

Now the scene moves into the privacy of the barracks. No further need for violence or show. He is to be crucified. His fate is sealed. But, of course human nature takes over. A hundred soldiers left to their own devices. No headcams, no accountability. A helpless, defenceless victim. An opportunity to insult, to humiliate, to abuse. A chance to amuse themselves at the expense of someone else. Someone who does not matter to them. In this instance it is a bunch of soldiers, but it is also a reminder that people can too easily put down, can ill-treat, exclude and abuse the weakest and most helpless in society. Humankind's inhumanity to their fellow humans. It is how gangs operate, how bullies function, how slavery was possible. The strong prey on the weak. A reminder too that throughout His ministry, Jesus reached out especially to the weak and marginalised and as we see here, in sacrificing himself, experienced what it truly meant.

Amidst the pressure of these two millstones, we see Jesus treading a demanding and difficult path. It is not just the path of one more local “military messiah” campaigning for revolution. This is the unique route that God has mapped out for Jesus - a route where “the gate is narrow and the road is hard” (Matthew 7.14).

Amidst the wider narrative of the Passion story Jesus sets us a challenge. Jesus is the perfect model of how to live as a human being. In doing so, he invites us to traverse a demanding but bespoke walk of discipleship. This road will cross through pressure points which could easily divert us into looking for easier terrain.

His challenge is to not give way to the pressure. He reminds us that he has already walked that path. His promise to us is that we do not walk alone. For this is the path that leads to life.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that you walked the lonely road that made new life possible for us.

We thank you that you have placed us in unique circumstances where we can exhibit your reality.

Please give us the strength of the Holy Spirit to walk the line when the going gets tough.

Please extend to us your grace when we stumble.

Please help us to regain our stride.

Amen.

*Mark for Everybody by Tom Wright page 207 (SPCK 2014).

31st March St Mark 15: 16-20

Peter Pay, Moderator of General Assembly 2020-22, Member of Salisbury URC

now and always, Amen.

Saturday 20th March St Mark 14: 12 - 21

The Rev'd John A Young, retired minister of the National Synod of Scotland and a member of Giffnock URC,

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, ‘Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?’ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’ So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When it was evening, he came with the twelve. And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, ‘Surely, not I?’ He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. For 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.’

Reflection

Mark’s gospel portrays Jesus’ twelve disciples in an unflattering light, eg: they are repeatedly amazed at Jesus’ miracles; despite Jesus’ plea to remain awake in the Garden of Gethsemane, they fall asleep; Peter, the ‘rock’ denies knowing Jesus more than once; on Jesus’ crucifixion they flee back to Galilee.

Do actions really speak louder than words? It seems so, especially those of Judas, present with Jesus and the other disciples in the upper room.

Though Judas' name is not mentioned in the above passage, we read him into "one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me". A familiar act of friendship, meal sharing, has become the occasion of a painful disclosure. We share with Jesus the foreknowledge of the betrayal that is coming: not because of any prescience on our part, but because of our prior familiarity with the Passion story.

There has been much conjecture as to why Jesus' warning to the unnamed betrayer 'it would have been better for that one not to have been born' did not change Judas' mind. Suffice to say, he could not, or would not change his chosen path. However, it raised alarm among the other eleven, that one of them might be the traitor, perhaps unwittingly. It has also alerted readers as to their complicity.

Mark sees Jesus' forthcoming Passion in the light of the ancient Feast of Passover, with the killing of the sacrificial lamb linked to Jesus' forthcoming death. Whatever doubts scholars have raised as to the timing of the Feast in Mark, it remains a powerful symbolism, capable of penetrating hardened hearts, even ours.

Prayer

Gracious God,
as we read and meditate upon
the events surrounding Jesus' Passion
we become aware of our part in it.
Let your Spirit not only convict us,
but convince us that his sacrifice
is for all time, for all people,
even the undeserving such as us.
Let thanks giving rise up within us,
and change us for the better. Amen

[Sunday 21st March Psalm 36](#)

The Rev'd John Proctor, retired minister, member of Downing Place URC,

[30th March - Tuesday in Holy Week St Mark 15: 6 - 15](#)

The Rev'd Daniel Harris, Minister with the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership.

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do[a] with the man you call the King of the Jews?' They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Reflection

So we find ourselves in the kangaroo court of imperial Rome. This court is less like fair or restorative justice as we would hope for, but more akin to the final vote in a reality TV show. "Who shall we release from the courts today without charge?" an imaginary presenter might say. "Jesus or Barabbas? Go online, text or call us to register your vote!"

The theologian Tom Wright describes Jesus' predicament as "the death of someone caught up between the upper millstone of local trouble and the lower millstone of imperial Rome" *. The religious leaders have already made their mind up; they want Jesus dead. Pilate offers some resistance to local demands but is ultimately more interested in maintaining civil obedience. He didn't want his superiors breathing down his neck. The outcome was inevitable.

didn't shy away from this danger. To call Jesus "Lord" is, after all, to dispute the Emperor's Lordship.

The Church soon developed rich theologies about the meaning of Jesus' death - we still squabble about these theologies and the hymns that are based upon them. Yet these theologies, necessary and wonderful though they are, distract us from the resistance that Jesus showed to Empire. This distraction, however, makes it harder for us to contest Empire.

Last year our nations reached the denouement of the Brexit saga. For some it's a national tragedy, for others it's a restoration of sovereignty and cocking a snook at a European empire, for others still it's the beginning of the end of the remains of the British Empire. Yet the larger empires that rule our world remain unchallenged - an economic system which allows companies to have larger net worth than entire nations, tax regimes which allow the rich to hide their wealth, the forces of globalization that both attract and repel those who flee their lands for safety and security all stand unnamed and unchallenged.

Jesus' refusal to engage with Pilate shows the moral illegitimacy of the Roman Empire - how do we, as the followers of Jesus - stand up to the Empires that still seek to rule, exploit and divide?

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
with contempt you dealt with the forces of evil,
from a legion of demons to a commander of legions,
declining to recognise their authority;
give us the grace to name the powers of oppression now,
to stand against and undermine them,
that your Kingdom may come,
and you alone be recognised as Lord. Amen

Cambridge

High in the heavens, eternal God,
your goodness in full glory shines:
your truth shall break through
every cloud
that veils and darkens your designs.

2 Forever firm thy justice stands,
as mountains their foundations
keep;
wise are the wonders of your
hands;
your judgments are a mighty deep.

3 From the provisions of your house
we shall be fed with sweet repast;
there mercy like a river flows,
and brings salvation to our taste.

4 Life, like a fountain rich and free,
springs from the presence of the
Lord,
and in your light our souls shall see
the glories promised in your word.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

You can hear the tune here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kchMyHZrgM>

Reflection

Life is a challenge. It involves choices, and sometimes conflict. You cannot take good fortune or good character for granted. You need to look to God for protection in your days and progress in your discipleship. Faithful living is the pattern to aim for. But other sorts of values and lifestyle are available – selfish, scheming, complacent and careless. That's the message of Psalm 36 as a whole. The upbeat section in today's reading is the middle of the Psalm (vv.5, 6, 8 and 9 in my Bible). But the opening and the ending have a more sober and shadowy mood. There are tricky and troublesome people at large in the world – the meddlers, manipulators and mafia of their day. Our Psalmist is clearly wary of their wiles and anxious not to follow their ways.

So the middle of the Psalm is a moment to re-focus our vision and recover a wide perspective. Here are major landmarks on the path of

faith, big realities to trust. God's 'steadfast love' (vv.5, 7 and 10) is the main theme. God is faithful, true, just, and mighty to save. Like the expanse of the skies, the strength of the hills and the depths of the sea, grace reaches around us, above us and beneath us. This is a welcoming, hospitable God who longs to meet us with open hands, and to show us the world in its truest glory: 'in your light our souls shall see'.

Look to God, and you will see more clearly the care in which you are held, the choices you are called to make, and the character you are meant to be. As with many an old psalm, the message is still fresh.

Prayer

God of light and strength, please help us
to walk humbly and honestly in the world,
to steer by the landmarks you set before us,
and to tackle the journey ahead with purpose and hope.
For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

[Monday 22nd March St Mark 14: 22 - 25](#)

Michael RJ Topple, Lay Preacher and Elder of Chappel URC, Essex

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

Reflection

The meal had been long prepared: the plans long made.

This was not a throwaway remark.

I commit my life to You today.

I am still with You. Amen

[29th March - Monday in Holy Week St Mark 15: 1-5](#)

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' Then the chief priests accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed

Reflection

It is difficult to read this passage without thinking that Jesus is being incredibly rude to Pilate. He's standing before the representative of the Roman Empire who has power over him and who could sentence him to death. Yet Jesus is rude - not giving a straightforward answer is impertinent.

Jesus refused to recognise the Governor's authority - after all Pilate was the representative of the occupying power. Just as, for example, French resistance fighters contested the authority of the Germans during the Occupation, Jesus contested Pilate's moral right to exercise authority. This was dangerous both for Jesus and the early Church - which needed to spread the Gospel throughout the Empire. Yet the Church, at first,

boldness and joy. He knew His Father's will and he submitted to what would be an indescribably brutal death, yet He did it willingly, with calmness and stillness, knowing why He was doing it.

The words of Psalm 37 take us down a path with stepping stones for us to follow. The first foot rests on trust (v3) where we lean on, rely on and have confidence in the Lord, that He will lead us to safety. The second stone is delight (v4), or to be soft and tender. We delight in God, to walk His path, just as Jesus did riding into Jerusalem. To delight is not a forced or hyperactive emotion; it is a gentle, thoughtful, spiritual response to knowing God's presence. God is the delight of our lives and we are in turn the delight of His.

The next step we take is to commit our way to the Lord (v5). Commitment leads us to so much; it opens up a new freedom, instead of restrictions and restraint. To commit means to roll over our burdens on the Lord and the psalmist asks us to commit everything we do to the Lord, which gives Him the right to direct us and help us to succeed. The final stepping stone along our path encourages us to be still (v7). Maybe it's where we stop to gaze at the view, to wonder at the beauty around, to listen, to absorb God's greatness and goodness. Jesus knew about stillness and rest. His life radiated calm and the gentleness of His Father. It is impossible to be still in body, mind and heart and to carry anger, hate and worry. I don't think we can follow the path God has for us without trust, delight, commitment and stillness. Palm Sunday is a day full of emotion, so let's step onto God's way this week, journeying towards the joy of Easter.

Prayer

Lord, Your Word stands true, no matter which path we take.
Your Word and Your presence are everything I need.
You sustain me and keep me, helping me in all I do.
I trust You to guide me.
I delight in Your ways.

The unleavened bread ('matzah' - Exodus 12. 18ff), reminiscent of the Israelites' escape from the bondage of Pharaoh, the rush of the escape and the lack of leaven - now to be the beaten and bruised body of Jesus, giving us freedom from the bondage of our sins.

The four goblets of wine of the seder supper, each reminiscent of one of God's promises of redemption (Exodus 6. 6-7), each one to toast one of God's promises - now the dripping blood of the Lamb of God, the blood of the New Covenant, the new promise.

This meal was highly symbolic.

The exodus that God had brought around centuries earlier was happening again.

No more were God's people to be under bondage or oppression.

God's people were to be set free.

As we ponder the meaning of Holy Communion, each of us coming with our different slants or angles, let us not forget the deepest and fundamental message of this sacramental Meal: through Jesus Christ, we are set free from the oppression of sin and death.

Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Almighty God,
we thank You for feeding us with the body and blood of Your Son Jesus Christ, and through Him bringing about our salvation.
Through Him we offer You our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out in the power of Your Spirit, to live and work to Your praise and glory. Amen
(prayer adapted from CofE communion service)

Tuesday 23rd March St Mark 14: 26 - 31

The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Chaplaincy Coordinator, Newcastle University

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written,

"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered."

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.

Reflection

One of the most fascinating aspects of behavioural science is how humans behave under stress. Good, righteous, inclusive, law-abiding citizens, when faced with a moment of stress behave in ways which do not reflect their intention or their character. This can most often be reflected in what we say in the heat of an argument, where we desperately want it to finish, either with a concluding blow or a defensive swipe. We can be surprised at how we respond, what we come out with, what pushes our buttons and shapes our response.

History has shown us that evil prevails when the good do nothing. When we allow discrimination or hate speech to be applied to people within our community, we stand by while evil prevails. We see how people are dehumanised. We see how people are scapegoated and vilified. We see how people of different backgrounds and ethnicities, different sexualities and genders, different ages and abilities can be pushed aside, treated as second class, made victims of abuse or violence. We would never wish

And so there is hope for us, as we try and follow Jesus and walk his way, only to wander off the right path. We too are forgiven, welcomed back into the arms of Jesus and called to follow God's plan for us.

Prayer

Father, you love each one of us beyond measure – each with our own characters, and each with our talents and flaws. As we walk the way, help us to stay on the right path, and to know your love and forgiveness when we stray. Amen

28th March Palm Sunday Psalm 37

Jo Patel, local leader, Wattisfield URC, Norfolk

Commit your way to God the Lord
your cause will shine as bright as
fire;
delight to do God's holy word
and you shall find what you desire.

3 Salvation comes from God alone
the faithful know their help is sure;
to heaven all our needs are known,
and in God's strength we are
secure.

2 Be still before the Lord and wait,
and do not fret when wrong
succeeds;
refrain from anger, turn from hate,
for God will punish evil deeds.

4 Commit your way to God the
Lord,
to peace and truth and grace aspire:
then mercy shall be your reward,
God's promises your heart's desire.

After Psalm 37, Michael Perry (1942 - 1996)

© Mrs B Perry/Jubilate Hymns

You can hear the tune here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY8Gh6QhEVO>

Reflection

Psalm 37 and Palm Sunday both remind me of the path that we take in our walk with God. Jesus rode His path, not reluctantly but with courage,

not know this man you are talking about.’ At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.

Reflection

Peter – one of the inner circle of disciples – had always been the one unafraid to speak out, unafraid to test his faith, and sure of his devotion to Jesus. Peter was the one who stepped out of the boat to walk on the water, only to falter when the reality of the situation hit him. Peter was the one who declared that Jesus was the Messiah, but then was rebuked for denying the road to the cross. That same evening, he had declared that he would never desert Jesus, but had fallen asleep when asked to watch while Jesus prayed. Peter embodies many of us, who hope to be faithful followers, but get it wrong more times than we might like to admit.

Yet Peter didn’t completely desert Jesus. He followed at a distance to the courtyard where he could be close to Jesus. We have no record that any of the other disciples were there.

But again, when challenged, his courage deserted him. To admit to being with Jesus endangered his own life, and Peter wasn’t ready for that. Having made the first denial, he couldn’t go back at the second and third challenges, and so Jesus’s prediction came true – before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.

And Peter knew that he had failed Jesus.

But while the scene here is of Peter’s devastation, it is not the end of the story, and we can know that Jesus still loved Peter, and Peter still loved Jesus. Peter was forgiven and became one of the most influential leaders of the early Church.

our friends or family to suffer such treatment and would want people to stand up for good and against evil.

“I will not deny you,” Peter promises Jesus. These are the words of a good and righteous man who knows how he wants to respond. These are words of commitment and honour. Jesus would not be left subject to betrayal, to being left alone, with no one to support or protect. Peter knew he had words to say. He knew the words that were strong words, standing alongside the hurt and the broken, standing up for good over evil.

How would we act?

Could we promise the same?

Could we know what stresses would cause us to deny?

Could we know what persecution would make us run?

Could we be sure that good will prevail?

Prayer

God of good,
in the moments of stress in our lives,
when we are conflicted or shocked,
help us to act as you would want.
Bring us your peace at times of distress,
and give us the courage to speak out for good,
that we may not deny your Son or your Gospel
but live for your truth and your love. Amen

[Wednesday 24th March St Mark 14: 32 - 42](#)

The Rev’d Daniel Harris (Minister with the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership)

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, ‘I am deeply

grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.’

Reflection

This scene is a precursor to the infamous moment when Peter denies Jesus three times. It sets the mood as our journey through Lent reaches its climax. It invites us into our own moments of soul-searching.

For the first time, Jesus is starting to feel disconnected from God, a creeping sense of dread which fully realises itself when he cries “My God, why have you forsaken me?” on the cross (Matt 27.46). He asks for an alternative path than the one laid out before him. Jesus undertakes a night of prayer asking the disciples to join with him. Three times he finds them unable to do this; on the first occasion he directs his questioning at Peter.

The scene draws us in and provokes us to make us ask hard questions of ourselves. Are we like Peter and the others - enthusiastic one moment, but unable to stay focussed another? Do we associate with Jesus for our own reasons, ready to withdraw when better options present themselves? Or are we prepared to accompany him during this time of agonising prayer?

This can be a great encouragement to our promise to follow Jesus when it involves going into difficult places with him, e.g. a crucial meeting, a new responsibility, an unknown society, a dangerous or threatening situation.

If we go right in, that’s the first commitment achieved again. We have the opportunity to do something useful, and the experience may equip us for witnessing later. Whether we’ll say what is needed while there (witnessing at the time) is another matter, which we could tackle in relation to tomorrow’s passage.

Prayer

To follow where you lead,
to see with your perspective,
to share in strange struggles,
to thrive against threats,
to be firm in the face of challenges,
to trust with your confidence,
to message your Messiahship with our lives,
we pray, Lord Jesus, for the grace of your Spirit.

[Saturday 27th March St Mark 14: 66 - 72](#)

The Rev’d Sue Cossey, NSM and Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol area, and a member of Zion United Church, Frampton Cotterell

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, ‘You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.’ But he denied it, saying, ‘I do not know or understand what you are talking about.’ And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, ‘This man is one of them.’ But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, ‘Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.’ But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do

“you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.””

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as deserving death. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ The guards also took him over and beat him.

Reflection

Here we see that Peter carried out the first of two commitments he had made a few hours beforehand. Whether he fulfilled the second is left for us to see tomorrow.

On the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter had promised that he would not be scandalised and scattered when the shepherd was struck, even if the rest of the sheep scattered. As NRSV puts it in Mark 14:29, ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not.’

Peter followed him, writes Mark in 14.54 using the same word as he did in 1:18 when Peter and Andrew left their nets and followed him. At a distance, but he went right into the courtyard of the high priest, and even sat amongst the guards around the fire.

Peter must have been able to hear what happened: the conflicting testimonies and Jesus’ silence, the challenge from the high priest and Jesus’ bold declaration, the verdict of blasphemy and the abuse of Jesus by council and guards. As a result Peter will have been able to give his first-hand account to other disciples, and it became this important part of the Gospel of Mark (who may have been the young man who fled naked, 14:52) taken up also by the other Gospel writers.

But, gentle reader, we will also find ourselves in our own Garden of Gethsemane. We will have to face agonising times of prayer, desperately seeking a way forward which avoids suffering, a time where even our closest friends may not stand with us. But hopefully one lone figure will stand out amidst the gloom - the silhouette of Jesus Christ who surely “took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Is 53.4).

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, thank-you that we don’t travel this Easter road alone. You trailblazer the path ahead for us.

You travel with us, even when our companions sometimes desert us. Please grant us the strength to endure the path that you have mapped out for us.

Lead us to the joy of the Resurrection morning. Amen.

[Thursday 25th March St Mark 14: 43 - 52](#)

Sam Goodman, Elder, Derby Central URC

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’ So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’ and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.’ All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Reflection

Betrayal hurts, it unravels friendships and trust.

The tragedy of how the Easter story unfolds on the way to the Cross is littered with betrayals.

If we're tempted to put ourselves in the shoes of any of the disciples would/could we have done any better?

Would we have stayed awake in the garden?

Would we have denied we knew Jesus?

Would we have sold him for a few silver coins?

Who knows what motivated Judas to end up wanting to hand over someone who he had followed for three years. Surely it wasn't about the payment?

Was it frustration and maybe a realisation that Jesus wasn't going to overturn the rule of Rome with Pilate and the puppet King Herod, he wasn't going to fight like a warrior to establish a more just and fair earthly Kingdom.

Is this Easter a chance to atone for our betrayals?

An opportunity to forgive those who we feel have betrayed us?

If we ever feel unwelcome around the table to join and take the bread and wine for whatever reason then "let this house proclaim from roof to rafter, all are welcome..." Or maybe we feel too welcome, it has become too comfortable and routine?

What the road to Golgotha shows us is that even those who have doubted, failed to trust or betrayed, those who have run away or not stood up for Jesus can find redemption and salvation. It can take bravery on our part to accept that need to repent or atone and then to display

the humility and openness to accept a fresh start.

For those who are already perfect, walk on by there's nothing for you to see here. But for the rest of us, this is hope snatched from despair, this is comfort snatched from grief and this is life conquering death.

Prayer

God of salvation and redemption

Meet us on the road the cross

Where we are carrying burdens, help us to lay them at your feet

If we are forcing burdens onto others forgive us

Help us to find a way

to step from despair to hope

From grief to solace

And from death to life Amen

[Friday 26th March St Mark 14: 53 - 65](#)

The Rev'd Bernie Collins, retired, member of Avenue St Andrew's URC, Southampton

They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands."' But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Jesus said, 'I am; and