Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 8



Friday 1st April – Wednesday 20th April

Introduction

We conclude our reading and reflection on Luke's Gospel. Luke was written to be read aloud to early meetings of the Church gathered in peoples' homes. The author writes that his purpose is to present "an orderly account" of "the events that have been fulfilled among us" ie Jesus' life and ministry. Luke's purpose is not to justify the faith but to encourage it – to answer the questions: what happened and what did it all mean?

Table of Contents

Introduction ***1***

Friday 1 April 2022 ..... ***2***

Saturday 2 April 2022 ..... ***4***

Sunday 3 April 2022 Psalm 86 ..... ***7***

Monday 4 April 2022 ..... ***9***

Tuesday 5 April 2022 ..... ***11***

Wednesday 6 April 2022 ..... ***13***

Thursday 7 April 2022 ..... ***15***

Friday 8 April 2022 ..... ***18***

Saturday 9 April 2021 ..... ***20***

Sunday 10 April 2022 Psalm 87 ..... ***21***

Monday 11 April 2022 ..... ***23***

Tuesday 12 April 2022 ..... ***25***

Wednesday 13 April 2022 ..... ***27***

Thursday 14 April 2022 Maundy Thursday ***29***

Friday 15 April 2022 Good Friday ***31***

Saturday 16 April 2022 Holy Saturday ***33***

Sunday 17 April 2022 Easter Sunday ***34***

Monday 18 April 2022 Easter Monday ***36***

Tuesday 19 April 2022 Easter Tuesday ***39***

Wednesday 20 April 2022 Easter Wednesday ***41***

Friday 1 April 2022

The Rev'd Andrew Mann-Ray, Minster, Baxter, Kidderminster &
Worcester URCs and Area Minister for Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

St Luke 20: 20 - 26

So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in

come. Don't we?

Prayer

Loving God
We thank you for the good times we have with friends and family.
We pray for all travellers, and those they leave behind. Amen.

order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. So they asked him, 'Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 'Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?' They said, 'The emperor's.' He said to them, 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.

Reflection

I don't know if you've ever watched a Mary Beard historical documentary about the Romans but I was watching one recently where she happened to talk about Roman currency. According to the documentary the first Roman coins to have the head of a significant leader stamped on them was Julius Caesar and subsequent emperors adopted the practice themselves. Mary Beard commented that the Romans became obsessed with deifying their emperors and to have the head of the emperor stamped on coins wasn't just simply to show where authority lay in the Empire in terms of trade and commerce, but also was an attempt to show that the emperor as a 'god' was watching everything that you said, did or purchased. The Roman emperor as a 'god' was literally in your pocket. No doubt we will have heard sermons or reflections on this encounter Jesus has in his life with people out to entrap him about where authority and true worship lie. And we will have probably heard it said that 'giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' actually means giving everything to God, because the emperor and his coinage is as much a part of the created order as anything or anyone else. The emperor has no more authority and is no more a 'god' than anyone else. There is only one true living God so how can you give something to the Roman emperor that is ultimately God's anyway? The trouble is that we all fall into the trap of worshipping

created things rather than offering heartfelt worship to God. We only have to think about the things we place value in - money, technology, fashion accessories - to realise that all too often we place greater value on these things than our love and relationship with God. In so doing we end up carrying our pocket sized 'caesars' around with us. The challenge of this reading is for us to worship the creator rather than the created things and to live each day of our lives in awe and wonder at all that God has done, is doing and will do in us and through us.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to offer you heartfelt worship,
and to live our lives in awe and wonder,
at all you are doing in our lives.
Help us to see that everything we have comes from you,
and the gifts and blessings we receive from you,
reflect your goodness and abundance to us.
May we live our lives in the knowledge of your great love for us,
and help us to share that love with those we meet.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Saturday 2 April 2022

The Rev'd Sarah Moore serves as Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland and as Assistant Clerk of the General Assembly.

St Luke 20: 27 - 47

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.' Jesus said to them, 'Those

Wednesday 20 April 2022 Easter Wednesday

Leo Roberts, Children and Youth Development Officer, North Western Synod

St Luke 24: 50 - 53

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Reflection

If the world is back to anything approaching normal when you are reading this, I'll be in Australia. My son and his wife live over there and, during lockdown, they had a daughter. Of course, we didn't get the chance to visit so we had to make do with video calls. We've watched her successfully navigate her first year remotely. At the time of writing, we've just been told that, if our planned trip for next Spring goes ahead as planned, we'll meet another grandchild who will, God willing, have arrived by then!

It'll be tough to leave, but leave we must. And they'll give us a lift to the airport and we'll try and put a brave face on it knowing that it might be a few years before we get the chance to visit them again.

How different from Jesus' disciples who saw him lifted into Heaven and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy. I wonder if they were putting a brave face on the situation, too? Or maybe they were genuinely overjoyed at the time they'd had together with Jesus and didn't worry about whether or not they might see him again?

Shakespeare got it right when he wrote "Parting is such sweet sorrow." We give thanks for the time we had, and look forward to the time yet to

no such thing. Rather, he acknowledges their fearful feelings, before inviting them to see his wounds and to touch him, as a way of assuring them that it really was him.

His resurrection body is, in some mysterious sense, more than his earthly body, though the two have some similarities, but it still bears the wounds inflicted upon him by his crucifixion. In this Easter Season we rejoice in our Lord's resurrection from the dead, and rightly so. But it is good to remember that he still bears the marks of his suffering and death.

Following him does not mean forgetting his wounds, or other people's, or our own. David Runcorn suggests that the vision of the wounded and risen Christ invites us to live more honestly with the wounds we carry ourselves (Rumours of Life, p90).

The risen Lord responded to his disciples with grace. He offers us this same grace in our need, for there have been times when we, too, have failed him. Not only does he make no reference to the disciples' past failure, he also tells them that they are to be his witnesses. We may not have seen the risen Lord as they did, nor been invited to touch his wounds as they were, but we are called to witness to him.

We, too, are called to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins. One way we do this is by forgiving people who hurt us, or cause us difficulty, in one way or another, rather than bearing grudges or seeking to get our own back.

Prayer

Crucified and risen Lord, we thank you for your grace and your forgiveness of our failures. We marvel that you call us to be your witnesses. Help us to be faithful to you, not least by extending the same grace and forgiveness to other people that you offer to us. Amen.

who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' For they no longer dared to ask him another question. Then he said to them, 'How can they say that the Messiah is David's son? For David himself says in the book of Psalms, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" David thus calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

Reflection

Questions about what happens to us, and to the rest of creation, when we die have been around since time immemorial. Pondering these matters would seem to be a central part of the human condition.

This passage has a group of Sadducees pressing Jesus with questions. According to britannica.com the Sadducees were a sect within Judaism in the two centuries prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. They consisted of priests, merchants, aristocrats and other members of the ruling class and their life focussed on worship in the temple accepting only the Torah, or first five books of our Bibles, the texts traditionally ascribed to Moses. Their conservative practice of Judaism contrasted with the Pharisees, an understanding of that faith grounded in a fuller version of the scripture and learning. Our passage highlights

their rejection of resurrection denying a belief in the immortality of the soul or bodily resurrection, another belief placing them at odds with the Pharisees.

In the churches of our time we find people whose beliefs align with both Pharisee and Sadducee understandings of resurrection and other beliefs too. Personally I have some sympathy with the Sadducee perspective as I find myself feeling uncomfortable with the suggestion that life post death is some sort of extension of family life on earth. On the other hand for many folk the possibility of reunion with beloved members of community or family is deeply comforting both in seasons of grief and as we contemplate our own mortality.

Jesus uses the images of angels, children of God and being children of the resurrection in this passage. Notice that the image is 'like angels' rather than 'are' angels. The hope for the hearer is to be a child of God. A child of that hope and love that Jesus teaches and shows us really does spring eternal. A better hope than being a mere angel. A hope of being fully within God's presence held within God's love.

Prayer

May the Lord support us all the day long,
till the shades lengthen and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.
Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging,
and holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.

Prayer attributed to St John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

Tuesday 19 April 2022 Easter Tuesday

The Rev'd John Matthews is a retired Baptist minister and member of Wellingborough URC.

St Luke 24: 36 - 49

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Reflection

'Peace be with you' was the conventional greeting, but it may have been more than the disciples expected – and more than they deserved. Having deserted Jesus when he was arrested, must they not have been apprehensive on seeing him risen from the dead? Even, perhaps, expecting the Aramaic equivalent of 'you're fired'. But the risen Lord says

disciples on their own long, lonely walk, coming to terms with all that has happened over the last few days. I can almost feel the pain of Cleopas and his friend as they trudge back to Emmaus, all their hopes and dreams seemingly in tatters.

I often find a long walk is a good time to think and reflect and that's what these two are doing - they are trying to make sense of everything that has happened. You can understand their distress and confusion, everything they thought, everything they believed appears to be lost. Do they dare to trust that Jesus could have risen from the dead, after all women were not considered reliable witnesses, so are they just setting themselves up for false hope?

Then there's their disbelief that this stranger who joins them has no idea about what has been going on.

What I love about this story though is the almost throwaway line, 'their eyes were kept from recognising him'. It is not that Cleopas, and his friend don't recognise Jesus, no, it is that the time is not right; there was more they needed to learn from this stranger and so it is in the breaking of bread, that finally they are allowed to recognise Jesus.

Then another journey, more exhilarating, breathless with good news to share with those who will listen. Oh, that we should feel that same excitement today.

Prayer

Loving Lord,
When the road seems long and the journey hard, help us to remember we do not travel alone.
When life gets us down and we see no reason to hope, help us to remember the joy of resurrection.
When we see your love in friend and stranger, give us courage to share the good news. Amen

Sunday 3 April 2022 Psalm 86

The Rev'd Dr John McNeil Scott, Principal of the Scottish College, Glasgow

Lord, my petition heed,
now help me in my need,
my Saviour be.
I am your servant, Lord;
my trust is in your word,
mercy to me accord;
Lord, hear my plea.

2 Comfort your servant now,
while at your throne I bow,
for you are love.
Your pard'ning grace is free;
sinners who call in need
your tender mercy see,
O God above.

3 Lord, hear me while I pray,
while now in troubled day
I seek your face.
No god of human design
is like our God, divine;
most bright your glories shine,
O God of grace.

4 By all whom you have made
be praise and worship paid
through earth abroad.
Your name be glorified,
there is none great beside,
matchless your works abide,
for you are God.

5 Help me your will to do,
your truth I will pursue,
teach me to fear;
my heart now purify,
your name to glorify,
O Lord, my God Most High,
with heart sincere.

6 How great your love appears
that made death's gloomy fears
no more dismay;
O God, to anger slow,
save me from ev'ry foe,
your lovingkindness show,
your truth display.

7 Show me your mercy true,
your servant's strength renew, deliv'rance send.
To me your goodness show, your comfort, Lord, bestow;
let those who hate me know you are my friend.

from the 1912 Psalter by the Rev'd Bert Polman 1983 © 1987 Faith Alive Christian Resources. You can hear the tune suggested for this Psalm,

Mason, here https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/157920

Reflection

“All actual life is encounter.” – Martin Buber, I and Thou

I struggle with much Christian language; in which human emotions, purpose, needs and agency are projected onto God with overstated confidence. Maybe you do too?

While we should always be careful in our speaking of God – God’s ‘purposes’ and ‘actions’ as if they were our’s writ large – the bigger danger for us is that we fail to see God when God is really there.

“The Psalms are prayers addressed to a known, named, identifiable You. This is the most stunning and decisive factor in the prayers of the Psalter. Prayer is a direct address to, and conversation and communion with, an agent known from a shared treasured past. […] The utterance of “You” as the centre of speech distinguishes prayer, […] this “You”, whose face is not seen and whose voice is heard is known by the story that comes always with the name.” – Walter Brueggemann, The Psalms and the Life of Faith

Today allow this Psalm to recall you and I to an awareness of God ‘in, with and under’ all of the events of life – even yours and mine – and to a new confidence for our living in fellowship with God. Telling ourselves our own stories, and asking ‘I to Thou’ for strength for all that is present and ahead.

Prayer

We break from the preoccupation of our day
even the coming and goings of worship
and make space to notice you
in the ordinary moments and encounters.

redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Reflection

There have been a lot of journeys over the last 9 days. From Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem; a late-night walk from the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane; then Jesus’ lonely walk to Calvary.

Easter Day was another day of walks which started with the women’s desolate walk to the tomb early in the morning. Now we meet two more

was empty. Our challenge at Easter is to hear the angel's words to the women: "He is not here, he is risen! "He is not here, he is risen!" all combines to impress us with the holy, and everlasting truth that Jesus, God's Son and the world's saviour, has eternally defeated death for himself and for all humanity.

Prayer

On this Easter Sunday, Lord Jesus may we realise afresh what your death and resurrection means to us.
As we continually rejoice in your glorious and triumphant victory over death, help us to live for it and in it and for it.
Give us eyes that look upon your sacrifice, grace, love,
and rejoice in our salvation.
Above all, give us the ability to tell the good news of your resurrection to the world. Amen.

Monday 18 April 2022 Easter Monday

The Rev'd Branwen Rees, East Wales Regional Minister

St Luke 24: 13 - 35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to

You are always with us. Always.

God of flesh and word,
we meet you in worker and friend,
stranger and pilgrim,
the needy and the needed,
the questioner and questioned.

So when we meet you,
may we deepen trust, deepen life,
deepen justice and deepen joy.

And when you meet us,
help us approach our activities
with presence and power,
with love and humility,
with courage and dignity. Amen

adapted from *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community.*

Monday 4 April 2022

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison, Saint Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields

St Luke 21: 1 - 4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

Reflection

Jesus said, 'This poor widow … out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

The image of rich people giving something from their plenty whilst a poor widow gives everything out of her poverty is a powerful one. It's so powerful it became proverbial, though nowadays many more people have heard of the term, 'widow's mite', than could place it in its Gospel story setting.

Church goers may have heard these verses interpreted as Jesus's commendation of the attitude and action of the widow in giving sacrificially. Such interpretation might have been accompanied by gentle hints that our giving to church bears greater resemblance to the rich people putting their gifts into the temple treasury than to the one who donated their last two coins.

Certainly, the widow is a more sympathetic or heroic figure than a rich person (like you or me?) for whom giving is easy. But was Jesus really commending a situation where someone was left with nothing to live on? Alternatively, perhaps Jesus saw her as a victim, exploited by the rich and powerful. After all, he had just issued a condemnation of religious professionals who in order to fund their positions of power, 'devour widows' houses.' (20:47)

So, how should I respond to charities, Church, and others when they come looking for my money? What should I be asking of others when I seek their financial support for a cause that I hold dear?

Generosity: yes. Jesus would love people to be generous.

Self-destruction: no. Jesus, who loves everyone, would hate for that to happen to anyone.

Prayer

O God, You have given generously to me, so may I be generous to others. You have given me gifts for living, so may I enjoy them and flourish.

told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Reflection

How many times did Jesus predict his death? The first time was when he had just fed the multitudes, he said that the "Son of Man must suffer many things; be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes; be killed; and be raised again." The second time was shortly after the transfiguration. The third time was when he and his disciples were heading up toward Jerusalem for the Passover. He told his disciples how he would be mocked, scourged, crucified, and then rise again. The Gospel of John gives a few more predictions of Jesus' death, but they are slightly more subtle. In the ears of the disciples Jesus' predictions seemed as an idle tale. It took the disciples the events of Good Friday to disentangle themselves from the confusion about why Jesus was telling he was going to die.

Jesus died on Friday. And now it's Sunday. The women who were Jesus' disciples and their friends, come to the apostles and tell them that Jesus is risen. Here is one thing in the text worth pointing out. Some of the disciples were unsympathetic to the women, treating their report as an idle tale. Somehow Peter—perhaps because of his experience at the mount of transfiguration was spared the temptation to dismiss the report of the women.

Instead of dithering, he got up and went running to the tomb. And of course, he found what he probably already knew to be true: the tomb

Often we wait as there is nothing to do. We wait with those who mourn knowing that our words, our actions, our good intentions really aren't what is needed, just our presence. We wait to find answers to life's hardest questions but know that, this side of the grave at least, there aren't any.

Yet waiting can be joyful - parents who await the arrival of a child, partners who await their wedding, the refugee finally granted the right to remain, the prisoner eventually freed.

We wait for tomorrow - of course we know what tomorrow brings but in our waiting we remember those who wait with uncertainty, hoping for joy but not knowing what to expect.

Prayer

God of promise, with you we wait, and with you we long.
In you we rest, and in you we trust.
Be with those who wait,
for better times, for better lives, and for a better world,
that joy, when it comes, will banish the anxieties of waiting. Amen.

Sunday 17 April 2022 Easter Sunday

The Rev'd Samuel Silungwe, Minister, Rockingham Forest Group, Kettering

St Luke 24: 1 - 12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he

And may I never exploit the gifts of others, for my benefit or to their suffering. Amen

Tuesday 5 April 2022

The Revd Kevin Watson, retired minister, Northern Synod

St Luke 21: 5 - 28

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' They asked him, 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them. 'When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. 'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great

distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Reflection

In 1939 leading Congregationalists sent out a letter 'To the ministers of Christ's holy gospel in the churches of the Congregational Order' – it was urgent, passionate, and deeply felt. It recognised the desperate state of our churches, "short of men (sic.) and money, but this is not our most serious need, for God is able to take the weak things of the world to confound the strong. Our dreadful weakness is religious. We are not declaring the Gospel with power to a dispirited and disillusioned age; we are not living in the discipline of Gospel fellowship." Ending with the challenge - "We are today calling ourselves to repent and to believe the good news of Jesus and the Resurrection…. We seek to get in touch and to keep in touch with those who feel the burden of the day as we feel it, and who seek to know the incarnate and crucified Lord, the benefits of His Passion and the power of His Resurrection."

What followed? For many across the world, hellish years of the Second World War, poverty, and a changing world order. Their words were surely God-given to prepare Christ's followers to face whatever would come. Now we hear again of the parlous state our churches are in - 'short of people and money,' but again it is time to recognise our real desperate need is "to know the incarnate and crucified Lord, the benefits of His Passion, and the power of His Resurrection" in order to face a

Prayer

God of every Good Friday, you love us, you know our human pains.
When we feel vulnerable, help us to see you with us.
May we never seek power, but yield always in the way of love,
as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, Amen.

Saturday 16 April 2022 Holy Saturday

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is the URC's Minister for Digital Worship

St Luke 23: 50-56

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

Reflection

Waiting is hard. We may wait for a new job, for the pandemic to be finally over, to see loved ones in person not on a screen, for justice to finally come.

Today the Church waits just as "the women who had come with him from Galilee" had to wait to prepare Jesus' body for a proper funeral. Their emotions must have been in turmoil as they longed to do the only thing they could do - anoint His body - yet at this point they couldn't even do that.

Reflection

How do we read this account of that part of the day the Church calls good? Do we read it as evidence of supernatural forces at work? Evidence that Jesus was indeed God? Perhaps we are inclined to look for theological explanations for Jesus' death? Or to air our particular theology of atonement (being made right with God).

These are all well-established and legitimate possibilities. But, I wonder if to go in any one of these directions takes us away, however inadvertently, from the humanity of it all – the trauma, the horror, the pain. I wonder what it would be like to imagine ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' acquaintances, his friends. Standing quietly, transfixed, watching the unfolding horror of our dearly beloved friend's execution.

Fortunately, few of us will ever have to encounter such horror as was the scene of that day called Good. But daily, we live as flesh and blood human beings. We are affected by the pain we witness in others, and by our own experience of suffering. If I'm honest, sometimes I wish I followed a God who would take it all away – or even better still, a God, whose power can obscure the sun to get rid of our everyday Good Fridays and take us straight to Easter Sunday. But that is not what I see when I, like Jesus' friends, look on.

I see one, suffering the worst of what we humans can inflict on a person. I see one who would not invoke a God of power or a legion of angel armies. I see one who revealed in painful vulnerability a God who rejects violence, force, and coercion. A God who loves so much to risk the ultimate vulnerability – rejection, even death at the hands of the beloved.

We may be in a rush to find God in Sunday's triumphant acclamations of resurrection and salvation, but God is already with us, today and in every Good Friday experience we go through.

global pandemic and its aftermath, a world order in transition, and earth itself wounded by our abuse.

Jesus knew what was coming for his beloved city and his own race. It came to pass. Thank God his followers were prepared – they would suffer persecution, exile from their homeland, some even martyrdom. But "by your endurance you will gain your souls" They did, and we still can, until we see "the son of Man coming in a cloud" Come Lord Jesus.

Prayer

"Because he lives I can face tomorrow;
because he lives all fear is gone.
Because I know he holds the future,
and life is worth the living just because he lives"**

Jesus, in political uncertainties, economic hardships, dangers of climate change, and abuse of human life, may I see you, finding the lost, serving those in need, transforming lives, embracing those unloved – because your Love is victorious 'til the end of time'. Amen.

**reprinted in "The Story of Congregationalism" by Erik Routley, first published 1961 ** Hymn by Bill and Gloria Gaither*

Wednesday 6 April 2022

The Revd Jacky Embrey, Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership

St Luke 21: 29 - 37

Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, as it was called. And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.

Reflection

That generation has passed away (Jesus did say that no one knew the day or the hour, not even him), but Jesus' words have not passed away. They have lasted two thousand years and they speak to us today, as much as they spoke to Jesus' contemporaries.

Each time we read them, they have fresh significance. The words that sprang out to me today were those about being weighed down by dissipation and drunkenness. No, not because they particularly apply to me, but because I've never thought that they did.

I've mostly read those few words as addressed to those, possibly new converts, used to dissipation and drunkenness. However, we could equally read them as applying to folk who are weighed down by the dissipation and drunkenness that they see around them.

Could that be us? Fed up with a world in which so much seems to be going wrong. There is famine and climate change; there are wars and refugees; folk are burdened with debt or dying of cancer and to cap it all, those who have least problems and most worldly goods are wasting their lives in dissipation and drunkenness, rather than trying to help.

eternity as much as it pointed to the next day.

Let's take heart from the light of eternity this dark day/night. The whole truth is always greater than the detail of any story; diving into details helps, yet alongside, we need to see the accumulation of moments to see the greater truth. Death and resurrection are but moments in the long graceful narrative of eternal life.

Prayer

God, you know how we can focus in on tiny things, letting ourselves get lost in one detail over another. Give us wisdom and peace to see small things add up, to see the bigger narrative unfold.
Give us courage to see that if the larger truth is not Gospel, the details are put into question.
Be with us with your grace, as present with us in the focussed moment as in the larger drama. Amen

Friday 15 April 2022 Good Friday

The Rev'd Jonnie Hill, Minister in the Greater Manchester South and Cheshire Missional Partnership

St Luke 23: 44 - 49

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.

saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Reflection

Maundy Thursday. The dark night before the good day narrated in this passage. The night’s details are as confusing as the details of Jesus’ walk and death that next day. Three Gospels narrate cross carrier Simon, but only in Luke is the appeal for women to stop weeping; focus on hoping they won’t have to bear the present or next age. Only Luke writes that Jesus promises paradise to criminals next to him. The Luke writer goes beyond the stories heard, letting the story rise from the immediate moment to place Jesus’ death into a longer narrative, death and resurrection only a moment in a longer timeframe of hope and consequences.

Maundy Thursdays, we try to focus on the moment, not the longer time. We focus on the conversations, potential meaning, implications for Jesus’ followers and betrayers. We try to make sense of bread and wine bearing meaning for the moment, but we can’t help seeing the meaning for future moments. With Jesus, it is never possible to focus only on the one event. I wonder sometimes if the Gospels are the variety they are because, with Jesus, we’re always swept up into greater truths each time we try to pin down a moment. Whatever the details, the bigger story compels us. God was in Jesus, the night before the crucifixion was a powerful time full of spots of light into dark rooms, the night pointed to

That is the path to despair, disillusionment and loss of hope. No wonder Jesus warned his disciples against it. It is so easy to moan, to criticise and to let the negatives so dominate our lives that we lose our faith – our trust in the promises of God.

That is why we must keep on celebrating Easter, as we do every Sunday, even in Lent. God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. We can have faith in such a God and hope that God’s promises will be fulfilled.

Prayer

Living and loving God,
Help us not to be weighed down by dissipation and drunkenness.
Help us to focus on your love, to trust in your promises,
and to do what we can to bring closer the time
when your kingdom comes.
Thanks be to God Amen

Thursday 7 April 2022

The Rev’d Julian Templeton, Minister, St John’s URC New Barnet

St Luke 22: 1-23

Now the festival of Unleavened Bread, which is called the Passover, was near. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present. Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the

Passover meal for us that we may eat it.' They asked him, 'Where do you want us to make preparations for it?' 'Listen,' he said to them, 'when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of the house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there.' So they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!' Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

Reflection

Betrayal is probably one of the most hurtful experiences of life. When someone we trust betrays our trust, the relationship is fractured. What might we learn from Judas's betrayal of Jesus? John Calvin makes the following comment about Judas: "in this mirror we can see the blindness of human desires and their effect of bewitching the mind." Is Calvin suggesting that Judas is a kind of mirror in which we might see a reflection of our own actions and desires? If so, we might protest that Judas's betrayal is so treacherous that we cannot possibly see anything that remotely reflects our actions and motivations.

Prayer

Loving God, help us not to be content to coast through life looking for the easiest possible way to do things and not worrying about the consequences of our actions on others. Help us to stand up and be counted when we know things are not as you would want them to be and help us seek out justice for all of your children throughout the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thursday 14 April 2022 Maundy Thursday

The Rev'd Elizabeth Gray-King, Visual Theologian, member St Columba's URC, North Western Synod Pastor

St Luke 23: 46-42

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus[e] there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and

in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

Reflection

Throughout history, people have made bad decisions because they seemed the easy, obvious decision to make at first glance. Alexander Graham Bell once took an invention of his along to Western Union to try and sell it to them, something called the telephone! The man he was meeting told him in no uncertain terms that he would not be investing because 'what use could his company make of an electronic toy'. We look back on these decisions and laugh in years to come but, how often do we look for the easy answers?

We are all guilty of it, it might be something simple such as performing a bodge job around the home to 'fix' something that your spouse has informed you is broken, or it might be something more serious in which we find ourselves going along with the party line rather than sticking our necks out for something we know in our hearts to be right.

Pilate knew in his heart of hearts that Jesus should have been released, but the fickle crowd gathered outside, just a few days after welcoming him in an exuberant way into the city, were baying for his blood and instead of his release were calling for the release of an actual criminal. Neither Herod nor Pilate could find any fault in Jesus for which they could convict him, and yet, the pressure that was put onto Pilate, forced his hand, and ensured he went against his conscience to deliver the penalty.

All our decisions have consequences, we learn this when we are young, for the chairman of Western Union, he must have been kicking himself when the telephone went on to become so successful. For Pilate, the realisation of Jesus on the cross must have been devastating, knowing he found no fault in this man and yet because of his inaction – this man was there, hanging on a cross. Easy answers do not mean right answers, let us try to look for the right thing to do rather than the easiest.

Yet, upon further reflection, can we honestly claim that none of our actions are self-serving and all our motivations good? Perhaps, then, we can learn something from the way in which Jesus relates to Judas. Judas conspires with the chief priests and temple police to hand over Jesus to them in exchange for money. Although not specifically named, we assume that Judas is present when Jesus celebrates his supper with the disciples. If so, Judas shares in the loaf of bread and hears Jesus say, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Judas drinks from the cup and hears Jesus say, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Immediately after this, Judas also hears Jesus say, "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table, For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!"

Karl Barth argues that the relationship between Jesus and Judas at this point is only a heightened example of the relationship between Jesus and all people. Namely, Jesus chooses and loves Judas as his covenant-partner; but Judas, and we, often reject the intensity and demand of this love. Yet even our rejection can be redeemed.

Prayer

O God of grace and glory,
we thank you for covenanting to be our God.
In so doing you have claimed us as your people.
Forgive our betrayals and rejections, small and large.
Tell us again of Jesus's body given for us
and his blood poured out for us.
Restore us as your covenant-partners
who may dare to believe that no one is beyond redemption
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Friday 8 April 2022

The Rev'd Kevin Watson, retired minister, Northern Synod

St Luke 22: 24 - 38

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 'You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!' Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.' He said to them, 'When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'No, not a thing.' He said to them, 'But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, "And he was counted among the lawless"; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.' They said, 'Lord, look, here are two swords.' He replied, 'It is enough.'

Reflection

The prophecies of old are being fulfilled, reinforced by Jesus' stark warnings to the disciples of what is to come, spelled out in evermore detail – there will be betrayal, failed attempts with swords to save Jesus, many hiding away, and Peter of all people denying him – 'Peter, you

onto?

Prayer

God of hope and challenge,
We thank you for seeking us out, for walking with us and for continuing to call us to you.
May we continue to serve you where you place us
and may we continue to delight and grow in the love you wrap us in.
As we continue through Holy week, let us rejoice in the space we are in and celebrate the journey we are taking.
God of hope and challenge, this day is yours and you share it with us.
We thank you Amen

Wednesday 13 April 2022

The Rev'd Josh Thomas minister of Petersfield and Liss URC

St Luke 23: 13 - 24

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.' Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put

perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Reflection

What on earth is it about this Jesus that makes the assembly rise as one to take Jesus to Pilate?

What was it that caused them all to come together to make out that Jesus was a threat to Roman authority?

How much of a challenge must they have perceived was coming from Jesus to their own power and rule?

And what was it about Jesus that made Herod and Pilate become friends when, before this encounter with Jesus, they couldn't stand one another?

Whilst Jesus is a figure that brings hope, love, and a glorious invitation into closer relationship with God He also brings challenge to the status quo, to authority and into the corridors of power.

On this Tuesday morning, what might God be asking of any of us? What might that specific call to each of us be?

The glory of this passage is that love in Jesus was not squashed by the powerful or the cunning. That love never fades away – not today, or any day.

As members of the family of Jesus, living as 'Jesus-shaped' people might just mean that we need to challenge the things which 'power' holds

couldn't believe it when he told you so!' Until Jesus, left alone to face the powers of Sin and Death, dies on the cross, the loneliest place in history. To those at that last supper, it seemed they'd reached the point of no return – it all becomes inevitable, it has to happen and it's going to happen now.

Jesus tries so hard to prepare the disciples for what is coming, though they just can't take it in. But they will remember when it's all over. Hidden in locked rooms they will hear stories from the women, from Cleopas and friend, from the gossip of the city – it has all happened as foretold, and as Jesus had said it would. They do remember his words. Now, turn from your Sin, your failings – really big ones - Peter, you cowardly followers, you fickle crowds, you politicians and religious leaders and face Jesus – now the risen Christ, who calls you out of your despondency and guilt, fears and anger - for a new life with new hope and a new strength of will, as you have never known before.

Jesus calls us still, all of us, whoever we are, whatever we have been - are you ready now for this new life? Above all it is a call to deny yourself for the sake of others, serve not your wants and desires, but instead serve your sisters and brothers - this is the Kingdom of Love Jesus kept describing, and now it is real – welcome, friend! Let's follow Him together!

Prayers

Depth of mercy! Can there be mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear?
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?
There for me the Saviour stands,
shows His wounds and spreads His hands:
God is love! I know, I feel; Jesus weeps, but loves me still!
Pity from thine eye let fall; By a look my soul recall;
Now the stone to flesh convert, Cast a look and break my heart.

Charles Wesley

Saturday 9 April 2021

The Rev'd Sue Chapman, Minister, Hove & Portslade Pastorate, East Sussex

St Luke 22: 47 - 53

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, 'Lord, should we strike with the sword?' Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!'

Reflection

Kissing is an important action in Judaism, and is a widespread practice among Jews. There is no religious obligation to kiss a holy object, however, Jews believe kissing displays veneration and devotion and loyalty to God. We don't know why Judas chose this sign but it may have been a way of confirming to Jesus, that he still believed that Jesus was the Messiah and wanted him to know it, and this was a secret and subversive way to pull wool over the eyes of the authorities. This was a statement; we might call it an ironic one. Those in the arresting party could have arrested him at any time, but chose to do it at night, in a quiet place, with a mob in tow. This could have been Judas' way of thanking Jesus for all he had shared with him, because it was his final opportunity or, that he was signalling with this kiss, the veneration of Jesus, the word of God, as a priest might kiss the Torah, the words of living.

taunt and torture. But ultimately neither friend nor foe could cope with the reality of having God in our midst. The temptation to deny or to destroy is a strong one. I wonder how that is present in us?

Prayer

Holy One, strengthen us in our witness of your story.
Show us a better way than the way of denial or destruction.
Help us to turn our lives around as we live out
our vocation to be your people.
It hurts to be the denier or destroyer.
Whatever end of that process we find ourselves
give us your peace
and help us to turn our lives around
and start again recreated and renewed. Amen.

Tuesday 12 April 2022

The Rev'd John Grundy is minister of St. Andrew's URC and St. Michael's United Church in South East London

St Luke 23: 1 - 12

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.' When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him

council. They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.' All of them asked, 'Are you, then, the Son of God?' He said to them, 'You say that I am.' Then they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!'

Reflection

The thing that Jesus said Peter would do, but Peter denied he would do, he did. As I read this passage again I am struck by how cut up Peter must have felt during this episode and in the hours and days that followed.

Jesus was seized and taken to the high priest's house. A group of people, including the arrested man, and Peter who had followed at a distance are sitting together around a fire in the courtyard. I am struck too by a realisation that the courtyard cannot have been particularly big to enable an arrested man to sit at the fire yet big enough that the curious are able to enter and warm themselves. This encounter takes place at the boundary between private and public space in a place that is simultaneously intimate and terrifying. A place to which people are dragged and are drawn. A place where inconvenient questions are posed by curious women. A place where friends betray friends.

This place, the high priest's courtyard, functions as a counter kingdom in the story. Many elements of Jesus' earlier ministry are present. The intimacy of people gathered around a fire. Questions being asked. A curious collection of people. Yet Jesus did not arrive at this place voluntarily. He is not at the centre of the story, or is he?

Peter denies knowing Jesus three times in Jesus' presence. I wonder if these denials, spaced out over several hours of a night, hurt Jesus more deeply than the other ways he was tortured on that fateful day? Shortly after Peter's denials, Jesus is mocked and beaten. At the end of our passage Jesus' identity as Son of God is revealed on the lips of those who

When I reread the reading I read the words, "Lord, should we strike them with THE WORD" rather than "Swords. This got me thinking of the power of Jesus, the living word of God, there in their midst. Even at this crucial point in the proceeding Jesus stops to heal the wounded one. Jesus realigns the world by his presence, healing and speaking the truth about God, which is what those listening hate about him. Jesus never hid himself. He revealed God's likeness and love in everything he said and did. The Pharisees and other religious leaders didn't recognise God in Jesus, which is why he had to go. Maybe this was Judas' last chance to kiss the holy word of God, and he took it!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have the ability to change a situation by your presence. As we approach Easter, help us to be changed by what you reveal of yourself to us.

This Easter Season help us to give our full attention to you, Jesus, living word of God for us. Amen.

Sunday 10 April 2022 Psalm 87

Linda Rayner is the URC Coordinator for Fresh Expressions.

Built upon God's holy mountain:
Prophets celebrate and sing
of your worth beyond recounting,
city of the eternal King!

1 Home of peace! The Lord
esteems you
more than any other place,
choosing here to make his
dwelling
with his family of grace.

2 Out of every tribe and nation
come the citizens of Heaven;
God has made them heirs
together
and to each a birthright given.

3 In his register is listed
everyone who's born anew.
Hear the joyful songs ascending -
"all my life flows out from you!"

Emma Turl © Emma Turl / admin. The Jubilate Group
You can hear the suggested tune here
https://www.jubilate.co.uk/songs/built_upon_gods_holy_mountain

Reflection

The modern hymn that you can see here is a reworking of Psalm 87. It's an ancient poem, a eulogy for Jerusalem, where the poet (Psalmist) confirms Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the location of the Temple where God was known to live. This Psalmist prophesies and envisages a spiritual city where nations come together in equality, each with a 'birthright' to be there. Other Psalmists similarly sing the praises of Jerusalem and declare God's love for the city founded by God on mountains that reach to Heaven (vs 1-3). The Psalmist is articulating God's dream of a world united – the Kingdom of God. Yet sadly even now, in the 21st Century, we look at the beautiful city of Jerusalem and see a place torn apart by ethnic rivalries, where division has reigned for millennia since the Psalm was first written and the writer's vision has yet to be realised.

Today, is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, culminating in God's ultimate sacrifice for us. This is the day when Christians remember Jesus' controversial entry into Jerusalem. Jesus, who wept over the same city, rode a donkey at the head of a procession of peasants down the Mount of Olives and into the city. This was symbolically far removed from an imperial procession that was taking place in another part of the city. Jesus came in peace, without the trappings of warfare, bringing a message of love and non-violent justice, and looking towards that Kingdom of God – God's dream for the world – as prophesied by the Psalmist.

Today we wave our palm crosses, sharing our faith as 21st Century disciples, yet sadly it's difficult to envisage that world where everyone lives in peace – that world foreseen by the Psalmist – where nations live in harmony, where conflict and division are no more.

Prayer

God of Peace, as we recall Jesus making his way through Jerusalem and eventually to his death on the cross for us, we ask forgiveness – we have not learned the lessons, we still accept injustice and we still live in a world divided.

We beg for your help as we, 21st Century disciples strive towards the peaceful, just, loving world of your Kingdom.
Lord make peacemakers of us all. Amen

Monday 11 April 2022

The Rev'd Sarah Moore serves as Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland and as Assistant Clerk of the General Assembly.

St Luke 22: 54 - 71

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it, saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not!' Then about an hour later yet another kept insisting, 'Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about!' At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly. Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, 'Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?' They kept heaping many other insults on him. When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their