

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – April 5 2020 (Palm Sunday)**

Hello. I should warn you this is a slightly longer preamble than usual!

My name is Bill Young and I am one of the ministers in the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. I say 'one of the ministers' because by Sunday my colleague, the Revd Debbie Brown will have been inducted to ministry in our Group. These are not great times to be moving to a new place and getting to know new people, or starting a new job, but I know we will all help Debbie as she begins work, and I also know we will receive a blessing through her ministry in Coventry.

Debbie's induction, conducted by our Moderator online, will also be available on the usual web page. This is a basic ceremony and there will be a service of welcome and celebration later.

This is our third Group podcast in this time of Covid-19 emergency measures. Thank you for feedback on the previous editions, and it is always welcome. I would also welcome any offers to contribute by reading scripture or prayers, if you have an 'app' on your phone or PC which allows you to record to an audio file. I look forward to hearing from you.

Among the acts of worship we have had to cancel because of the virus were our now-habitual Holy Week pilgrimage services in our four churches. There will be a shorter podcast with scripture, reflection and prayer put online by late afternoon each day in the coming week, available in the usual place

On Easter Morning itself, we will operate a telephone conference in order to share in a short Group act of worship. **THIS WILL BE AT 11.15AM** and probably last for 15 to 20 minutes. You can join by calling the number 0330 606 0403.

When you are asked for it, enter the following access code on your phone pad: 442786#.

**THIS IS A LATER TIME THAN PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED AS THERE IS OFTEN CONGESTION ON THIS FREE CONFERENCE CALL SERVICE ON THE HOUR. MY APOLOGIES IF THERE ARE STILL TECHNICAL ISSUES WITH EVERYONE CALLING IN!**

If you are able, please provide yourself with something to eat and drink as communion is shared. It doesn't matter if this is not bread and wine! It is the sharing that is most important. Please note, the phone number is not 'premium rate' and that the call will cost no more than a normal call to a UK number.

### **Now welcome to a podcast reflection for Sunday 5 April, Palm Sunday**

Sometimes all of the Old Testament seems as if it is looking forward to the New. In a sense this is true, but some passages seem particularly prescient, almost tailor made trailers for the Gospel story.

And still other passages would naturally occur to the people who encountered Jesus, who knew their own scriptures. Palm Sunday - the first Palm Sunday – stirred the crowds to remember the last words of this excerpt from Psalm 118:

*Open for me the gates of the righteous;  
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.  
This is the gate of the Lord  
through which the righteous may enter.*

*I will give you thanks, for you answered me;  
you have become my salvation.*

*The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvellous in our eyes.  
The Lord has done it this very day;  
let us rejoice today and be glad.*

*Lord, save us!  
Lord, grant us success!*

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

The phrase 'Lord, save us' gives us a Hebrew word which reaches us as 'Hosanna', and so many would say leads straight to the cry of the crowds on that Jerusalem day: *Hosanna, Blessed is the one who saves us: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*

In our churches there is a certain expectation of what music goes with Palm Sunday and to avoid dropping ratings I wasn't going to disappoint, this time round. This opening hymn is very well known although in modern hymnbooks there is often a move to truncate it because otherwise the congregation tends to run out of steam. This is not true of Coventry's own *St Michael's Singers* who bring us *All glory, laud and honour*.

### **All glory, laud and honour<sup>ii</sup>**

*All glory, laud, and honour  
to thee, Redeemer, King!  
to whom the lips of children  
made sweet hosannas ring.*

*Thou art the King of Israel,  
thou David's royal Son,  
who in the Lord's Name comest,  
the King and Blessed One.*

*All glory, laud, and honour...*

*The company of angels  
are praising thee on high;  
and mortal men and all things  
created make reply.*

*All glory, laud, and honour...*

*The people of the Hebrews  
with palms before thee went;  
our praise and prayer and anthems  
before thee we present.*

*All glory, laud, and honour...*

*To thee before thy passion  
they sang their hymns of praise;  
to thee, now high exalted,  
our melody we raise.*

*All glory, laud, and honour...*

*Thou didst accept their praises;  
accept the prayers we bring,  
who in all good delightest,  
thou good and gracious King.*

*All glory, laud, and honour...*

## **Prayers**

At the beginning of Holy Week, in a time of national and International crisis, we pray:

Lord Jesus, at the beginning of the last week of your earthly life you were welcomed into Jerusalem by the crowds. Even so may we welcome you into this worship and into our lives.

May the joy of the crowds then be echoed now in our joy in the fresh realisation of your nature and your love.

May the recognition of the crowds, who saw in you the fulfilment of ancient promises, be echoed in our fresh appreciation of your sacrifice and of the route you show us into God's presence.

May the way they led you into the town then be echoed in the way we invite you to influence the world now.

May the way you challenged the religious leaders of your day find an echo in the way we challenge the political leaders of this world to look always for just and peaceful, honest and fair solutions to this world's problems.

Grant us gifts of courage and humility, selflessness and focus, discernment between what is important and urgent and those things that can wait, between eternal values and transitory.

For you rode humbly into Jerusalem, on a donkey. King of the world, about to change the world.

We offer these prayers in your name... and in your words...

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen*

Here is the story of the first Palm Sunday as we can read it in Matthew's Gospel:

**Matthew 21.1-11<sup>iii</sup> [read by Janet Powell]**

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.'

This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

'Say to Daughter Zion,  
"See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!  
'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?

The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.'

I want to turn, before we reflect on this passage, to another psalm that speaks of gates – but this time welcoming-in a conquering king. This is in a metrical version of Psalm 24, written for the Presbyterian church in the middle of the seventeenth century. *Ye gates, lift up your heads*, in a recording by the Glasgow Phoenix Choir.

**Ye gates, lift up your heads**

*Ye gates lift up your heads on high;  
ye doors that last for aye,  
be lifted up, that so the King  
of glory enter may.*

*But who of glory is the King?  
The mighty Lord is this,  
even that same Lord that great in might  
and strong in battle is.*

*Ye gates, lift up your heads; ye doors,  
doors that do last for aye,  
be lifted up, that so the King  
of glory enter may.*

*But who is he that is the King,  
the King of glory? who is this?  
The Lord of hosts, and none but he,  
the King of glory is.*

*Alleluia! Amen.*

It strikes me you didn't get to be in that choir without just the right sort of posh Scottish accent.

## Reflection

Something else from north of the border: a collect prayer for Palm Sunday<sup>iv</sup> from the service book of the Church of Scotland: *Common Order*:

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
On the first Palm Sunday  
You entered the rebellious city  
Where you were to die.  
Enter our hearts, we pray,  
And subdue them to yourself.  
And as your disciples blessed your coming  
And spread garments and branches in your way,  
Make us ready to lay at your feet  
All that we have and are,  
That we too may bless your coming  
In the name of the Lord.  
Amen*

Holy Week is upon us and once again we are faced with the old questions to answer.

How would we have behaved, if put in the same position as...

The crowds?  
Pilate?  
Caiaphas, the high priest?  
Peter, or one of the other disciples?  
Judas?  
Jesus himself?

The same old questions arise -

Could Jesus have changed the course of the week and then of history? As he himself prayed in the garden, **could** the cup have been taken from him?

There are other less deep questions; a recurring one for me is "how to pronounce "Bethphage". I am grateful to Janet for reading and for making that decision for me, though it doesn't sound very Hebrew to me. I live in fear of some Bible scholar one day telling me it should rhyme not with 'rage' but with 'baggy'.

You may know that on Palm Sunday the lectionary, which is our guide to a pattern of scripture that can be used through the year, offers us two choices. This is not a morning and an evening choice.

The main readings for the day can be either the so-called 'Liturgy of the Palms': Palm Sunday arrival in Jerusalem, the donkey, the crowds, the palm branches and the Hosannahs, or 'the liturgy of the Passion': a full account of all of the events of the first Holy Week.

This year for the latter option we are offered Matthew 26:14-27:66. Nearly 3000 words which I reckon would take around half an hour to read out. That, or a sermon? I haven't given you the choice.

This passage covers Matthew's version of the last supper, Judas' betrayal, the agony in the garden, the arrest, Peter's denial, the trial before Pilate and the visit to Herod,. The crucifixion. The death of Jesus. His burial in the tomb prepared for Joseph from Arimathea.

There is a lot to take in, and some of it is amazing stuff, though from our vantage point of 2000 years later we know that this was the preamble to something yet more amazing.

Though the next few days and through further daily shorter podcasts I shall take a journey through Holy Week at a slower pace.

But today I decided to take the story of Palm Sunday just a little further, through to the point where Jesus has entered Jerusalem and started doing stuff. So, two more verses:

*Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it "a den of robbers."*

Through the contrast with the passage that Janet read I wanted to be able to say that in the world that Jesus came to there was a wide variety of attitudes. There were decent people and misguided people, virtuous people and some with evil in their hearts. This was not a cauldron of devil worship or a universal abandonment of the ancient moral code that was embodied in the Jewish Law.

Some aspects of the Law were corrupted and the central meaning of God's message had become clouded by the interpretation of the Law into a certain pattern of ceremonies and rituals. The priestly ruling class was getting its priorities wrong and the wrong things were indeed going on in the Temple, but there was hope in the world. Some of the people that Jesus met were only lacking one part of the jigsaw to make their picture complete. Some only needed a nudge or an example in order to apply the Law the way Jesus would come to interpret it: Love God, love your neighbour.

Through the Gospel story Jesus made inroads and progress. People were realising there was something special in the world, and wondering how to deal with it. In the story of the first Holy Week, things came to a head.

The story of Holy Week is a gathering tension and at the time must have been unimaginably tense for all the protagonists. Jesus is dead at the end of the story of Holy Week and our liturgy of the passion, had we used it, doesn't shrink from that particular plot spoiler. And from a church perspective we know this story has a happy ending. We have no fear, year after year, that Jesus is gone for ever.

We build downbeat words into our liturgies of Good Friday. We re-examine ourselves in the light of the enormity of what Jesus willingly did for us. But Easter morning is no surprise and we take care to plan the services, the church decoration, the choice of music and the choreography of worship to reflect our thankfulness and our joy at God's love. Some allow themselves to eat chocolate once again.

No surprise for us, but think of the characters in the long reading we didn't have this time. Think of their position. It was as if they were reading this story for the first time. Think of the last book you read where you turned the page at the end and got a shock.

Then and now there are people who still have that shock to come. God calls us each to a particular role and it may not be our calling to tell the Gospel story to first-time hearers but it might be our job to keep telling people what the message of it is.

Our Holy Week scripture features an enormous cast of characters. This is why for example Oberammagau needs a whole village-full every ten years to provide a faithful representation on the stage, if you are accounting for the Jerusalem crowds alongside the principals. Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, Ananias, Peter, John, the Marys, the other disciples. Up to a point it is not the extras that this story is about. It is not the baddies. Through all of this the **disciples** were being equipped, in a shocking and stark and unexpected way, to do what they were called to do, to go on and found the church.

In whose shoes will you try and put yourself this week? Perhaps our additional daily reflections will provide different options for this. For now I think of us imagining the disciples' feelings. Through the ups and downs of that first Holy Week, so much greater than any we face, they endured and where they fell they were sustained and forgiven and put back on track. At the end of the story the man Jesus has died.

But keep turning the pages. The adventure and its many sequels goes on. We can re-read the book every year and find new insights and lessons. And the message is for us and for all. Jesus suffered and died not only to show what God can do, but to remind humankind what it can do, what we can do, for God and for each other.

A dedication to look after each other has been demonstrated in this year's crisis. Whether you call it a coronavirus or a Covid-19 crisis it has shown already how this sort of situation pushes people to make a decision, either to pull together or not.

Do you know, they say the origins of the word crisis have nothing to do with things being bad or things being at their worst. Crisis is from a Greek word implying a point of decision-making, perhaps even a crossroads. A turning point, so crisis is sometimes used in tracking diseases. Will the patient get better or not? The illness reaches its crisis.

In this crisis there lies decision-making for all. It's a funny sort of crossroads where there is no option of turning back. There are limited options at each stage. But if each option can be examined in the light of Christ to see whether it is the one that helps others, that is fair and just and a decision that will mean we still like who we are at the end of it all, that's the route to take. Every time.

Not always the smoothest road. As Jesus found. But the road Jesus chose. Every time.

## **Prayers**

We pray once again, for the Church and for the World in which it is challenged to be the body of Christ:

Lord, we are struggling to find a new 'normal', in a world that changes from day to day and which itself is reacting to the unknown, the unforeseen and the unthinkable.

We have sought in the past to be close alongside those who suffer, when Jesus himself identified his Church as those who would feed the hungry and refresh the thirsty, invite the stranger in and comfort and visit the sick. In a world where to care is to avoid contact, help us to see a new way to be Christ's body on earth.

Help us as we look for effective and inclusive ways to worship, when many lack the latest means of communication. Help us still to help others, even when that help is reduced to undramatic conversations and simple shopping.

But we remember those who make the bigger investment, the risk of their own safety and the exposure to the upset of serious illness. NHS staff at all levels. Those who support them in chaplaincy, supply and administration. Their families whose own risk is higher or isolation more complete.

We pray for those who supply us with our shopping needs, our power and our water, who keep our systems going. May those who are obliged to remain at home remain watchful and observant of rules that protect all.

Be with all of us in our frustrations, including those who would offer help but find themselves in a queue, waiting opportunities and chances.

In our Group of churches we pray for Debbie and Clive Brown as Debbie begins her ministry in Coventry. May the limitations of the management of the virus emergency, and limited communication options, be overcome as she and we seek for imaginative ways to serve you together.

In all of this may we know your presence and sense how we can best respond to your goodness and love.

In Jesus' name

Amen

May God keep you safe in the coming days, and amidst the turmoil and upset of a world at a time of crisis – a time when everyone's decisions matter – may you still find space to consider the message of Holy Week, summed up in our closing hymn:

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
In lowly pomp ride on to die;  
bow thy meek head to mortal pain,  
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.*

**Ride on! Ride on in majesty!'**

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry;  
O Saviour meek, pursue thy road  
with palms and scattered garments strowed.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
In lowly pomp ride on to die;  
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin  
o'er captive death and conquered sin.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
The angel-armies of the sky  
look down with sad and wondering eyes  
to see the approaching sacrifice.*



*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh;  
the Father on his sapphire throne  
awaits his own anointed Son.*

*Ride on! ride on in majesty!  
In lowly pomp ride on to die;  
bow thy meek head to mortal pain,  
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.*

## **Blessing**

Move on into Holy Week knowing that the humble man on a donkey is the Son of God, his Father is our Father and the Spirit that sustained him is still offered to us. And may the blessing of God Almighty; Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *All glory, laud and honour and Ride on! Ride on in majesty!* recordings by St Michael's Singers and Ye Gates, *lift up your heads* recording by the Glasgow Orpheus Choir are made available under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067.

<sup>ii</sup> Words by Theodulph, bishop of Orleans (d. 821), translation by J M Neale (1818-66)

<sup>iii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition

<sup>iv</sup> As in *Common Order* (1994), from the Church of Scotland

<sup>v</sup> Words by H H Milman (1791-1868)