



Call to Worship

From Philippians 2:5-8

In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus. Christ himself was like God in everything. He was equal with God. But he did not think that being equal with God was something to be held on to. He gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He was born to be a man and became like a servant. And when he was living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God. He obeyed even when that caused his death—death on a cross.

Prayer of Adoration & Confession

Lord God. You are a powerful and mighty God, worthy of our praise and adoration. Yet you do not use your might to force your will upon us. Instead, you show mercy and grace, and above all, you show us the way of perfect love. Willing us to share in your light to receive true fulfilment.

In this season of Lent, we strive more than ever to understand how we can learn from your Son, Jesus Christ, so that we can follow in His way of being faithful to your love in the way we speak and in the way we act. Bless us in our seeking, in our thinking, and all that we do – may it be honourable and to your glory.

We know that so often we strive in vain to live up to your love and our calling, yet you are free with your forgiveness as you shower your mercy and love on us in renewal.

Amen

Hymn

A hymn written to accompany you through Holy Week – set to the tune Winchester New, from Singing the Faith 265)

Ride on, ride on, to loud acclaim,
The crowds have come to praise his name.
With palms and cloaks, the streets they pave.
"Messiah's come", they cheer and wave.

Ride on, ride on, to court of prayer,
With cheating filled, where greed's laid bare.
The temple priests want their own way,
"This man must die", is what they say.

Ride on, ride on, the friends have met,
Their feet are washed, the supper's set.
When bread is blest and wine is poured,
They gather round to praise the Lord.

Ride on, ride on, the darkness falls,
The meal is done, the garden calls.
His friends asleep, he prays with tears,
With traitor's kiss, the guard appears.

Ride on, ride on, the court's convened,
"God's written law, he's contravened".
With made-up charge, they make their claim.
To kill this man, their single aim.

Ride on, ride on, the sentence passed,
The High Priest cheers, "he's gone at last!"
They nail him high upon the tree.
He dies in pain, for you and me.

Ride on, ride on, that's not the end,
With healing love, God does amend.
Death cannot hold His conqu'ring Son,
Vict'ry secured, His peace has won.

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Scripture

Read – two passages from St Matthew's gospel:

The Liturgy of the Palms – Matthew 21:1-11

The Liturgy of the Passion – Matthew 27:11-31 (note the full set passage is long: 26:14-27:66)

Sermon

You choose! That is the guidance of the lectionary today, in this final Sunday in Lent. We are given a choice. It is an important choice. It begs the question, whether we have used the Lenten period of reflection and preparation as fully as we might have. Lent is often used as a period of self-denial as we are invited to reflect on those things in our life which really matter, and to understand those things which act as barriers to the strength of our relationship with God, through Christ. It is also an opportunity for us to think and act differently because of that reflection, and it feels as if Lent is being used more and more to take up new things which have a more altruistic purpose, rather than simply to engage in self-denial.

We have been brought in our reflection and preparation, through the implications of temptation. We have shared a theological conversation with Nicodemus, which in modern interpretation is about the effects of nature and nurture on our growth and maturity. We've continued exploring that balance between physical and spiritual as we have shared in an encounter which confronted diversity head-on. It broke down all the cultural taboos between men and women, and challenged the historical mistrust between nations, showing that our need for spiritual sustenance is more life changing than our physical sustenance. We've explored the reality that the marginalised and disadvantaged suffer at the hands of authorities more interested in protecting their own power base, and that the love of God reaches right through those selfish human power structures with compassion, understanding and healing to meet the need at whatever cost. We've been shown how God is not immune to the pain and sorrow of his people, but weeps with them, bringing salvation and restoration in a time which is of his choosing, even if that sometimes prolongs the hurt.

If that whistlestop tour through Lent hasn't challenged us in our reflection, we come to this final step, and are left with a choice. Unlike most Sundays when the lectionary guides us to a specific set of bible passages for our consideration, this Sunday provides two alternative groups of readings.

We can choose to mark this Sunday with the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as Jesus is honoured and celebrated by the crowds streaming into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration.

Or we can choose to mark this Sunday as the passion of Jesus, as he is increasingly dishonoured and vilified with the betrayal, the arrest, the false trial, the mockery, the scourging and painful death.

Honour versus dishonour. Celebration versus vilification.

There is a distinct polarisation in our choice. Just as we experience increasingly in our lives, we are left with no middle ground or compromise – we are forced to choose between two extremes. Are we for him, or against him? Are we with the crowd coming in from the countryside where Jesus has won hearts and minds of local communities, but antagonised the authorities, or are we with the authorities who see nothing but a threat to their power-base in this upstart?

Is this dissonance and the conflicting thoughts designed to force us to come off the fence and choose? Will we choose the celebration and the pomp and the comfortable message of the triumphal entry and share palm crosses as symbols of the bits of the good news story of Jesus, conveniently leaving all the nasty bits for the days through Holy Week. Will we keep a low profile until we can meet again next Sunday to sing "Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia!"?

Or will we choose to reflect on some of the worst of humanity, and travel through the pain and humiliation that those in power dish out with impunity and apparent disregard for the impact they are having?

Does our reflection on all the encounters we have explored through Lent prepare us to journey day-by-day through the pain of Holy Week? Does it encourage us to be true allies; to stand against those who would abuse their power and push the disadvantaged and poor even more into the margins? To proclaim a gospel of salvation and equality and justice for all, at untold cost to ourselves? Or, is that challenge too demanding, too uncertain, or just plain scary? Would we prefer to celebrate the triumph of the palm entry, and the triumph of resurrection without having to endure that awful journey that comes between the two triumphs?

Jesus' prayer feels a little more poignant in the words of the International Children's bible: "*My Father, if it is not possible for this painful thing to be taken from me, and if I must do it, then I pray that what you want will be done*"

As I ponder the choice presented by the alternative lectionary readings, it feels as if the crux of the message for today lies not in either set of readings alone, but in the stark dilemma of the choice itself. Surely that internal battle between the options is a measure of the commitment we have already made through our Lenten journey, and will force us to choose just how we will face the coming week, with the extremes of both its highs and its lows.

May God guide you with his words of both challenge and comfort as you confront this choice for yourself.

Prayer for the world

In the garden, you prayed that the cup of anguish and suffering may be removed from you, but still was obedient to your will.

We pray for the many people who are living in anguish and suffering, and for whom there seems to be no hope of peace or justice. May we take the yoke of Christ in standing as allies of the poor, the weak, the suffering, the marginalised and the oppressed. May we be granted the wisdom and strength to speak truth to power and call out the injustices, and the abuse of power wherever it is seen.

May your Spirit provide comfort, assurance and hope, as it did to Christ when he faced the coming anguish and suffering.

As we face the lows and highs of this Holy Week, we pray that the promise of resurrection glory may turn hardened hearts; comfort and console broken hearts, and liberate fear-bound hearts.

Amen

Hymn

from Singing the Faith 720 – a hymn calling out for justice and compassion.

*We turn to you, O God of every nation,
giver of good and origin of life;
your love is at the heart of all creation,
your hurt is people's pain in war and death.*

*We turn to you that we may be forgiven
for crucifying Christ on earth again.
We know that we have never wholly striven
to share with all the promise of your reign.*

*Free every heart from haughty self-reliance,
our ways of thought inspire with simple grace;*

*break down among us barriers of defiance,
speak to the soul of all the human race.*

*On all who rise on earth for right relations,
we pray the light of love from hour to hour.
Grant wisdom to the leaders of the nations,
the gift of carefulness to those in power.*

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve the need of
others,
help us to give and not to count the cost.
Unite us all to live as sisters, brothers,
defeat our Babel with your Pentecost!*

Blessing

As you look forward into this Holiest of Weeks, may God bless you and keep you. May he be with you as you reflect on the call he is making on your life, and as you prepare to meet the Christ who rose to set you free.

Amen.