

starters for Sunday

Sixth Sunday in Lent

Palm/Passion Sunday

29 March 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Tom Gordon, former Chaplain of Marie Curie Hospice, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on Palm/Passion Sunday.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Isaiah 50: 4-9a](#)

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

⁴ The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.

He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

⁵ The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears;
I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.

⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;

I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.

⁷ Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

⁸ He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!

Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me!

⁹ It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.
Who will condemn me?



Background

In what is known as ‘Second Isaiah, there are, scholars have suggested, more pointers to the fulfilment of God’s promises in the New Testament than in any other part of the Old Testament. This passage is no exception, and we should look to the New Testament for what is, perhaps, Isaiah’s greatest contribution to that prospect of fulfilment – the concept of the Suffering Servant. This is a strangely mysterious figure in Isaiah’s writing, described in four short songs: 42:1-4, 49:1-6, this passage 50:4-9, and, finally, 52:13-53:12. Many scholarly tomes have been written on the subject of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant. William Neil (One Volume Commentary) indicates that ‘the Servant has been thought to be, among a host of other suggestions, Jeremiah, the prophet himself, Israel, the faithful minority within the community, the ideal people of God.’

But, whatever Isaiah built upon, the concept of the Suffering Servant communicates a vital truth to those of us who are part of the post-New Testament community of faith. Here is a picture of the perfect Servant of God who, through his sufferings and death, brought us to the full knowledge of God himself.

Some scholars suggest that the ‘servant songs’ are later additions to the narrative of Isaiah’s prophecies and that they have their birth in the disappointment Second Isaiah had to face. Cyrus did not give *YHWH* credit for his victories, and Israel did not praise *YHWH* for his promise of freedom and a new beginning. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the prophet was somewhat disillusioned. Yet out of that turmoil came this conviction – Israel had a future. The role of God’s people had a purpose. They were to be destined to suffer on behalf of others and so win the world, and the whole of humanity, for God.

Israel chose not to accept this prophecy. But Jesus in his coming as God’s Son (see John 3: 16) was the fulfilment of the prophecy. The Servant had to suffer and die in order that redemption could be offered to all.



This passage

Verses 1-4 of chapter 50 indicates that the dereliction of the Jews is not 'of Christ', for the coming of the Messiah brings with it the power to save all human kind. **Verses 5-9** points to the Suffering Servant who is obedient to his calling, for he knows that he is 'of God', and that God is ever present with him. **Verses 10-11** offer us an exhortation not to trust in ourselves but in God.

Some thoughts on the passage

Verse 4: The 'Sovereign Lord' has given the prophet a message. This passage, and passages which follow, point to the fulfilment of the prophet's message in the person of the Incarnate Christ. 'A well instructed tongue' would indicate that the message was true, and that the prophet was speaking plainly, convincingly and persuasively. And here is a message for 'the weary', all those who are burdened with what the prophet saw in his people – a sense of a hopeless condition. The prophet is 'wakened'. When a new day dawns, the message is there, clear as day. It is with him all the time. It never goes away. It is the prophet's task, therefore, to hear, be attuned to that message, interpret it and speak it plainly, and with all attention and diligence.

Verse 6: The Suffering Servant will have a hard time. His back is turned on his persecutors. He has the patience born only of a deep and lasting trust in God. He will not yield to those who persecute him.

Verse 8: There will be vindication for all of this. God will know the righteousness of his servant and will show by mighty signs and wonders that the Suffering Servant lived and died as the faithful servant he was called to be. The Suffering Servant knows his own innocence. God will still be in control.

Verse 9: Accusers and enemies will not prevail.

There are many echoes of Christ's own words in this passage which offer us the unbreakable link between this prophecy and its fulfilment in the Incarnate Christ.

John Wesley wrote on his commentary on this passage:

Christ... is called God's servant, by way of eminency and to intimate that though he was God, yet he would take upon himself the form of a servant. In darkness... not in



sin, but in misery, that lives in a disconsolate and calamitous condition... no light, no comfort. [There is the call to] trust... Let him fix his faith and hope in the mercy, and faithfulness, of the Lord, declared in his word, and in his interest in God, who by the mediation of this servant is reconciled to him and made his God.

[Mark 14: 1-15:47](#)

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Jesus anointed at Bethany

14 Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him.

² ‘But not during the festival,’ they said, ‘or the people may riot.’

³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, ‘Why this waste of perfume?’ ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.’ And they rebuked her harshly.

⁶ ‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.

¹¹ They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

The Last Supper

¹² On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus’ disciples asked him, ‘Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’



¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, ‘Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴ Say to the owner of the house he enters, “The Teacher asks: where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” ¹⁵ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.’

⁴⁷ Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁴⁸ ‘Am I leading a rebellion,’ said Jesus, ‘that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? ⁴⁹ Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.’ ⁵⁰ Then everyone deserted him and fled.

⁵¹ A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, ⁵² he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Jesus before the Sanhedrin

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. ⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

⁵⁵ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. ⁵⁶ Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.”’ ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ ⁶¹ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’

⁶² ‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. ‘Why do we need any more witnesses?’ he asked. ⁶⁴ ‘You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?’



They all condemned him as worthy of death. ⁶⁵ Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, ‘Prophecy!’ And the guards took him and beat him.

Peter disowns Jesus

⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.

⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.

‘You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,’ she said.

⁶⁸ But he denied it. ‘I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,’ he said, and went out into the entrance.

⁶⁹ When the servant-girl saw him there, she said again to those standing round them, ‘This fellow is one of them.’ ⁷⁰ Again he denied it.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, ‘Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.’

⁷¹ He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man you’re talking about.’

⁷² Immediately the cock crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: ‘Before the cock crows twice you will disown me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.

Jesus before Pilate

¹⁵ Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

² ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate.

‘You have said so,’ Jesus replied.

³ The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ So again Pilate asked him, ‘Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.’

⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder in the uprising.

⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.



⁹ ‘Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?’ asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to get Pilate to release Barabbas instead.

¹² ‘What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?’ Pilate asked them.

¹³ ‘Crucify him!’ they shouted.

¹⁴ ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’

¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers mock Jesus

¹⁶ The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷ They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ ¹⁹ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The crucifixion of Jesus

²¹ A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means ‘the place of the skull’). ²³ Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

²⁵ It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

²⁷ They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. [j] ²⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ come down from the cross and save yourself!’ ³¹ In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself!’ ³² Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down



now from the cross, that we may see and believe.’ Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

The death of Jesus

³³ At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’).

³⁵ When some of those standing near heard this, they said, ‘Listen, he’s calling Elijah.’

³⁶ Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ‘Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,’ he said.

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’

⁴⁰ Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

The burial of Jesus

⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached,

⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.

⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.



Background

On the assumption that there should be choice of focus on this Sunday of the Christian Year in preparation for Holy Week, the compilers of the Lectionary have chosen to offer the whole of the Passion Narrative as the Gospel reading for this Sunday. It is impossible, therefore, to offer insight into such a long section of the Gospel of Mark, given that the passage contains accounts of Jesus being anointed at Bethany, the Last Supper, Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Peter disowning Jesus, Jesus before Pilate, the soldiers mocking Jesus, the crucifixion, and the death and burial of Jesus.

Consequently, I shall concentrate only on one section of this lengthy narrative – The anointing of Jesus at Bethany. It seems to me as I am writing this that it follows appropriately from our thinking of ‘The Suffering Servant’ from the Isaiah lesson.

[Mark 14: 1-11](#)

The discourse which Mark outlays in chapter 13 has ominous tones ringing through it. But now in chapter 14 Mark reverts to the day to day account of the events of the week of Jesus’ Passion. He begins his narrative of this remarkable series of events – compressing some of the time-scales and altering the order of things for his own dramatic purposes – with a preface, a story which offers a statement of purpose for all that is to follow.

Jesus is at the home, in Bethany, of his friend, Simon the Leper, presumably one of those who had been cured from leprosy during Jesus’ ministry. And the tranquillity and family-orientated nature of the gathering is totally disrupted by the arrival of an uninvited guest. She had an alabaster jar of precious ointment, and she anoints Jesus’ head with the scented oil. While it was often the custom to pour a few drops of perfume on a guest when they arrived at a house or sat down to a meal, it was not expected that all the perfume would be used. Nard was expensive. And the alabaster phial – a rare and valued artefact on those days - was completely smashed.

There is uproar. ‘What a waste,’ people said. ‘Surely the cost of this could have been given to help the poor and needy and not be wasted on this man.’ But Jesus rebukes them, and tells the people that this woman has done an important thing.



Look at the reactions of the different people to the event: (A possible outline for a sermon.)

- **The woman**, for whatever reason, believed she was anointing a King. The symbolism of this action points to the anointing of royalty or the elevation of a priest. Did she see Jesus as the Messiah? Perhaps she did. But, whatever was on her mind, she wanted to show the importance of Jesus in her life, and she didn't care who knew it. Professor William Barclay in his commentary on Mark's Gospel offers us this thought on the motives of the woman:

There may have been more than one reason why she broke the flask. Maybe she broke it as a sign that all was to be used. There was a custom in the East that if a glass was used by a distinguished guest or stranger, after he had used it, it would be broken so that it could never again be touched by the hand of any lesser person. Maybe there was something of that in the woman's mind.

The woman gave her all, and held nothing back – a wonderful symbol of itself. Here was an action of unconditional love in her response to Jesus. Jesus said it was a 'lovely' thing she had done to him. Barclay concludes, 'Love does lovely things.'

- **The onlookers** didn't want any fuss, Mark tells us. Yet here was Jesus as the centre of attention again. They misunderstood the actions of the woman, seeing this entirely in monetary or secular terms. This is waste, and on such a person as this, when there are poor to be cared for. Hypocrites, or what?
- **And Jesus?** If the woman believed she was anointing a king or a priest, Jesus believed he was being anointed for burial. Here, supremely, is the Suffering Servant who understood his calling, even if the people didn't. Jesus does not accept this action as a royal anointing. He sees this as the final pointer to his sacrifice. Is it any surprise, therefore, that Mark, writing some years after the events he catalogues, uses this story as the preface for, and the 'pointer' to, all that is to follow in the Passion Narrative?
- **This is a turning point for Judas.** Here was Jesus spurning any belief in earthly kingship, and, therefore, finally rejecting any political action, any revolution or earthly power-struggle. Could this have been the final straw for Judas, the event which tipped the balance? Was this the moment when Judas renounced his allegiance to Jesus and decided to betray his master? If Jesus was determined to die, this is not what Judas bargained for, and for his own safety he had swiftly to withdraw his support for the losing side.



Philippians 2: 5-11

New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death –

even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Background

In this chapter the Apostle offers exhortations to the duties to the Christians of Philippi, to be like-minded and lowly-minded, and to follow the example of Christ. He continues from where he left off in the preceding chapter, urging the people to conform to the example of the Lord Jesus, the great pattern of humility and love. Christ is the supreme example.

Verse 5 - *“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”.*

Christians must be of Christ’s mind. We must bear a resemblance to his life, if we would have the benefit of his death. The mind of Christ? Jesus was eminently humble. ‘Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart’, Jesus said. If we are lowly-minded, we should be like-minded. Matthew Henry’s commentary suggests that



‘We must walk in the same spirit and in the same steps with the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself to sufferings and death for us; not only to satisfy God’s justice, and pay the price of our redemption, but to set us an example, and that we might follow his steps.’

Verse 6 – *“who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”*

The concept of ‘equality with God’ has been interpreted in many ways by New Testament Scholars. The main debate is whether it means being ‘in the form of God’ or to be considered as something for the future which could be found – and, in Christ’s case, known but rejected. This is complicated stuff, and, I suspect, an element of this passage which isn’t likely to be considered for a sermon. But this is worth thinking about: the Son of God, faced with the temptation which is fundamental to humanity – the second Adam, if you like – to be greater than God Himself, renounced what was his by right. Ralph Martin in his commentary on Philippians, writes:

[He] chose instead the way of obedient suffering as the pathway to His lordship.

Verses 7 & 8 - *rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by coming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

These are the key verses in this passage. For here is the upshot of the choice indicated in verse 6. Jesus did not grab at equality with his Father. He accepted the consequences of his pathway of self-denial. He, supremely, and by conscious choice, took the role of the Suffering Servant to which Isaiah pointed so graphically and eloquently. The phrase translated here as “he humbled himself” is translated elsewhere as “he made himself of no reputation” or “he emptied himself”.

Verses 9-11 - *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Now the emphasis changes. Up till now attention has been focussed on the self-humbling and total obedience of the Son of God. Now the spotlight is on the God who takes the initiative. The obedience of the Suffering Servant is (Ralph Martin):



...crowned by the act of exaltation in which the Father raises His Son from the dead and elevates Him to the place of honour. The resurrection and glorification of the Lord are the Father's response to the... obedience [of the Son] which led him to the cross, the Father's 'Amen!' to the Son's 'It is finished!'

A M Hunter describes this passage as:

... a 'purple patch' stitched into the fabric of the exhortation [to the Philippians].

It is, therefore, a key element in the teaching of the Apostle to a fledgling church, the key, if you like, that can unlock much more understanding of the nature and purpose of Christ. Ralph Martin describes these few verses as a 'Christological hymn', and cites Lohmeyer's concept (outlined in "Kyrios Jesus") that this is, in fact, an early Christian confession which belongs to liturgy rather than exposition. He suggests that Lohmeyer is right when he lays the passage out in a different form, therefore producing a hymn of six stanzas, each with three lines:

1. *Being in the form of God
He considered it not a thing to be seized
To be equal to God.*
2. *But emptied Himself,
By taking the form of a slave,
Coming in human likeness.*
3. *And appearing on earth as Man,
He humbled himself,
Becoming obedient unto death (indeed, death on a cross).*
4. *Wherefore God exalted Him,
And bestowed on Him the name
That is above every other name;*
5. *That in the name of Jesus
Every knee should bow,
Of things in heaven, on earth and under the earth,*
6. *And every tongue confess:
'Jesus Christ is Lord',
To the glory of God the Father.*



Illustrative material

The uninvited guest

This story has been written to offer a contemporary setting for the Gospel reading of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany. It is conceivable, therefore, that it could be utilised as a sermon of itself, without interpretation or gloss, allowing the listeners to enter in a new way into the concepts and meaning of the anointing of Jesus.

No one expected Patsy Gallagher to turn up at the show of presents. No one expected her, because, for one thing, she hadn't been invited, and for another, it wasn't likely to be her scene anyway.

Patsy Gallagher was an outsider. It hadn't always been like that, because, as Veronica knew well, there was a time when Patsy was one of the crowd, and her presence at something like a 'show of presents' would not only have been expected, it would have been positively welcomed. But that was then, and this was now. So no one expected Patsy Gallagher to turn up.

It was Veronica's do. Back in the 1970s, before 'hen nights' with their trips to Prague or Dublin or New York came into vogue, there was always a 'show of presents' a couple of weeks before a wedding. It was a way a grateful bride could say 'thank you' to generous people, and at the same time show off the nice things she'd been given to offer a good start to married life. All the goodies would be on display in her mum's front room, sometimes spilling over into the hall or a bedroom. And, if you were well enough organised, all the presents would be labelled, and if not actually labelled, then explained by a beaming bride-to-be or her proud mum.

'And these are the bath towels from my auntie Vi... And here we have the canteen of cutlery from Jim's parents... And this catalogue has a picture in it of the fridge gran's getting us...' and so on. It was the expected way of things. And the women who came to the show of presents – for it was always the women; men wouldn't be seen dead at such a do! – would murmur appreciation, drink sweet sherry or port-and-lemon, drink endless cups of tea and gratefully consume cakes specially made for the occasion, and, of course, chatter endlessly and have a thoroughly good time.

All the people that mattered were at Veronica's do. The show of presents had been weeks in the planning. It was turning out to be a great success. That is, until Patsy Gallagher arrived...



Patsy and Veronica had been in school together, all through Primary and the four years of Junior Secondary before they left school at sixteen and entered the world of employment. It would be too much to say that Patsy and Veronica had been best mates. There was a whole bunch of them who'd hung around together. All the rest of the gang had been invited to Veronica's do. All, that is, apart from Patsy. Patsy had changed. In fact, she'd started to change before she'd left school. 'Getting in with a bad crowd,' had been Veronica's mum's explanation. But whatever it was, Patsy drifted away from her friends, and, more accurately, her friends were having less and less to do with her.

When Patsy fell pregnant, two months after her sixteenth birthday, that was pretty well the end of things. The social stigma of a teenage pregnancy was too much for a group of respectable young women to cope with. There were rumours of 'doesn't know who the father is' because of multiple partners and of an increasingly promiscuous life-style.

Patsy had moved away. No one held out much hope for her. The last people knew was that she was living up with a pretty dubious character in a squat in town. The kids – three of them now – were in care. And no one bothered too much.

It was Veronica's sister who answered the door. And there in the stair-well stood Patsy Gallagher. The young lass didn't know what to do. So, leaving the door half ajar, she rushed into the living room and sought out her sister.

'Veronica, Patsy Gallagher's here,' she whispered.

'What?' asked a startled Veronica. 'Here? Who invited her? Where is she?'

'She's at the front door.' Veronica and her sister's attempt at a whispered conversation had failed. For now they realised that the whole room had gone quiet and that everyone knew what they were talking about.

'You can't let her in,' someone said. 'Who does she think she is?' offered another. 'Bloody cheek.' And, within moments, the chatter was loud and animated - and it was all about Patsy Gallagher.

Veronica slipped from the living room and into the hallway. What was she to do? She didn't want the show of presents to be ruined. And she wouldn't have anything to say to her former friend anyway. She was confused. And then, the front door slowly swung open, gently pushed by the



uninvited guest in the stair-well, and there Veronica saw Patsy Gallagher for the first time in ten years. She's obviously made an effort, but she was still in pretty poor shape.

Picking up on Veronica's obvious uncertainty the bedraggled figure said, 'Hello, Veronica. Long time, eh? Hope you don't mind. But I couldn't let it go by, eh?' Veronica had nothing to say and just stood in the hallway and stared. She needn't have worried. 'I'll not come in,' Patsy said. 'But I wanted to give you this.' And with that she unearthed a small, rather grubby parcel, no bigger than a cassette-tape box, and held it out to Veronica. 'It's all I've got that's worth anything. I got it from my gran. I hope you like it.'

Veronica moved forward uncertainly. When she was close enough, Patsy placed the gift in her hand and said, 'I'll not stay. I'll just spoil things. But... anyway... all the best.' And she was gone, leaving a bewildered Veronica staring at an open door and an empty stair-well.

When Veronica returned to her friends in the front room, there was much relief that she'd managed to 'get rid of that toe-rag' and that the assembled company could get 'back to the fun'. Veronica just smiled. She never mentioned the contents of the grubby parcel. It was never put on display with the other presents.

But now, thirty years later, sitting on her dressing table in a nondescript cardboard box, no bigger than a cassette-tape, is a delicate silk handkerchief, with coloured, lace edges, and bearing in bright, yellow stitching, the initial 'P'. Veronica's daughter asked her once where she'd got the handkerchief from, and why she kept it on display like that and never used it... And Veronica replied that it was too good to use, and that it had been given to her by an old and very generous friend.

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Out of place

This meditation, written to complement both the Gospel reading of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany and the contemporary story above, can usefully be used as a prayer/reflection in worship, either after the Gospel reading or a reflective piece on the theme.

It was awkward when she arrived.

She looked out of place.

The clothes weren't right.

There was a strange smell.

She wore thick-make up

that didn't improve her looks much.

There were things she didn't do right.

She felt like an awkward, unwelcome stranger -

the wrong person,

in the wrong place,

at the wrong time.

The others weren't awkward when she arrived.

They gave a stranger her place.

No one mentioned her clothes.

They coped with the smell.

And they smiled in welcome,

and the heavily made-up face cracked into a smile too.

Not everyone got it right,

and some felt strange and awkward

with the wrong person,

in the wrong place,

at the right time.

She wasn't awkward when she left.

She'd had her place.

Maybe she had no other clothes,



and always smelled.

And the thick make-up was an attempt
to show she'd made some kind of effort
to do it right,
despite her awkward strangeness,
as the wrong person,
in the right place,
at the right time.

The others weren't awkward when they left.
They'd once been strangers in the place too,
worrying whether they were dressed properly,
and hoping they didn't smell.
But the smile of welcome
from all the made-up faces
had made them feel at home.
So they hoped they'd done it right,
and made the awkward stranger feel welcome,
and that she was the right person,
in the right place,
at the right time.

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Sermon Ideas

"Oh! No! Not Jesus again!" (On the theme of the Suffering Servant)

This is Palm Sunday. And, believe it or not, it wasn't hard for me to find the theme of my sermon for today. Oh yes, you'd expect me mention the Palm Sunday Procession, the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem at the start of Holy Week, donkeys, hosannas, and all the rest.

But Palm Sunday is much more than that, and so I've been pondering the meaning of this particular Sunday in the Christian Year in a different way. This Sunday at the start of Holy Week is, in the Church's mind, a combination of the Palm Sunday story and "Passion Sunday", that day before Holy Week when we begin to look forward to the passion or suffering of our Lord. How do we make sense of Palm and Passion, celebration and suffering, as Holy Week begins?

When I was in my last parish, I was chaplain at the local school. One day I was taking the morning service in the school for the children aged 7, 8 and 9. I had been sharing with them some thoughts about hospitals and how it was good that there were people who could care for us when we were sick, and how hard it would be if no one cared at all. It was all very inclusive and gentle. And, having set the scene, I went on to tell the children the story of the paralysed man at the pool of Bethesda, who could not get in to the water to be cured because he had no one to help him. You know the story I mean. And along came a man called Jesus who made him better.

And, no sooner had I said that, than a little 7 year old girl in the front row, right beside my feet, muttered, for no one's particular benefit, but certainly audibly enough for me to hear - "Oh, no! Not Jesus again!"

It's not often I am thrown when I am in full flow in the middle of a story. I have even been heckled in the past during a sermon and managed to keep going. But I must say that I stumbled a bit when I heard the words of that little girl, not because I was interrupted - you get used to that in a school service, from kids eating sweeties to those who suddenly need the toilet - but because of the way the words were uttered. "Oh, no! Not Jesus again" was said with feeling. She meant it!

Now, I don't mind people being turned off by the way I conduct services or tell stories. It might be a salutary lesson for any minister or leader of worship to have the odd person looking bored or nodding off to remind him or her of the responsibility we all have to make the Gospel



interesting and relevant. Nor am I to know how boring people have found other ministers so that anything to do with Church and the Bible and Jesus is bound to be boring again. But can a 7 year old really have been so turned off the Gospel because it's only ever been communicated in a tedious and uninspiring way? I think not.

Why then the strength of her reaction? Why the deep meaning of her rejection of Jesus? It can only be because of what she has heard and what she has absorbed from others. It can only be gleaned from the atmosphere which surrounds her. It can only be that she learns as she lives.

Now, this is not sermon to bemoan the irreligious state of the nation and the lack of Christian understanding among our school children. This is not a sermon to say that the negative reaction of this child to Jesus is a sign of the secularisation of a non-Christian society. This is not a sermon to praise the good old days when all children were taught Christian principles and brought up in the faith. For if the good old days were so good, why don't these children who are now adults fill our churches to overflowing?

No, this is not a sermon to wail and moan at the way society is going. But this is a sermon to pick up the challenge that has been thrown down by a 7 year old child, and through her by her family and those who influence her thinking, to look at the why of the comment "Oh, no! Not Jesus again!", and to look at the how of what might be done to counter that reaction.

Think of what happens in our church when we baptise a little baby. The parents make promises, and the congregation – all of you – make promises too. Why? Because we ask ourselves about our responsibility. What is the Church going to do with the child in our midst.

Is it the sad case that the joy and excitement of the Gospel will be communicated in a boring and non-stimulating way, so that at the age of seven he might say, 'Oh no, not Jesus again?' And if that is the case it is a great indictment on those of us who say we are Christian and are excited about Jesus but show nothing of that in our own lives, and who get more excited about the characters of Soap-operas, and the scorers of Scotland's goals, and the vagaries of local politicians than we do about the Jesus who is the Lord of the whole of life.

As part of the Church – Jesus people - we have to look at that one very hard. For children see what they see and know what they know. And if we say we are Christians and show no relevance



of Christ in our own lives, what chance have the kids of picking up any of the excitement of the Gospel.

But, I suspect that there is more to this than just a boring image of Jesus. For in that school service all these years ago there was no lethargy or disinterest in this child. Instead, there was much more. There was aggression and rejection and embitterment - and all at the age of 7!

And where has that come from? From a society that knows that this Jesus stands for challenge. His very life challenges the foundations of the lives we seek to build. His teaching challenges our materialism. His love challenges our selfishness. His miracles challenge our knowledge. His spirit challenges our pragmatism. His weakness challenges our power. His Gospel challenges our control.

And of course we reject that, for we do not want this disturbance, this upset in our lives. And, until we hit a crisis and we face the emptiness of our own existence, we will hear the name of our Lord and we will say "Oh, no. Not Jesus again!"

Today, we remember that Jesus came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, to face his passion, and take the way of the cross.

This Jesus had to suffer because people like us rejected his challenge. And it is that above all else that makes the world 2000 years on still do its damndest to reject Jesus altogether. And it is that above all else that a 7 year old has picked up.

"Come, my children, listen to me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." said the Psalmist.

So, when Jesus comes again to us on this day, and when Jesus comes to us with the same message... Will we stand and wave and shout hosanna and share the joy of his coming?

Or will we say we will not fear the Lord; we will not turn from our evil; we will not do good to others; we will not seek peace; we will not pursue justice. "Oh, no! Not Jesus again!"

That little girl in front of me in a school service all these years ago is part of a society which rejects the issues which the name of Jesus will always raise, and only knowing what she knows and seeing what she sees.



You will get no pat answers from me about how to make the next generation Christian when this one isn't. Even I have problems creating enthusiasm for a little girl in the front row of a school service! The parents of a child being baptised will get no rule book which will make their children Christians.

But you and I have a job to do as this Holy Week begins. And that's got something to do with creating an awareness that this Jesus has to do with the whole of life. That he is relevant to the day to day issues of 2015 as well as for a Palm Sunday 2000 years before.

That Jesus is about the things people, and especially children, get excited about here and now.

When the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, once again Jesus takes a little child into our midst - a 7 year old from a school service or an infant at a baptism - and tells us we will fail this child as we have failed others before if we do not communicate the relevance of Christ for them and their concerns.

On this Sunday above all else, Jesus is not about boredom or even about holiness, he is about relevance to the real world and all it contains, the people, the children, the disciples, the city, the politics, the now of life. The lesson for us has its answer in there somewhere, to be grappled with by the whole of the church.

If this Passion Sunday, therefore, in some way symbolises the pain of the rejection of the challenge of Jesus that is the "why" of a little child's cry, "Oh, no! Not Jesus again!", then the baptism I shared in this morning is the beginning of how we deal with that cry.

For as parents, as a congregation, as a part of the whole Church we will fail these children if we do not work extremely hard to keep our baptismal vows, and do our utmost to communicate the excitement of Jesus and the relevance of this Christ to where they are now.



Prayers

Collect

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.

or

Almighty and ever-living God,
in tender love for all our human race
you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take our flesh
and suffer death upon a cross.
Grant that we may follow
the example of his great humility,
and share in the glory of his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.



Approach, confession and supplication

Living God,
our world is a amazing place,
a dwelling place of beauty and form,
with vistas of colour and wonder,
with discoveries of variety and mystery.
So we give you thanks,
for there is no other way we could possibly respond
in the face of your gift to us of this remarkable world.

This is a good world.
It is a gift from a good God.
It is offered it trust to good people.
So grant us, loving God, the wisdom to use this gift well,
the passion to preserve what is good,
and the sound common sense, and the insights of faith,
to give thanks to God,
the provider of life and love.

But we also know,
this is a world where we have to face and seek to understand
suffering and brokenness.
The suffering of pain and sorrow,
and the brokenness of sin and evil;
the suffering of war and strife,
and the brokenness of body, mind and spirit;
the suffering of failure and rejection,
and the brokenness of faithlessness and profanity.

Where the suffering and brokenness is of our making,
Lord forgive us.



Where the suffering and brokenness is caused by others,
give us the grace to forgive them.

Where the suffering and brokenness is beyond our understanding,
give us your hope, and patience, and peace.

Where the suffering and brokenness is in the mystery of our not-knowing,
we offer our confusion and personal pain,
we offer our honest struggles,
and pray that your healing might bring blessing and wholeness,
even when we don't yet believe it might be possible.

Come, living God,
give beauty where there is brokenness,
bright your hope where there is despair,
pour out your healing where there is suffering,
instil your truth where there are lies,
point out your way where there is no clear pathway'

And when I fear that there is only little me,
and a failed and fallen humanity
to do your bidding,
fit my service into your plan,
and bind the service of all of your people
into your cloud of grace
and the embrace of your love.

Amen



Prayer of intercession

Living God,
in gratitude we come,
our hearts busting with thankfulness
for all your goodness to us.

And now, in that spirit of gratitude,
we turn to you with our prayers and concerns for others,
for we are already grateful that you will hear our prayers
and respond in your mercy and love.

Living God,
in pride we come,
responding to what we see and know,
of righteousness and truth,
of compassion and purpose,
with a pride in the goodness of our humanity
under the blessing of God.

We are proud of our Church,
carrying, as it does, the Light of your Gospel
into all corners of our world.

Let that pride not turn us to arrogance of self-satisfaction,
but let it encourage us to raise our banner high,
and carry it with smiles on our faces.

Living God, in togetherness we come,
as citizens of this historic land,
responding to what we feel.

Together – despite our differences;
together – facing the needs of our people with compassion;
together – offering welcome to those who are seeking rest, hope and peace;
together – where no one is rejected and left out.



Let our togetherness not turn us to the complacency of exclusiveness,
but let it encourage us to rejoice in our diversity.

Living God, in anguish we come,
carrying with us our concerns for a broken world,
responding to what we see and know.
Where there is suffering, we reach out in love;
where there is war, we seek reconciliation;
where there is poverty, we work for justice.
Our world matters to us, so we have anguish in our hearts.
Let our anguish not turn us to despair,
but let it refocus us on hope and truth;
let our anguish not turn us to doing nothing at all,
but let it be a prick to our conscience
and a heightening of our awareness of the needs of others.

Living God, in silence we come,
bringing to your throne of Grace our every unspoken prayer.

Silence

Let our silence not turn us to wordlessness,
but to a deep yearning
that you will take the agonising searchings of our hearts
and make from them
the beautiful prayers you deserve.
Keep us bound with the saints of all the ages,
the saints of then, and the saints of now,
the saints of feast-days and the saints whose names remain unknown,
the saints who have left us the legacies of faith, hope and love,
and the saints who live out these things in their own lives,
round about us every day. Amen



Musical Suggestions

In addition to the familiar Palm Sunday and Passion praise, the following might be considered:

CH4 457	'All hail the power of Jesus name'
CH4 458	'At the name of Jesus'
CH4 366	'Come into the streets with me'
CH4 503	'I will offer up my life in spirit and truth'
CH4 386	'Lifted high on your cross'
CH4 356	'Meekness and majesty'
CH4 531	'My Jesus, my Saviour'
CH4 554	'Rock of ages, cleft for me'
CH4 395	'What wondrous love is this'



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Tom Gordon for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

