



Palm/Passion Sunday

9 April 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith, Honorary Secretary of the Church Service Society, for his thoughts on Palm/Passion Sunday.

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Introduction

Why two names for this Sunday?

For centuries, the fifth Sunday in Lent began the two week season of 'Passiontide' which lasted until the dawn of Easter Day and was known as 'Passion Sunday'. The name 'Palm Sunday' is also ancient and it was on that Sunday that the story of the Passion was read, beginning with Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Mid-twentieth century changes in the Roman calendar fused the two names, and the adoption of the twin name is now widespread, perhaps also acknowledging the density and length of the Passion narrative. This has also led to the presenting of the themes as an either-or, which can cause a dilemma. The growing popularity in the Reformed churches of Good Friday observances allows for a hearing of the Passion narrative, but for very many this part of the story may not be heard at its appropriate time. Perhaps, therefore, where the Palm Sunday Gospel is prioritised, readings, sermon and song should be careful to acknowledge the whole drama of the Passion.

Recoverable Palm Sunday customs

Two long-standing practices associated with Palm Sunday might be suggestive for contemporary worship. One is that where the Passion narrative was read or chanted, three contrasting voices were used, respectively for the words of Christ, for the narrator, and for the voices of other participants including the crowd. The second is that the congregations would process within or round the outside of the church bearing palms or their equivalent, and it could include a ceremony of the bishop / minister knocking on the church door before re-entering. Not all might wish or be able to join in such a procession but in this dramatic action there would be meaning for those remaining in their places as much as for those who withdraw to process and return.

Scripture passages overview

Palm Sunday Gospel and Psalm

Matthew 21: 1-11

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

It is remarkable how many Old Testament references there are in this account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. A major source was this day's psalm, which was one that pilgrims are said to have sung



going up for the feast of the tabernacles. There is 'Hosanna' (v.25 'save us'); 'Blessed is the one that comes in the name of the Lord' (v.26, a welcome to pilgrims); the idea of entering through city gates (v.19); the ritual shaking of foliage (v.27); the humble king on a donkey (Zech.9:9); the spreading of garments as a spontaneous gesture of respect (2 Kings 9:13).

It is almost as if this narrative were a fabrication from OT soundbites! However, it is best understood as the young church coming to an understanding, from their own telling, reflection, and prayer, of the significance of the event. In asking, 'what did Jesus intend, what was going through his own mind, and through the mind of the disciples and bystanders?' it was inevitable that people would have found answers in their own cultural background – in sayings, song, and story. Both life and art develop out of people's past as well as their grappling with the issues of the day.

It was not until the story had run its course: through Holy Week, when the true nature of the long-awaited Messiah was revealed; Easter, when disciples and many others (1 Cor.15:6) had a strong experience of the living presence of one whom they believed dead; and Pentecost, when a quite unusual surge of power and clarity of understanding swept through those from amongst whom the church was emerging, that its full meaning could be grasped. Then would the many strands of this incident come together to reveal to the followers of Jesus that this Kingdom-bearer was more like a Servant who, suffering with humanity, radically challenged the culture that had borne the story.

The Passion Sunday readings

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2: 5-11

Matthew 26: 14-27: 66 or Matthew 27: 11-54

Psalm 31:9-16

The Old Testament and Epistle readings not only correspond in their themes but also in the fact that they are songs. Verses 6-11 in the Philippians reading are thought to quote one of the earliest Christian hymns, while the Isaiah passage is known as the Third Servant Song, one of Four (Isaiah: 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12). Many suggestions have been made as to the identity of the Servant: a particular historical figure, perhaps, whose costly suffering would bring about the healing and restoring of a nation at that time in exile, or indeed the whole nation itself, the remnant of humanity, destined to suffer on behalf of others and thus to win the world for God. What is certain



is that not only did the concept help form Jesus' own insights into the kind of Messiah he was to be, but, more than most passages from the Old Testament, they contributed to the new church's theological understanding of the person of Christ and the nature of discipleship.

Which readings to select

The OT and Epistle readings could be used along with either the Entry gospel or one of the Passion narratives. If the latter, perhaps the Palm Sunday reading could be used additionally as a kind of 'introit' at the opening of the service, in the way Scripture Sentences are often used, and delivered by three voices: Jesus, narrator, and one for the OT quotations and the response of the crowd.

Sermon ideas

Since the choices and the focus in local churches will vary, the suggestions below relate to each reading rather than an overall theme or themes for the day. They may be combined in different ways, or developed separately.

Sermon focusing on the Entry gospel

This is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday celebrates the kingship of Christ. It commemorates the triumphant entry of Jesus the Messiah into Jerusalem, the eternal city, the centre of the religious and political life of Israel. The whole multitude rejoiced and praised God by saying, 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord'. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and the people asked, who is this? The Christian church always answers, He is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the Messiah, the king (T V Philip).

Just as the significance of the Entry into Jerusalem was grasped and shared with the help of traditional sayings and songs (see note on readings, above), so too a people's culture is an important factor in shaping their understanding of Christian faith and discipleship. At the same time, however, the Gospel radically challenges the values of the culture and points to its healing and reconciliation in the Kingdom of God. The sermon might reflect on the many OT references in the Entry narrative, and on the role of a people's culture and upbringing in bringing understanding of new events or challenges in their lives and in the life of the world, and then go on to show how in the gospel the cultural expectations are fulfilled in a different way, 'further disclosure' (Bridget



Nichols in the *Church Times*), and how in the Passion of Christ, his death and resurrection, God goes beyond the limits of human culture and, in Christ, brings hope and the promise of transformation.

Points and illustrations might include:

- how our culture shapes our individual lives [e.g. courting customs, what a bride wears; the attitudes we adopt in doing our job – the welcoming receptionist, the efficient sympathy of the nurse, the caution of the lawyer, the bedside manner of the doctor, the courtesy of the civil servant, (the saintliness of the minister!?), the cheeriness of the postman; not to mention knowing what car goes with our station in life and where we should take our holidays];
- how our culture (and religion too) can also 'tell' us who we should hate, who matter and who don't, what we should hope for, what we should value most.

The sermon could explore this as it affects individuals:

- our own growth and development are similarly punctuated by past events and circumstances not fully understood at the time but which strengthen, pattern and illuminate our path of discipleship;
- some things, however, may fail to contribute to our growth because they are uncomfortable to look back on, or, the opposite, we look with rose-tinted spectacles at a period in our lives and refuse to recognise the truth; we are unable therefore to draw nourishment, life, refreshment from our past; sometimes we need to look back and re-evaluate relationships and experiences for the sake of wholeness and freedom;
- at this time it may be helpful to look upon our own past story in the light of the story of the Passion of Christ, and the outcome of Easter when reconciliation became a reality and fears were laid to rest; at this time we are again called and invited to step beyond the things that keep us from growing into the full love of God, into what Paul called the maturity of Christ; there is always a further step to be taken on the Christian journey, a 'further disclosure'.

Sermon on Passion Sunday themes: first approach – Isaiah 50

The sermon could begin by showing how the Third Servant Song, considered in the context of the Passion of Christ, provides a profile of discipleship.



1. The Christian disciple must have the tongue of a **teacher**, showing in her life Jesus' call to love and service. We may feel this is 'not us', yet all of us 'teach' in some form, often without realising what we are doing. It could be grannies passing on wisdom, a craft worker training an apprentice, people analysing the performance of their team or explaining their political view over a pint, participants in a 'mumsnet' type of website sharing their experience and expertise. Even if not consciously teaching, our conversation or bearing may be eloquent of some spiritual wisdom or moral priority; as the passage suggests, we 'teach' not to pontificate but to 'sustain the weary with a word'.

2. The Christian disciple is also to be a **learner**, and not Sunday by Sunday but 'morning by morning'. In the song, what is learned is to accept adversity and to keep one's inner balance whatever life will bring. Such a spiritual maturity does not come without effort; we need guidance and information on which to build faithful discipleship. It used to be that holy festivals and visual aids like statues and learning the psalms or the creed by heart or daily services in our parish churches fed the spiritual lives of our forebears. Today opportunities to listen and learn as Christians, in addition to weekly worship, may seem to be fewer, but they do exist: group Bible study, notes that help Bible reading and private devotions, patterns of spirituality (such as Ignatian), discussion / prayer groups in Lent or Advent, and so on. We can also give our listening ear practice with the care with which we listen to and hear other people with whom we come in contact, when we are often the nearest person to give help and support, and we give thanks for the way people can rise to an occasion and bring more than they thought to a person's dilemma or grief or loneliness, bringing into that situation the God who cares.

3. The Christian disciple is ready to offer **service that is costly**. True discipleship, says the song, refuses the way of power, of retaliation, and with humility and patience accepts what life brings. This gracious and humble giving of place to others removes the tension from a situation, where fear and pride can block a solution, a way through, whether it is in a close relationship or an approach to strangers - be they refugees or people down the street, or indeed nation to nation seeking to live in peace. Thus is opened the way to the reconciliation that is a foretaste of God's kingdom.

The sermon could then address the feeling many will have that the physical and mental suffering and setback in the song is beyond our experience, that it is more about people in extreme situations



and in other places. There is also the difficulty that the modern world teaches, and seems to require, more assertive stances. The sermon could invite hearers to think of the concept of being a 'fully engaged' disciple as an alternative to a 'suffering' servant to help the passage resonate for them:

- to be fully engaged can involve a response to life that reaches deep into our beings, one that can leave us 'spent'.
- meditating at this time on the life and ministry of Christ, echoed in the Philippians hymn, we seem him engaging with the sick beyond the palliative right through to the point of healing; engaging with religion not just to understand but to the point of re-interpreting it even for the experts; engaging with his culture and happy to draw on it for his teaching, but at the same time pointing to alternatives – 'let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone'; engaging in debate, he doesn't just win his point but leaves others speechless; engaging with the working life of the people by being able, although a carpenter, to tell the fishermen where the fish were to be found.
- what we see in the life of Christ is someone who so deeply and fully engages with human life that he takes people beyond life to a new dimension: he healed not just people's bodies but their souls at the same time and gave them a new freedom; his speech was not just words but the very Word of God; he reminded them of their Law, but brought a new commandment; he called people from their working life, like the fishermen, into new work which would change lives not just feed mouths; indeed his engagement with humanity was to move them into a place where they would find intimacy with God, salvation and wholeness and peace that was beyond anything they knew before.

The sermon might conclude with reference to today's passage from Philippians:

- We ourselves at some level share this engagement with life, giving ourselves wholly to family or to work or to those in need, struggling with those who are difficult to know or demanding to put up with, doing long hours, tackling yet another task we have never had to do before, and do we not often find ourselves drained, undervalued, wondering if something has been worth the effort, or helpless in the face of a task which seems too great, just like the suffering



servant in our song. But do we not also find ourselves so often fulfilled after our engagement, strengthened, buoyant?

- These insights about Christ and about discipleship are echoed in the hymn in Philippians. It reminds us that the Passion, culminating in death and resurrection, was not some new dramatic episode in Christ's life but an unchecked continuation of his level of engagement with humanity and with God. For the resurrection was a natural progression from Christ's depth of engagement with life right to the point of it breaking down with the demands he made on humanity. There was only one way to go, on to Easter. To engage with life as he did meant engaging with what was beyond life. We rejoice that the resurrection is not a rejection of what went before but a culmination. It means that as we engage fully in life in a costly way, we may also find something of resurrection, of renewal, of reconciliation, and of peace.

Sermon on Passion Sunday themes: second approach – Philippians 2:7-8

"(Christ Jesus...) emptied himself... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death..."

This second approach (which could be allied with earlier material if desired) would be to read the Philippians passage in the context of the larger, global, canvas, and address issues of international justice and peace. The following quotes material from a sermon by a former colleague, the Indian theologian and church historian Dr T V Philip, originally a member of the Mar Thoma Church. Eloquently written, it is here left intact:

This Sunday is also called Passion Sunday. If Palm Sunday publicly announces that Jesus is king, Passion Sunday reminds us that the Messiah who is the king is the suffering Messiah, the one who is crucified. He is the king who suffers for and with his people. His kingly rule is exercised through suffering and rejection.

Jesus suffered and died not only for the people, but also with the people. He summed up in his Passion the passion of all those who suffer and die unjustly. Jesus was the victim of the religion and politics of his time. Religion, politics, the authorities and powers of his day crushed him because his teachings and actions went against their vested interests. In the eyes of Roman Law, Jesus clearly had done nothing to deserve death. Pilate told the Jewish leaders so. Yet he feared insurrection and



handed Jesus over to be crucified. It was the policy of the political leaders to keep law and order at any cost.

Was Jesus the only victim of the inhumanity of fellow human beings, of religion and politics? No, Jesus was only one out of millions. There were thousands of people at the time of Jesus, and millions of people today, who were and are crushed and destroyed by those who hold power and authority, whether religious, political, economic or cultural. Jesus' cross was not the only cross then. Jesus' cross is not the only cross today. Thousands and thousands of crosses of innocent women, children and men, old and young, are raised every day all over the world - the crosses of the exploited, oppressed, tortured and destroyed by the powerful and the mighty of this world. Jesus cried, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me'. He still cries. In that cry of dereliction, we hear the cries of all God's children everywhere. Jesus *is* the crucified people.

Human history is written in the blood of those fallen victims of inhumanity committed by the powerful. History consists of heart-breaking stories told in tears by countless women, men and children living in our world today. Their story and their history is part of the story of Jesus' passion. Jesus has recapitulated in his passion the passion of all his people of all times. To speak of Passion Sunday is to speak of a God who has come to be part of the passion of his people. The cross of Jesus is the cross of God. The crosses of millions of innocent people are also the crosses of God. The cross of Jesus tells us a secret, it reveals to us a hidden truth about God: where God is to be found, where God is to be heard.

Time with Children

The children might prepare for this service in Sunday School on the previous Sunday or be guided through by their teachers on the day. What follows is based on the old custom of the Palm Sunday procession, and using Hymn 366 whose tune is an nursery rhyme and children's playground song. The melody has many variants and your congregation may know the tune in some form; if not, it is very easy to learn, as in real life as school children picked it up from peers and children from their parent or guardian.



At the beginning, or after the first prayer, the children knock on the door and process into church singing Hymn 366 with the congregation. They are carrying branches to represent Palms. They may process round the congregation before taking their seats.

The minister makes the procession the starting point, asking children what they felt like walking in the procession. S/he then says a little about the gospel account of the Entry.

S/he now seeks a volunteer to be escorted to the back of the church and then come in on her/his own, during which verse three of the hymn could be sung ('If the soldiers draw their swords, will we dare...'). Alternatively, all the children could be asked to come in one by one, not starting until the one before had sat down.

The minister again asks what it felt like to be in a one-person procession. This could lead to showing how Jesus after that day had to walk on his own. This enables her to indicate that as Christians we also find that we cannot always behave or believe what the crowd does, and we have to be strong to go it alone if we feel we are right (as suggested in vv.3-4 of the hymn).

Prayers

Opening prayer

God, you loved the world so much
 that you embraced it in all its suffering
 in your beloved Son Jesus Christ:
 who sought the way of the cross
 that he might come to Easter
 and offer us the way back to you.
 We thank you, Almighty God,
 for this space apart,
 not just on this Sunday morning
 but in the week that is to come -
 space to become more receptive
 to the incredible promise of new life:
 life to challenge all that is deathly in our world,



life to challenge all that is dull in our hearts.
Help us to use this time,
not just in prayer at worship,
but in the thoughtfulness
in which we go about these coming days,
listening for your voice in all we do,
as you challenge the habits that restrict us
and the assumptions that close our minds.

Or this Opening Prayer may be used:

Easter draws near; the pace quickens;
the clamour grows; rumours fly;
the opposition marshalls its forces.
The disciples, ordinary men and women,
bewildered among unfamiliar scenes,
faced down by institutions,
blunder after you, their Teacher,
Lord, Jesus Christ.
May our own journey through these days
be not clouded by foreknowledge,
by knowing too well what happened,
so that we might be able to see
what we have not yet seen
in the events of this coming week,
and also what we would rather not see.
Holy Spirit, descend on us as we worship;
bring us together,
help us to journey with you –
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



A prayer of confession could follow here or elsewhere (for an example, see below).

The first prayer may conclude with one of these Collects for this day from Common Order p.664, or one of them may be used at the presentation of the Offering:

1. The Entry into Jerusalem

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.

Common Order

2. The Passion of Christ

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.

Common Order



A Prayer of Confession on themes from the Passion Narrative

from Dorothy McRae-McMahon, *Liturgies for Daily Life*, altered, by permission

(It is from a series by this Australian author, published by SPCK, of orders of worship for various seasons and pastoral occasions as marked in a local church.)

Dear God, whose grace still hangs before all history,
if we have come to find you with our weapons
as well as our lanterns and torches,
pretending to be searching for you
even as we set out to betray the love for which you stand;
forgive us, Jesus Christ.

If we would rather warm ourselves before the fires of approval
instead of owning our friendship with you,
telling ourselves we will wait for another day to be brave:
forgive us, Jesus Christ.

If we sometimes carefully avoid being defiled,
rather than standing beside those who are rejected as unclean by others,
as though that is true holiness:
forgive us, Jesus Christ.

When our own lives become too challenging,
and we are tempted to say, 'Away with him',
rather than defending your life:
forgive us, Jesus Christ.

The word to us in Christ:
Even the faithless, even the fearful, even the weak,
are carried into the love of God as they stand in humble confession
before the cross which holds the transforming love of God.
We are indeed forgiven,
Thanks be to you, O Jesus Christ.



This responsive prayer appears in Common Order p. 436 and is especially suitable when children are present:

Humble and riding on a donkey,

we greet you;

acclaimed by crowds and carolled by children,

we cheer you;

moving from the peace of the countryside

to the corridors of power,

we salute you – CHRIST OUR LORD.

You are giving the beast of burden

a new dignity;

you are giving majesty

a new face;

you are giving those who long for redemption

a new song to sing.

With them, with heart and voice,

we shout – 'HOSANNA!'

Amen.

If the Isaiah passage is being used, this new collect, based on it, could accompany the presentation of the Offering

God with us,

you waken us morning by morning

to savour the world, to love others,

and to learn of your purposes,

sharpen our ears and our senses

that, walking with Christ,

and taught by his words and example,

we may fully embrace his Passion



and with him be brought to Resurrection.

Collect on Isaiah 50:4-9a

The following two prayers have long been uttered in the church. One may be selected during the prayers of intercession when praying for the Church:

1. Gelasian Sacramentary, 7th century AD

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light,
look favourably on your whole church,
that wonderful and sacred mystery;
and by the peaceful operation of your providence,
carry out the work of our salvation.
And let the whole world feel and see
that things which were cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old are being made new,
and all things are returning to perfection
through him from whom they took their origin;
even through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. Ambrose 4th century AD

Merciful Lord,
the Comforter and Teacher of thy faithful people,
increase in thy Church the desire which thou hast given,
and confirm the hearts of those who hope in thee
by enabling them to understand the depth of thy promises;
that all thine adopted sons and daughters
may even now behold with the eyes of faith,
and patiently wait for,
the light which as yet thou does not openly manifest;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



The prayer of intercession may include prayers for suffering servants in our day

Hear our prayers also on this day for those who risk all to worship,
Christian communities who are suffering persecution at this time,
who flee the violence or continue to live in the ruins,
who fear reprisal, kidnap, and the destruction of buildings,
or who can no longer enter their cities,
razed to the ground or occupied by others.

We pray for those who embark on long and dangerous journeys
seeking a place of safety and space to rebuild their lives.

We pray for world leaders uniting to counter violence and its outcome,
and pray that the whole church with even greater urgency
may seek ways of making known the promise of reconciliation
raised before all humankind in the Cross of Christ.

Musical suggestions

Palm Sunday theme

- | | |
|---------|---|
| CH4 364 | All glory, laud and honour (In this long hymn, choir or soloist could provide one or two of the verses, or men and women may take a verse each) |
| CH4 365 | Ride on! ride on in majesty! |
| CH4 370 | Ride on (a realistic portrayal of the scene and those in the crowd) |
| CH4 366 | Come into the streets with me (set to an old children's song; suitable for a procession or dance) |
| CH4 367 | Hosanna, loud hosanna |
| CH4 368 | Shout, 'Hosanna' (new but easily learned, suitable when children are present) |
| CH4 369 | Here comes Jesus (new but easily learned, suitable when children are present) |

Where there is a Sunday School, 366 or 368 or 369 could be learned in advance



The Psalm

CH4 78 (Psalm 118) Oh, set ye open unto me

Passion Sunday theme

CH4 484 Great God, your love (suitable for an opening hymn, the foot washing)

CH4 371 Lay down your head (the Garden of Gethsemane)

CH4 372 Lord Jesus, as the shadows (the foot washing, echoes of Philippians 2))

CH4 374 From heaven you came (a worship song)

CH4 378 Praise to the holiest

CH4 399 My song is love unknown (combines Passion and Palm Sunday, v.3).

and others in this section of the hymn book

Hymns especially relating to Philippians 2:5-11

CH4 356 Meekness and majesty (a worship song)

CH4 386 Lifted high on your cross (Scottish folk melody; best sung lightly, with movement, and unaccompanied; verses could be sung by a soloist and the refrain by the congregation)

CH4 395 What wondrous love (an Appalachian hymn in which v.2 especially relates to this passage; could also be sung by a choir or singing group as an 'anthem' in a mix of unison and harmony)

CH4 706 For the healing of the nations (growing in the likeness of Christ)

CH4 520 Ye who the name (Scottish Paraphrase based directly on this passage, restoring the original song nature of this passage)

CH4 634 Word of the Father (for when there is a baptism, incorporating a Passion theme and particularly the Philippians passage)

The Psalm

CH4 25 (Psalm 31) In you, O Lord (for reading responsively by the congregation)

CH4 270 Put all your trust in God (closely based on the psalm)



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

Quick Guide...

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](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith for providing us with this 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.

