

A Pilgrimage Through Holy Week

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter Sunday. We are invited to make a pilgrimage through Holy week to the climax of Easter Day. Whether you subscribe to a Christian worldview or not, making this journey has much to offer us – and let's face it many of us are not exactly short of time at the moment. So here's a chance to come on that pilgrimage as we ponder our way through Holy Week. Each day there is a reading to reflect on, sometimes given in full, or with a summary, followed by a short reflection and a prayer.

Palm Sunday

We begin today, Palm Sunday, remembering the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as recorded by St Matthew. It's from Matthew 21, if you want to read the whole story. For those less familiar with the bible I offer a short summary, as well as the full reading.

Short Summary

Jesus asks two disciples to go and collect a donkey – which he uses to ride into Jerusalem. He is enacting an old prophecy about the true King riding in humility. As he enters the city, people gather about, drawn to the scene. They cut down palm branches and wave them like flags, calling out in excitement 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' Blessed be the name of the Lord.' The city is in turmoil – with everyone asking, Who is this?'

Reading

Matthew 21

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Reflection

Who is this? That's the question that jumps out for me. The crowd is buzzing and asking: 'who is this?' Jesus plans his entry into the city deliberately. He parodies the great processions of the powerful. No great carriages, no fine horses, no fanfare; he comes riding a donkey, with a rabble paving the way. People are drawn to him in crowds. They see something in him that makes them mark and honour his presence, waving palm branches and shouting out with excitement. Jesus is enacting a clear message. His power is not over and above – but alongside and with people. That's worth noticing. I can't help

but sigh internally at the reference to a large crowd in this time of social distancing, longing to physically connect with people and not have to cross roads to avoid them, or zig zag out of the way in the supermarket, which feels so weird. But I draw comfort from the truth that whether we are gathered in crowds or separated from each other, then as now Jesus is alongside and with us. Remember that as you take what seems to be a solitary walk, or make this solitary pilgrimage. Jesus walks with you.

Who is this? He is Jesus – friend of sinners, friend of fools, friend of all who turn to him. On this strange Palm Sunday – ponder that thought and be comforted. His power is not over and above – but alongside and with people. Alongside and with you.

A Prayer as we start our Pilgrimage

Jesus as we walk through Holy week
will you walk with us?

As separately we gather around you,
give us your strength
your wisdom, your courage,
and the knowledge of your presence with us.
Enter the city of our hearts,
and teach us who you are.
Amen.

Monday of Holy Week

The reading for today comes from the Gospel of St John – it describes a touching domestic scene – a meal between friends.

Reading

John 12.1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Reflection

It's a touching scene – with a real poignancy for those of us in lock down alone. Sharing a meal is such a basic expression of friendship. In today's reading four friends gather at the table – Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus. Who do you long to share a meal with and why? The four friends gathered in this story are celebrating Lazarus who had been restored to life by Jesus. When you gather with friends in the future just imagine your celebration – and remember, Jesus is present at your table now and will be present at that table too. He is present in grief and present in joy.

The other thing that leaps out of this story is the importance of touch. In our crematoria chapels today all the chairs are spaced out, people separated at an event when

connection is so vital. Never have I been so aware of the basic human need for touch. In this story Mary offers her thanks to Jesus in the form of the perfume she anoints his feet with. She wipes his feet with her hair – intimate, excessive, physical and connected.

And then there's Judas Iscariot banging on about her action being a waste of money which could have been given to the poor. But we are told he was not really bothered about those in need – he was greedy and a thief. Judas is out for himself – a first century stockpiler – focussed on all the wrong things.

In our current crisis we have the opportunity to reflect on what really matters – community, touch, being together. These themes jump out of this story: they matter to Jesus, just as they matter to us. I take from this a strong sense that Jesus understands our present sadness – and is with us in it. As we make our pilgrimage through Holy Week, let's promise never to take for granted the importance of friendship and physical connection

Pilgrimage Prayer

Today we think of those we miss,
those we long to eat with,
those we ache to touch.
We thank you for them,
and ask for patience in our separation
Bless them with your presence
as you blessed Mary, Martha and Lazarus
Amen

Tuesday of Holy Week

Today we continue in the Gospel of St John – a reading which offers difficult and resonant themes. You can read it or yourself in Johns Gospel 12.20-36 – but below I also give you a very brief summary.

Summary

Jesus speaks about how a single of grain of wheat falls to earth and dies and in so doing produces much fruit. He speaks about how we look at life and calls us to follow his way and serve him. He expresses feeling troubled and talks about the events that will happen later in this week, when he will be lifted up on the cross. The crowd who listen don't understand him. He warns them that darkness is coming and urges them to walk in the light.

Reading

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there

heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, 'We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'

Reflection

This is a complex passage, with multiple themes and ideas. I want to tease out a few thoughts to ponder. We hear Jesus stating that 'his soul is troubled'. He knows what is coming – his suffering and death on the cross, all of which is part of his purpose. To have a troubled soul is to feel a sense of unease and disquiet. There is no peace here. I imagine all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, feel troubled at the moment. That internal gnawing fear that everything is strange, that anxiety for those who are ill, that grief over those who have died, that trauma as we realise that everything is uncertain and we have no control. This is soul trouble, and Jesus understands it.

Soul trouble, as much as we want to flee it or suppress it, presents opportunity. Soul trouble invites us to reassess what matters most. Do we look back and cling onto the life we once had, or do we choose a different kind of life – which in some ways might feel like a death. The passage we read and our current situation invite us to think again about what matters to us. We are invited to walk in light, to be people who spread light, who are of the light. This is a decision we make, an attitude we chose, to cultivate acts of love, service and generosity.

The passage ends on a sombre note – there is warning of coming darkness. As I write this, people are experiencing the darkness of sickness, grief and loss. Here we need to remind ourselves that in the midst of darkness, Jesus is the light of the world, a light which will never be overcome by darkness. What does this mean? Light is present in grief when we reach out to each other. Light is present when we catch a glimpse of the eternal dimensions of God's life and love, which he invites us to step into. There is always hope. Take comfort.

Pilgrimage Prayer

Today I pray for wisdom
to discern what really matters.
To re-order my life around light.
I pray for those who are wrapped
in the darkness of grief.
Show me how to light candles for them
in my words and actions.
Amen

Wednesday of Holy Week

Reading

John 13:21-32

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Reflection

Today's passage is painful to read. It begins with reference to Jesus' state of mind. He was 'troubled in spirit'. Jesus isn't a one dimensional figure in a white dress – all serene and floaty. He understands the suffering of the human spirit from the inside – and is therefore able to empathise with us. Ever been betrayed, let down, wounded by a friend? Then you will have some insight to bring to this story. You will have a sense of what Jesus is feeling.

Jesus is at a meal with his disciples and he knows that one of those gathered around the table will shortly betray him, kick him in the teeth, sell him out. Can you begin to imagine the turmoil he goes through as he looks at Judas, remembering their shared history, knowing that soon Judas will stab him in the back? At the table, Judas' face says one thing – false smiles and false friendship, whilst his actions are scheming and dark. Soon he will go to the authorities and sell Jesus out. In this act of betrayal Judas will set in motion a chain of events that will see Jesus arrested, beaten up and killed. The reading ends with the chilling words, 'Judas went out. And it was night.' Night for both Jesus and Judas. The candle is snuffed out – and pain and suffering sneak in with the night. There is no point in trying to sugar coat this. Sometimes we experience darkness. Sometimes it is of our own making and sometimes others cause the night to fall. The proverb says, 'it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness', but the truth is sometimes we just have to sit in the darkness and curse it. That's honesty.

Pilgrimage Prayer

Forgive me Lord for my betrayals;
heal me where I've been hurt,
wounded, left grieving.
Raise in me the resilience
to bear with the night honestly,
without denial;
and help me to hope for the dawn.
Amen

Maundy Thursday

Today the Holy week reading takes the form of a flashback and picks up the Holy Week story just before Judas leaves the table. When we consider what Judas was about to do , and notice that Jesus was fully aware of his intentions, his actions become all the more striking.

Summary

The reading shows us Jesus fully aware of what's coming, and acting out of love towards his disciples. He kneels down and washes each ones feet. Peter – initially resists this, but then wants his head and hands washed also. Jesus makes the comment that not all are clean – perhaps at this point he washes Judas's feet.

When he has finished he makes the point that he has set them an example – they should wash one another's feet. Doing such acts of service brings blessing.

Reading

John 13:1-7,31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

Reflection

I want to focus in on Jesus' actions in this scene. Here we see the hallmarks of profoundly wise leadership. Foot-washing is alien to our society, but in the context of this story it was common for a host to ensure that the guests feet were washed when they arrived at the house. I imagine that most hosts got a servant to do this on their behalf. In this passage, Jesus himself kneels down and washes his disciples' feet. His actions are so powerful – and such a telling mark of true leadership. Often we see models of leadership based on grasping power and keeping hold of it. Here is a different picture. Jesus serves his people, and offers this as an example of how they should behave. I wonder what it means to inhabit this kind of servant leadership today? At heart it is about empathising with the needs of those you lead and meeting those needs practically. It calls for leadership that is willing to get involved with those who are led, not standing above and aside. There are no

empty words here. Jesus enacts his care for his people -all of them, even Judas. He opens a door for Judas, who could have seen his leader's humility and reappraised his plan. The tragedy is that he is too committed to his own path. What we see in Jesus are the hallmarks of true leadership: empathy, humility, insight. It's worth remembering that there are all kinds of leadership roles today: the leadership in the work place; the leadership in the chain of command within the military; the leadership that parents exercise over their children, which must be pretty testing when you are trying to educate them at home; the leadership of friendship ,in the examples we set for one another. Here we have Jesus who shows that the hallmarks of true leadership are empathy, humility, insight and the willingness to serve.

Pilgrimage Prayer

Good Lord,
Teach us the wisdom of leading through service;
in all branches of society:
government, education,
law and social care,
commerce and church,
medicine and military.
Teach me humility in my leadership,
and grant me empathy, humility and insight
in my care of others.
Amen

Good Friday

Reading

The set reading for today is from St John's Gospel chapter 18, through to 19.42. I'm not going to insert it here, but will incorporate parts of the story into my reflection for today.

Reflection

Perhaps you wonder why Good Friday is in any sense good? The events after the supper, through to the death of Jesus the following day are full of violence, intrigue and horror. Judas brings a detachment of soldiers to the garden where Jesus is meeting with his disciples after their last meal. The fear must have been palpable. The arrest and questioning of Jesus take place in the hours of darkness in a series of kangaroo courts. Jesus' great friend Simon Peter caves in and denies knowing Jesus twice in a very human expression of fear and self preservation. Jesus is taken before Pilate – who is fully aware of Jesus's innocence, but hands him over to crucifixion anyway, cowed by the crowds' demands, not before allowing his soldiers to knock him about, dress him up as a king and generally abuse him. He is forced to carry his own cross to the place of execution and murdered as his mother looks on. So why is today called Good Friday? Not much good here.

Let's look more closely at John's account. Given all I have just said, we might expect to see Jesus as a beaten, broken man. But throughout there are clear clues that Jesus is the powerful still centre of this storm of violence. Annas tries to interrogate Jesus who responds calmly, without being cowed, and gets a beating for it. Before Pilate Jesus adopts the same calm, control and command. Even during his crucifixion he looks down and seeing his mother and friend he establishes that in future they are to be mother and son to each other.

Betrayed, arrested, beaten, mocked, bounced before kangaroo courts, hung up to die, we surely expect to see Jesus as a broken, beaten man. But the account we are given

presents a very different picture. Jesus is the still centre of the mayhem around him – he is not rattled by any of the violence or intimidation. He is in control of events and walking a path he chooses up to the point where he, rather than his enemies is able to say 'It is finished.'

So what is good about Good Friday – today the good I take is a sense of peace. In the midst of suffering, apparent defeat, loss, despair and uncertainty – Jesus is the still centre. He was then. He is now. Even when all seems lost, in times of fear and dread, we can trust in God.

Pilgrimage Prayer

In times of fear and dread,
help us to look to you,
calm and in control,
when all was apparently lost;
when we feel fearful and anxious
grant that we may so cast our burdens upon you
that you may bear us on the holy wings of the Spirit
to the stronghold of your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Holy Saturday

Reading

John 19.38-42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Reflection

I wonder about the heaviness and grief that must have weighed down Jesus' friends and family on this day. All their hopes for the future had been snuffed out in the cruellest of ways. Shock, disbelief and waves of sorrow must have hit them, leaving them reeling, bewildered and bowed by grief. We don't get to see their grief; the writer draws a veil over that and we must respect their privacy. What we are offered is a focus on two characters who had been in the shadows – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, men who had kept their admiration of Jesus a secret – perhaps because they were men of wealth and power. Whatever their reasons for secrecy – that changes as they step into the open – providing what is needed for the practical task of burying the body of Jesus: grave clothes and a tomb. In grief, life goes on and the business of death needs to be dealt with. Notice how it is not overseen at this point by Jesus' family. Others lean in and give needed support. Jesus is laid to rest with dignity. I can't help thinking that as a result of the hurried funerals we have seen and may have experienced in recent days there will be work to be done

later, ensuring that people have appropriate memorial events, and people are helped in the process of grieving.

We must not run to quickly from grief. Holy Saturday is a metaphor for sitting with grief – not denying it, not muting it, not fleeing it. Holy Saturday calls for honest lament.

So today we sit with the grief of all who have lost friends and family, all who mourn the empty place at the dinner table, all whose hopes have been smashed. Let's be honest the Holy Saturday of our time will extend for years to come for many, if not all of us. Holy Saturday asks us to be present to the reality of grief – in silence, in care and in practical action. Overall, let's be present in love.

Pilgrimage prayer:

Good Lord we pray for all
bowed down by sadness and affliction.
for all trying to grieve in difficult situations,
In the anguish of loss
may we bring comfort,
give us courage
and teach us the path through bereavement,
to quiet acceptance. Amen

Easter Sunday

Reading

So we have arrived at day eight of our pilgrimage, Easter Sunday. St John's account of the resurrection of Jesus is one of my favourite passages of the bible, full of chaos, misunderstanding and then the final realisation of momentous news. Here the ordinary – in the shape of people mourning – meets the extraordinary with reference to angels and even stranger things. Here's the story in the words of St John:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet

ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection

I want to focus on Mary's experience. Imagine how you would feel if you went to lay some flowers at a grave and found it open and the body missing. That's Mary's experience. She thinks grave robbers have been at work. So the story begins in darkness and horror. Understandably, Mary runs for help, alerting Simon Peter and another disciple to the missing body. They dash onto the scene – but don't offer Mary much help. They depart and she is left alone, weeping by the open tomb. Her loss is devastating – she loved Jesus, and he's dead. On top of that it looks like his body has been moved for some unfathomable reason. I imagine she is at the lowest point of her life. Where does she go from here – weeping into the dark? It all looks so hopeless.

There is a lovely line in the service of Morning Prayer that the Padres on base say every day. It goes like this, 'In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us.' It's a love image of the sun breaking through darkness as a new day breaks. Easter day is a promise that the sun will always break through the darkness. Sometime we must wait in patience, but we can always wait in hope. Sometimes hope arrives unexpectedly and we don't recognise it at first. That's true for Mary – who thinks that the resurrected Jesus before her is a gardener. She doesn't recognise him, perhaps because she just doesn't expect it – sometimes we only see what we expect to see. In what must be the most moving scene in the bible, Jesus speaks her name and suddenly the hope bursts out and she gets it. He lives. The dawn from on high bursts into her dark world.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is a story of hope triumphant in the face of death. It's a hope beyond all our imaginings, a hope beyond our rational ability to understand. It doesn't take away the pain of loss, it doesn't make things all as they once were, but it does turn over the page and say there is a new tomorrow – which changes the way we look at today.

Today though our church buildings are closed, and friends and family may be far away. We live in isolation, in uncertain times. BUT whatever we face we can face it all in the sure and certain Easter hope that in God's time the dawn from on high will break upon us. Given that – can I wish you a Happy Easter.

Pilgrimage Prayer

Grant us good Lord, Easter faith
to trust that the dawn from on high
will break upon us
to dispel these dark and difficult days.

Grant us, good Lord, Easter hope
to look for the good around us,
to guide the way we live.

Grant us, good Lord, Easter love,
to speak out the story of your resurrection life
in thought and word and deed. Amen