

24th March, 2024

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe,

light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hear all the tribes hosanna cry;
O Saviour meek, pursue Your road
with palms and scattered garments
stowed.

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

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
The host of angels in the sky
look down with sad and wondering
eyes
to see the approaching Sacrifice.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Your last and fiercest strife is nigh.
The Father on His sapphire throne
awaits His own anointed Son.

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



The Good
Shepherd
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

The Sermon by Robert Hughes

Philippians 2.5-11, Mark 15.1-20 – The Passion

Can I be the only one who has wondered whether Pilate really thought Jesus was 'king' of the Jews, or come to that, the leader of a rebellion - much less Saviour of humanity? I have even asked myself: Did any of Jesus' **accusers** honestly believe their accusations against him? I think about these things because the events of that first Easter seem in some ways to have been inevitable - not just 'written in the stars', so to say, but forecast by Scripture. Among the Bible's several references, whether we listen to Isaiah (7 and 9), Peter in the Book of Acts (Chapter 2), or Paul in his letters to Romans or Ephesians, we can hardly say Easter was unexpected.

At his Palace meeting with Jesus, Pilate has clearly sensed something 'different' about him; another kind of authority, perhaps. Political leaders like the Roman Governor develop a 'nose' for power, don't they? They can 'smell' competition. Yet when Pilate meets Jesus, to all appearances, an ordinary '**man**', he doesn't ask: Are you really a man? He asks: Are you 'king of the Jews? And I don't think that question is prompted solely by what Jesus' enemies say about him. For Jesus is evidently not your 'every day' kind of man; something in his manner unsettles the Governor. His curiosity is piqued; Who is this, he wonders? And the answer is about as far from rational understanding as it's possible to get.

Something in this meeting of two different kinds of power recalls for me the childhood relationship I had with my own father, a man I loved but sometimes feared, a man with enormous influence in my life. Where did his power come from? There were times I thought he earned it through the sacrifices he made to secure my well-being. I knew I needed his presence, that it shaped me and brought order to my days. And I came to know him as the man whose regard for my interests demonstrated what it might mean to be a father - to care for a child. For all that, I don't think I saw his authority as the face of love until later in my life.

I was never a particularly good father, and probably a long way from being a good parent. But from the beginning I loved my son and my daughter with a kind of 'passion'! In one sense I can say I don't really know why I love them - except that they wouldn't be here without me; that their coming changed my life. From the moment they came they have been inseparably parts of what makes me, 'me'. They have **earned** my admiration, yet did nothing to earn my love. They just took their miraculous forms in the moment of their conception - and eventually arrived in complete (if noisy!) harmony with the song of this infinitely mysterious universe. Their births forced me to my knees, both times, with spontaneous tears of thanks and praise. And whatever the ups and downs, they are always beautiful to my eyes:

Which is why, I suppose, Jesus' selfless care for all of us, his pain - especially in that Easter week - reminds me of fatherhood. Did Jesus look out on the gathering crowd that day and see them as beautiful? We know he wept over Jerusalem when he looked down on it from the hills. What depths of betrayal he must have felt - to have been abandoned by his children.

Strangely, when I think about it now - despite the fact my children have been fully independent for many years - they continue to treat me with a deference I hardly deserve. They give me immeasurably more respect as their father than they would for those whose authority comes with a public office, people like Pontius Pilate and those who stood in judgment of Jesus that day in Jerusalem. So perhaps the brushes Jesus had 'officialdom' illustrate just how envious and resentful institutional leaders can be of those we trust because we have a close relationship with them. Matthew (27:18) thought along similar lines: **'For Jesus knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over.'** ... and so did Mark (15:10): **'For Jesus knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over.'** Social, political and military authorities have a thousand times less influence over what we believe and how we live than parents - than those upon who's intimacy we have come to depend. That must be galling for leaders seeking control over us.

But are envy and resentment enough to drive Easter's powerful narrative? Well, if its scenes of suffering were 'ordained' by God - written in the stars', so to say - would it matter how the actors in Jerusalem that day justified ending Jesus' Earthly life? Maybe humanity's casual attitude to cruelty and violence is part of the point here. We don't have to look far to see it playing out across the world - as a perpetual blight on Creation.

For at least two thousand years, our Christian understanding has been that Jesus died 'for us', that he stood-in for us, taking the punishment upon himself that we ourselves deserved for our wrong-doing - that He shields us, still, from the consequences of our own offences in the eyes of God. But though I profoundly believe that, too, I have to ask: Is there much evidence 'out there' to suggest punishment has ever reduced wrong doing? Isn't it altogether clearer that forgiveness and encouragement make the real difference? Jesus' life, it seems to me, points us to that conclusion.

So I come back to Scripture: Jesus coming in the flesh and the events that ensued were, we might say poetically, 'written in the stars', part of Gods plan. But to an entirely rational mind - (a mind I dare to say, like Pilate's) - the inspired opening words of the Book of Genesis, and the majestic introduction to John's Gospel sound fanciful, not to say ridiculous. Yet, and to quote John: **'Without Jesus nothing was made that has been made. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ... born of God.'**

Though both kings and fathers exercise authority, it's two different kinds of authority. The powers of kings are vested in laws, institutions, and ultimately in force of arms: Parental power, on the other hand, arrives with the act of creation - through relationship - just as Jesus power in our lives arrives with our Creation, from the moment of our conception. Easter reveals, for perhaps the only time in written history, that these two powers are irreconcilable; That over a place still called Jerusalem, God the Son, who appeared briefly as the man Jesus, still stands in defence of His children - in the same conflict of authority, between Heaven and Earth.

'Are you the king of the Jews' Pilate asks. He just doesn't 'get it'. Those who don't yet accept their life comes as His gift, as his ultimate responsibility, will not understand the Easter. Those who do will be inspired by its remembrance, to draw closer to Him as members of One family under God, and as Paul says in Ephesians 2, 'take encouragement' from that relationship, and peace from the comfort of the Father's love.

Amen.

Palm Sunday: Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards the human race sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross: grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat: April 17th at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: April 17th at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: March 27th at 10.30am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: TBA