



Holy Week at home

Listening to the voices of Holy Week

Palm Sunday

Readings: Isaiah 50:4–9a, Philippians 2:5–11
The Liturgy of the Palms; Mark 11:1–11



Jesus and his disciples head out of Jericho and begin the twelve-mile walk to Jerusalem for the Passover. It's uphill, dusty and even for hardened travellers, it's a bit of a slog. Once they reach the suburbs with just a couple of miles to go, Jesus sends two of the disciples to find a colt that has never been ridden; akin to a virgin offering, something symbolically pure and perfect for a king. Roman soldiers would often commandeer beasts, and so could kings. Zechariah 9:9 is being fulfilled:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

There's a tension between royalty and humility, but the crowd sees only what it wants to see; a king, powerful and mighty, coming to save them from oppression. They throw their cloaks on the dirty road and wave branches (not just palms but reeds and foliage) in his honour. The time for joy hasn't come. Not yet.

The voice of the donkey

"It's strange how the day unfolded. Two men came and carefully untied me, and explained to my owner that I was needed. I've hardly left my mother's side, but I felt strangely calm as I was led away. Picking my way down the hill, I saw a man unlike any other. He had the kindest eyes, and he slipped so lightly onto my back. People threw their best cloaks onto the ground as we walked, and I scuffed them in the dirt. Precious fabrics, ground into the dust, because of the man I carried. They waved branches, and they shouted and sang and yet they didn't startle or frighten me... with this man I felt safe. We walked on and on, the crowds shouting 'Hosanna, hosanna', part of a song I hadn't heard before. They seemed full of joy and hope! And yet I could sense a deep sadness, an ache in the man's heart. I bore more than the weight of this man, and I wonder what he himself was carrying."



Cloaks were precious to their owners, symbols of status as well as garments for warmth and protection. Throwing them on the ground before Jesus was an act of worship. Look around your house for your most treasured item. What would it take for you to give it away as an act of worship?

◆ Lord, you rode straight into the power of the enemy to suffer and die; give us the strength to follow you to the centres of oppression in this world, and the confidence which confronts power with love. Amen.!

Monday of Holy Week

Readings: Isaiah 42:1–9, Hebrews 9:11–15
Mary anoints Jesus; John 12:1–11



Jesus was staying with friends in the run-up to the Passover and they're relaxing at the table. Lazarus - who Jesus raised from the dead - is the host, and was sitting at the same table as Jesus, with a couple of others. As usual, Martha is serving and Mary is listening intently. Guests are few, Mary is single and in a private home so her head is uncovered - had she been in public, she would have had a head covering.² Nothing shocking about that, until she pulls out a huge pot filled with exotic Indian perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet, drying them with her hair. Mary must have had significant funds because the perfume is in a jar roughly twelve times the size of a usual bottle of scent - a rough estimate in current terms is around £14,000 worth of perfume. No wonder Judas Iscariot - who was often creaming off surplus money from the disciples' purse - was jealous. He completely misses the symbolic anointing of Jesus before his death, and he sees Mary's act of devotion as wasteful and ridiculous.

The voice of Lazarus

"It's the greatest honour imaginable to have Jesus in my home, sitting at my table. He may be a dear friend but since he called me in the tomb, woke me from my slumber and raised me from the dead - how can I ever see him as a 'normal' friend? I have no idea how to express my thanks because there are no words. We talk, share food and time together but it will never be enough, and I find that frustrating. But then Mary has a flash of inspiration. Maybe that's why she's been particularly quiet this morning, because the jar she pulls from behind her - like a stunning magic trick, perfume from thin air - is huge. She breaks the seal and the oil falls onto Jesus feet, catching the light and the scent is overwhelming. No one knows what to say. Judas is jealous of the apparent waste of money; I'm jealous because Mary's amazing expression of love, thanks, faith and devotion is stunning. I have no words."



Sometimes it's hard to know what to say, whether it's 'thank you', 'I love you', or (especially difficult) 'I'm sorry'. How would you like to express your feelings in a way that will be understood - with, or without, words? To whom would you express your feelings?

◆ Lord, give us wisdom before we speak, understanding while we listen, sensitivity towards those we meet, and the perspective of your kingdom. Amen³.

²Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Zondervan (2019) John 12:3.

³ John L. Bell, in Angela Ashwin (ed), The Book of a Thousand Prayers: Zondervan (1996), p.69

Tuesday of Holy Week

Readings: Isaiah 49:1–7, I Corinthians 1:18–31
Jesus speaks about his death; John 12:20–36



Among the many to go to the festival were some Greeks, or people who were descended from that area and culture. They would often have clashed with Jews, but being in the temple for Passover they've embraced a different faith. They seek Philip because his name is the most Greek-sounding to them, unlike the other disciples whose names were Jewish. We all tend to do this; seek out people who are like ourselves, because it feels safe, comfortable and secure. It's less threatening... but it also means that we lose out on learning from people who aren't like us. We can almost hear their anticipation and nervousness as they politely ask: 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. It's like a tentative, yet brave tap on the shoulder. Jesus is a different sort of man, and speaks of a grain of wheat falling to the earth and dying in order to bear fruit. It makes sense, and yet is perplexing. They recognise that Jesus is like them, and yet not like them at all.

The voice of the Greek

"I had heard so much about this man, Jesus. Rumours have been circulating for a while - he tells the most incredible stories, using images in words. Wheat. Sheep. Fish. They say he turned water into wine; this is my kinda guy! They say this man is here for all people – even Greeks like me and my family and neighbours, which is reassuring as I worry that they'll be left out. It was hard to believe that we had the chance to actually meet Jesus... our request was passed down through the crowd, and we heard him speak the most amazing words of hope and glory. Then there was this voice from heaven, a roar, like angels and thunder – it was awesome! I thought he'd look ten feet tall and broad and frightening, so I stood on tiptoe and when I saw Jesus, standing there, right in front of us, I was amazed. Because he looked just like me."



The very people we avoid, the ones who are too difficult or different to love, are the very ones we need to spend time with, listening to them, sharing moments or meals. Jesus made no exceptions so neither should we. Who have you been avoiding...?

✦ O God, you created all people in your image. We thank you for the astonishing variety of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁴

Wednesday of Holy Week

Readings: Isaiah 50:4–9a, Hebrews 12:1–3
Jesus foretells his betrayal; John 13:21–32

Jesus and the disciples were gathering at the end of the day, in an Upper Room to eat, drink, chat and relax. Three or four men would recline on a couch, leaning on the left elbow and eating with the right, often leaning on the chest of the man to the left. It's an intimate scene and should have been one of camaraderie and peace... but Jesus was 'troubled in spirit'. As they ate, Jesus declares

"Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

Remember, these men had travelled with Jesus and with each other constantly for years. They know each other and built trust between them, so when Jesus makes this statement, it would have flooded the room with questions. Who does he mean? How, when and where will this thing happen? What would the effect be? And, more scarily, each man - even if only for a moment - probably wondered; does he mean me?

The voice of the waiter

"I blend into the background, I'm not meant to be seen or heard. I simply take empty plates and replace them with full ones. In the kitchen, a rumour went around that one of the group in the Upper Room was Jesus, the man everyone's talking about, so when I went through with more oil I kept my eyes and ears open. All the men were chatting and eating and drinking, but one sat silent, glancing up occasionally, his dark eyes moving from man to man. It had to be Jesus, though I'm not sure how I could be so certain. The bowl in front of him was running low, so I leaned in, picked it up and replaced it with a fresh one stepping away slowly... and then I heard him speak. A man further down the table leaned forward, took the golden crust of fresh bread Jesus offered him, dripping with the oil I'd just placed on the table, and popped it into his mouth. He stood to leave, grabbing his cloak with a flourish; as he slipped through the doorway, our eyes met. And my blood ran cold as he passed."



Everyone feels guilty - sometimes with good reason. As others disappoint us, so we let other people down. Judas Iscariot was so heartbroken at the impact of his actions that he would later end his own life; but our faith in Christ opens the door to forgiveness for others and ourselves.

◆Christ our friend, you ask for our love in spite of our betrayal. Give us courage to embrace forgiveness, know you again, and trust ourselves in you. Amen. ⁵

⁵Janet Morley in Angela Ashwin (ed), The Book of a Thousand Prayers: Zondervan (1996), p.138



Maundy Thursday

Readings: Exodus 12:1–4, (5–10), 11–14

Corinthians 11:23–26, John 13:1–17, 31b–35

A lot of people are squeamish about revealing their feet, especially having them touched! But in Jesus' day the custom was very different. Feet, covered only in sandals, would quickly become covered in dust - and worse, as chamber pots would be tipped into the streets and animals would leave their droppings on the roads. On arrival at a house, a servant would remove the footwear and wash the feet as a practical necessity and sign of hospitality, performed on behalf of the host. It was a menial task, so although the act of foot washing was common, for the master to do it - in the middle of a meal - was unheard of. It was customary for diners to wash their hands between courses, so a bowl of water and a towel would have been available at the table. ⁶



The voice of Peter

“We arrived for the meal, and everyone was relaxed and relieved to have a chance to rest, but Jesus was strangely anxious. We settled at the table and everyone began to eat and discuss the events of the day, when Jesus suddenly rose and took off his robe. The chat died down and we watched in silence as he picked up a basin of clean water, tied a towel about him, knelt and began washing our feet. We'd already been cleaned by the servant, so I quickly glanced at my feet to check for dirt... nothing. Jesus worked his way round to me. I couldn't let him do this! - so I argued, but he insisted. Looked me right in the eye he did, and said 'Unless I wash you, you have no part of me'. So I told him to do my hands and my head, too! I want to be totally washed by him, because I don't want to miss out on anything... although I wasn't sure exactly what he was doing at first. This man is always turning everything upside down... just when we think we understand, he comes up with a new way to throw us off course, to teach us something new... he's always right. Always.”



Allowing ourselves to feel vulnerable goes against the grain. It can bring feelings of shame, guilt, and whole host of other discomforts. But Jesus uses our feelings to reach us when he needs to convey a message of importance; in this passage he teaches the disciples, and us, that no one is too great to serve, or too proud to receive.

◆ Infinite, intimate God; this night you kneel before your friends and wash our feet. Bound together in your love, trembling, we drink your cup and watch. ⁷

⁶ Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Zondervan (2019) John 12:5.

⁷ The New Zealand Prayer Book, in Angela Ashwin (ed), The Book of a Thousand Prayers: Zondervan (1996), p.336

Good Friday

Readings: Isaiah 52:13–end of ch. 53

Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9, John 18:1–end ch. 19

The time has come. Jesus has been mocked, tortured, stripped and crucified. As he awaits his death, he is joined by a group of women, including his mother - apparently a widow, as Joseph is not mentioned. Jesus, being the eldest son and in place of his father, would have been an essential advocate for his mother in a society where men took responsibility for most legal affairs.⁸ To ensure that his mother was cared for, he assigns that responsibility to a disciple, binding them together as family, saying:

“Woman, here is your son”, and to the disciple “Here is your mother”.

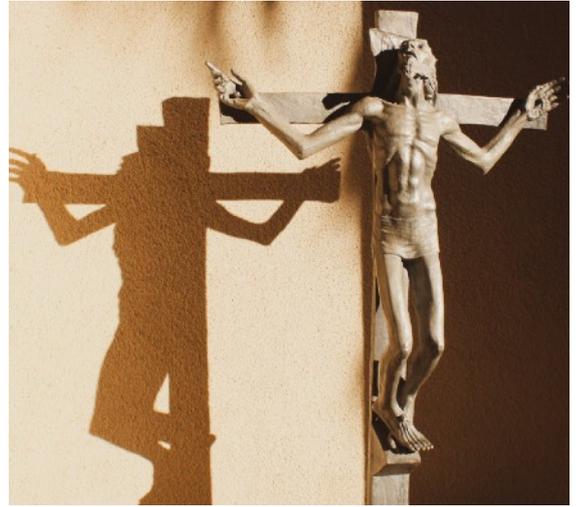
It’s not simply a legal and moral duty. How many of us, through the pandemic of the past year, have had to place our loved ones into the care of others? It’s not a decision that we’ve wanted to make; our hand has been forced. Strangers have brought food and comfort, they’ve wiped tears, conveyed our messages and created memories in our absence. We’re grateful, but there’s also a deep sadness as we realise what we’ve lost. Perhaps we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus understands, because he’s been through it too.

The voice of the disciple

“I was torn... I didn’t want to be present, but I wouldn’t be anywhere else. My Lord, my Master, my dear friend... breathing his last after hours of pain and humiliation. I don’t want to watch, but if the women have the courage to stay by his side, how can I leave? They stand in a tight group, weeping silently, and I grasp the shoulder of his mother so she knows I’m there, even though I’m just as helpless as the women. Jesus’ eyes open, flicking between Mary and myself. Through his exhaustion, we clearly hear his words; I am now Mary’s son, and she is my mother. I will do what I can for her, though I don’t know where to start, and nothing will ever be enough. I will do what I can.”

Stepping aside to let others use their skills in place of our own can hurt; we’re accustomed to being self-sufficient. Pride can get in the way of asking for, or accepting help, but by allowing others to step in, we’re enabling them to live their vocation. Far from being an inconvenient burden, it can be a gift, helping them to live as God created them to be.

✦ O Christ, your cross speaks both to us and to our world. In your dying for us you accepted the pain and hurt of the whole of creation. The arms of your cross stretch out across the broken world in reconciliation. You have made peace with us. Help us to make peace with you by sharing in your reconciling work. Amen.⁹



⁸ Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Zondervan (2019) John 19:26

⁹ Ali Newell, in Angela Ashwin (ed), The Book of a Thousand Prayers: Zondervan (1996), p.343

Saturday Easter Eve

Readings: Job 14:1–14, I Peter 4:1–8
John 19:38– end

Jesus' body is taken from the cross and laid to rest in a new tomb nearby, outside the city walls, as required following a criminal's execution. The tomb belongs to Joseph of Arimathea, described as a 'secret' disciple, one who was afraid of the Jews. It's only after Jesus' death that his courage shows; the family were permitted to request possession of the body, but others, including the elite, were not.

Joseph risks being linked with Jesus' alleged acts of treason, so he isn't just being kind; he puts his life in danger. Joseph is helped by Nicodemus, who once visited Jesus under cover of darkness to ask him questions (John 3), –he's another man afraid of the repercussions of being associated with Christ in life. Christ crucified has such a profound impact on the men that their actions will be remembered for many generations to come. How many others saw and had their lives changed as a result?

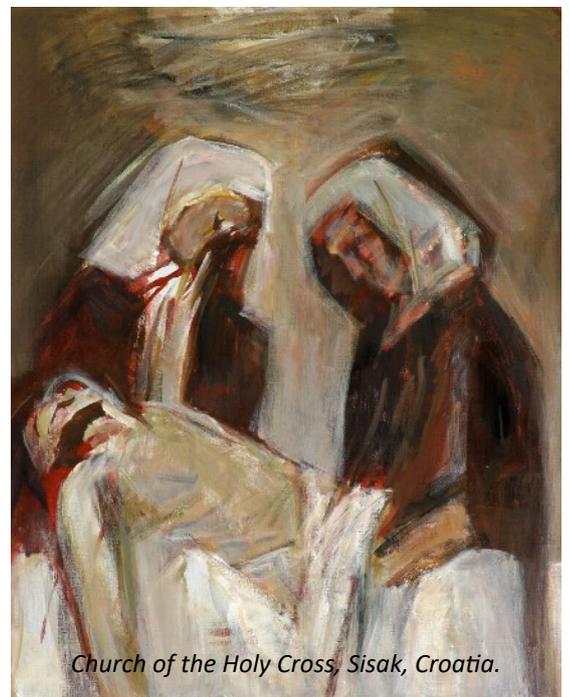


The voice of Mary

“It's impossible to describe. Seeing my son, my child, and my Lord, broken and taken...he left us with such dignity. The men lifted him down with infinite compassion and promises of many pounds of spices and aloes so we can anoint him as befits the Son of God. They provide for him in death as one honours a King; yet I, heartbroken, will anoint him as my firstborn, precious child.”

We can only guess what went through Mary's mind as she witnessed the end of her son's earthly life. How much did Jesus tell her, warn her, or prepare her? We may not have heard their conversations, but we can trust that Jesus spoke to her with infinite love and compassion. When we are distressed, it is the same voice that calmed Mary that will speak to us, if only we listen.

◆ In the depths of my being, I become quiet and still; I wait for you, my God, source of salvation. Amen.¹⁰



¹⁰ Jim Cotter in Angela Ashwin (ed), *The Book of a Thousand Prayers*: Zondervan (1996), p.259

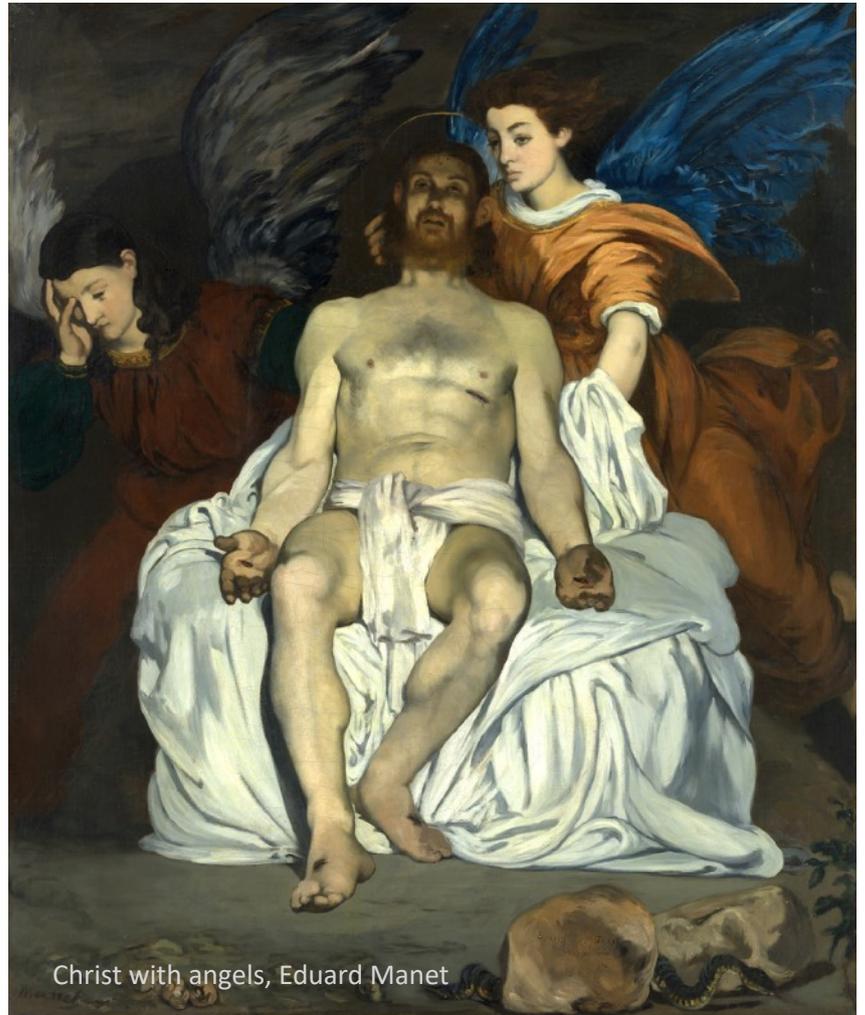
Easter Day

Readings: Acts 10:34–43,
Colossians 3:1–4

The Resurrection of Jesus:
John 20:1–18

There is a priceless, intimate moment rarely mentioned or portrayed but it's captured beautifully in this painting by Eduard Manet. The sun has not yet risen. The silence of the tomb is broken only by the breath of angels, the whisper of linen cloths being gently unwound, the scent of spices wafting into the air. One angel weeps at the sight of his wounds, while the other cradles his body; but if you look carefully,

you can see the angel's hair and robes billowing as the Spirit flows into the space, filling the lungs of our Lord once more. In this moment, Jesus will inhale, sit forward, stretch his limbs and stand. The angels will carefully fold his shroud, laying the linen neatly to one side, and will watch in awe as he steps through the open doorway into the early morning mist, to greet a weeping Mary. This is His glory; He is our hope.



Christ with angels, Eduard Manet

The voice of Christ

Each one of us meets with Christ, hears Him and communicates with Him differently. Our own journey of faith is unique, precious, and filled with highs and lows, challenges and gifts, yet our mission is the same. The voice of Christ tells us:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’”¹¹



The voice of Christ has become our voice, tasked with sharing the hope that we have in our risen Lord – the hope of forgiveness, of love, and of the peace that passes all understanding. Alleluia!

¹¹Matthew 22:37–39.

Easter Day prayers



Ever-living God,
Help us to celebrate our joy
in the resurrection of the Lord
and to express in our lives
the love we celebrate.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

May the risen Lord Jesus watch over
us and renew us as he renews the
whole of creation. May our hearts
and lives echo his love. Amen.



The whole bright world rejoices now:
With laughing cheer! With boundless joy!
The birds do sing on every bough:
Alleluia!

Then shout beneath the racing skies:
With laughing cheer! With boundless joy!
To him who rose that we might rise:
Alleluia!

God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
With laughing cheer! With boundless joy!
Our God most high, our joy, our boast:
Alleluia!

*May the God who shakes heaven and earth, whom death could not contain,
who lives to disturb and heal us,
Bless us with power to go forth and proclaim the gospel.*

