



Holy Week

This collection of readings and thoughts will help us through this strangest of Holy Weeks. The readings and reflections for the various days have been put together independently by members of the ministry team within the Parish. You will also find the images of the Stations of the Cross on website.

The Palm Sunday material will be part of our Palm Sunday morning worship which will be on the Shirley Parish B90 youtube channel.

<https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCpcB9321NJzEHS1K9LU-kAg>

As last week, we encourage you to join with the Morning Worship liturgy (which we circulated last week) at 10 o'clock, whether or not you can view the video.

Those of you who receive this by post or hand delivery will receive a palm cross, those who receive it by email have some instructions to make your own palm cross. We can use these crosses during the Palm Sunday worship.

The material for the other days in Holy Week can be used as you wish, but we suggest that we all say the words of Compline (the ancient late evening liturgy of the church) each evening at 9pm and include the readings and meditation.

The order of Compline will be circulated separately.

SHIRLEY PARISH



**KNOWING CHRIST
MAKING HIM KNOWN**

Palm Sunday

Reading : Matthew 21:1-11

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.'

Address (from Gill Gough)

Greetings to all God's people.

The Lord be with you.

Hosanna to the Son of David.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest!

Usually on this Palm Sunday morning we would be processing round the playground, proclaiming and celebrating the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It is an opportunity to witness that we as Christians are believers and followers of Christ. But this year is not usual in fact it's very unusual. There would have been vast crowds to welcome Him on a donkey, and although we are a small congregation last

year the majority of us walked round the playground singing hymns, this year we are in isolation, only venturing out when absolutely necessary. What a contrast!

However we can still welcome and recognise Jesus as our Lord and Saviour in our own homes. In fact it's a very good place to start. Jesus is not confined to the church building and today we need Him more than ever. He walked that road to Jerusalem in humility, in obedience to God. We too are now walking a road we have not walked before, and yes I am humbled because others care for me. Doctors, nurses, medical and clinical staff all over the country are working flat out to find a cure, to alleviate the sufferings of those affected, others offer practical help, supermarkets find times when it is safer to shop, everyone now pulling together to beat this virus. As a person over 70 I am asked to self isolate to help contain this evil virus and stop it from spreading. Can I do it alone, will I be able to make a difference?. With the help of God I can.

I wonder if Jesus had any of these feelings as he entered Jerusalem, he prayed to his Father in his hour of need and we can all pray. Start at home, in the quiet and isolation, Jesus often went to a quiet place to pray. Just a few simple words and God will hear. Have Mercy Lord or the Lord's Prayer or just your own words .We can pray for those who have the virus; for those stressed out with extra work loads; for those who can no longer work and have no income; for our children; the elderly and vulnerable; for our government ministers who are desperately trying to help everyone.

We can pray for each other, those we know and love and for those we know are struggling and for strangers who have showed us kindness. We can thank God for his blessings, for all NHS workers, volunteers and those willing to help from their own homes. We can all reach out by phone, email and by lighting a candle every night. We can applaud our NHS workers too. Jesus thought more of others than of himself, let us follow his example, humble ourselves to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Prayer:

Heavenly father, we praise and glorify your name. We come to you seeking help in our time of need. " God is our strength and refuge"

We pray we may not waiver in our faith but trust in you our God: "Be still and Know that I am God".

We ask for your peace in our hearts in these troubled times: "bid our anxious fears subside".

Help us to show your love to our neighbours in distress: "A new commandment I give unto you".

Give us strength to keep the flame of hope alive: "All my hope on God is founded".

Amen.

Here is part of a poem written by Michael Gehrling a pastor from Pittsburg USA

What kind of King are you?

*What kind of king rides on a donkey
A donkey that might be borrowed or might be hijacked?*

*What kind of King rides on a donkey
Into a city where his assassins are waiting?*

*What kind of King lets his subjects treat him like a military liberator
But doesn't come with a single sword or weapon?*

*What kind of King can sit at a dinner table with his subjects
and be subject to them and wash their feet?*

*What kind of King can carry his own cross
Can serve his assassins and help in his own execution?*

What kind of king are you?

*A King who came not to be served but to serve
And give his life as a ransom for many;
A King who keeps his promises;
A King who I can trust;
A King who can save;
A King I want to follow;
So let me follow you Lord all the way to Golgotha.
Let me walk next to you and put palm branches at your feet
And shout "Hosanna to the King of David
Hosanna to the king of kings".*

Monday of Holy Week

Reading – Luke 21:25-28

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Address (from Denise and Graham Smith)

This is the strangest of times with most of us staying in isolation because of this coronavirus, but then there are lots of Key workers out there from NHS to delivery people, supermarket workers, undertakers, cleaners and lots more all doing what they do best - to keep those of us who have been asked to stay in to help control this virus in the hope of eradicating it .

Although for the key workers going about their business, I feel sure that they would also like to be in the safety of their own homes.

Graham and myself have just read a passage from Luke's gospel chapter 21 verses 25 -28 if you want to look it up and read it for yourselves.

It talks about signs in the sun, moon and stars that all nations will be roaring in anguish and perplexity, that we will see the coming of the son of man in a cloud of power and great glory for our redemption is near. It tells us to stand up take our place lift up our heads because our redemption is drawing near.

Graham and myself have been thinking about this and how this coronavirus has thrown us all into turmoil.

We have all seen the panic buying, the abuse given out to the very services trying to keep us all safe, atrocious acts of self preservation without a thought for others except maybe for the loved ones they are trying to protect. Troubling times for all made even tougher by this action.

Then there is on the other hand the acts of kindness, people suddenly acknowledging that we are all in this together so have maybe for the first time knocked on the old folks doors in their street to see if they are ok and do a bit of supply shopping for them, the neighbours calling across fences enquiring if everyone is ok do you need anything, letters being written, phone calls made, even the night when the whole streets came together for the round of applause for the NHS.

Denise has joined a group for helping people who are in isolation but have problems like fear and anxiety. The idea is that anyone can share a fear or an idea like getting the children to draw colourful pictures and display them in their windows. Today as we are allowed to take a short walk around the block the children are to display a favorite teddy in the front window of the house then mums and dads can take children on "a Bear hunt" and count up how many teddies they saw. That is fun for all and something positive all done at the correct distance a part .

Each day the group has to share two positive things about that day and one thing they are struggling with. It has been amazing how people I don't even know have all come together and had an input of ideas and sharing out of things all done safely with really good intentions.

So all this leads us back to the Bible reading that this is a strange time for all but that must of been somewhat similar to the time surrounding Jesus in the last few days on his way to the cross. First we see Judas accepting money to betray Jesus, using the situation for personal gain, but then we see Mary using her very expensive perfume to anoint Jesus's feet. Then there is the meal shared in an upper room, a meal with an educational message given by Jesus to his disciples to take out to the world after he has gone.

This is hopefully making us all aware now at this strange time that even today our redemption is near but at last the world is slowly coming together, we are healing, we are thinking, not only of ourselves but of others, even today a message was given out that the ozone layer is beginning to repair itself with less pollution in the air.

Let us all keep up the good works started now and then just maybe people will take on the commandment - love one another has I have loved you, for at last the message of Easter is being received and heard through new eyes ears and actions.

We wish you all a very blessed Easter.

A poem taken from the book "In a world of Tears and Sorrow" written by Nick Facett .

Can I be of service?

Can I offer some support ?

Can I lend a shoulder when your falling short?

Can I bear your burden, help to share the load?

Can I walk beside you; journey the same road ?

*Can I show you friendship, offer love and care;
Let you know - whatever - someone will be there ?
Can I make you smile? Can I make you laugh?
Help to make the sun shine ? Brighten up your path ?*

*Can I share your troubles when they get on the top?
Can I reinforce you when your fit to drop ?
Can I ease your problems ; help them to go away ?
Let be of service ; show me now the way .*

Prayers

Lord as we journey on towards the cross, let us listen to your word with open hearts and minds; let us understand just what it cost you for our redemption, and understand the great love you have for each of us . Amen

Lord in this troubled world of wars greed and confusion, give us the time to sit and rest and to be still and know that you are God. Help us to see new ways of living and to be of service to each other. Just as Jesus was sent to serve, let us serve each other in the love of Christ. Amen

We remember all those who are sick in body mind and spirit. We remember all who are grieving at this time. Pass your healing hands over all and hold them in your loving arms. Amen

We pray that the lessons learned through this troubling time of the corona virus will help us all to become better people and may we continue to be so in your name, Jesus. Amen

Tuesday of Holy Week

Poem: Home thoughts – from abroad, Robert Browning.

As we are spending more time at home, and there is less traffic many of us are becoming more aware of nature. I know that our thoughts are very much from home at the moment but this appreciation of the British spring seemed appropriate.

*Oh, to be in England,
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England - now!
And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows -
Hark! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops - at the bent spray's edge -
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower,
- Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!*

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.’

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them

Address (from Sarah Penfold)

A few years ago, I found myself at my granddaughter’s school Easter production. It is a village school and all events like that are held in the parish church. We had songs about rabbits and chickens as well as more traditional hymns and the Easter story. Afterwards the minister from the local Baptist Church (the Vicar is serving 6 parishes but ecumenism is strong) handed the children a leaflet with the Easter story in pictures for them to colour at home.

Issy made me sit down to help her and as we coloured, we talked about the story. The thing that had grabbed her most was not the triumph of Palm Sunday, the horror of the crucifixion or the joy of the Resurrection. She kept asking me, ‘Why did Jesus’ friends leave him? Were they really his friends?’ Thinking about Holy week has brought this back to me.

It was a very busy time for Jesus and the disciples. Although the gospel accounts differ they all make it clear that even on those days when no specific events are recorded Jesus was out and about teaching and talking. He crossed paths with a large number of different groups in those last few days. The Jerusalem public, swelled in number due to the Passover, the Jewish authorities based in the temple, the Roman authorities, Gentiles typified by ‘the Greeks’ in today’s gospel reading, and of course his own disciples especially the chosen twelve.

Likewise it is often a busy time for us. Various church events throughout the week leading up to our ecumenical Walk of Witness, and the great celebration of Easter

morning. Family commitments on a bank holiday weekend, warmer weather and longer days making the garden more demanding. For me in a former life the Easter break often coincided with the end of March and a sprint to complete the annual audit plan.

This year it will all be different. There will be no gathering of the Shirley churches to walk the Stratford Road and hear the passion story, no bonfire as we light the Pashcal candles early on Easter morning. No family lunches and egg hunts.

I have always loved that expression, 'Alone in a crowded room'. Most people feel that it is a negative but it doesn't have to be. I do feel that it sums up how Jesus must have felt in that final week. Others were shouting, 'Hosanna', and getting excited about the Passover but he knew different. Despite his efforts to explain the disciples didn't quite get what he was telling them, especially the imminence of it all. Not only was it happening but it was happening now. Even when his friends were with him, he must have felt alone. But add to their failure to comprehend, the sleeping at Gethsemane, the running away and Peter's denials and Issy was spot on – were they really his friends? Would they seem to be? Would he have felt that they were?

Alone in a crowded room is the complete opposite of where most of us are now – alone in an empty (or almost empty house) would be nearer the mark. But our friends have not run into hiding. True they are not with us for reasons that we understand but the phone wires are buzzing, e mails are connecting; we have had you tube services and letters from the Parish as Paul works hard to keep us in contact.

For Jesus there was only one outcome – he understood that – the support of his friends would not change that but may have made it more bearable.

Our current situation is hard with many of us not realising how much we valued being out and about. But we are in this together as was demonstrated the other evening when at 8.00pm our road erupted as front doors opened and people stood on their doorsteps clapping wildly in support of NHS staff. Shouts of, 'You ok?', and, 'Stay safe' echoed from side to side.

Today we have time to pause and imagine the burden that Jesus bore. His own understanding of what was to come, while others failed to grasp it. The simple horror of what was to happen. He bore it all without any real understanding by others. There is a hint when the Greeks ask to see him and he replies like a man distracted by other thoughts. Finally in the garden after the last supper we are allowed a glimpse of his pain as he asks God to spare him this, but knows that that cannot be.

And because of this we will never have to face anything alone. We will always have the comfort and presence of God to help us through the most difficult of times. Hopefully we will always have the support of family and friends. At times like this not only is that support important but it needs to be seen, keep in contact, reiterate offers of help. Don't let anyone be alone in either a crowded room or an empty house. When life achieves some sort of normality we don't want anyone to be asked by a five year old - 'Were they really his friends?'

Wednesday of Holy Week

Reading Genesis 1:26-31

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Reading Isaiah 11:6-9

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Address (from Kate Day)

If you are following the #Live Lent Care for God's Creation readings this Lent, you will probably recognise the readings as the ones for yesterday and today. In the far off days when a few cases of atypical pneumonia in central China were surfacing way down on the news websites, we had planned that the worship for this evening, Wednesday in Holy Week, would reflect on some of the things that we had

considered and experienced through doing the readings, and meeting together in the Lent Groups.

Which just goes to show that we can do all the planning we like, but we are far less in control than we sometimes think....

But with your permission, I'd like to stick with the original intention – and think about our “Care for God’s Creation” journey through Lent both in terms of what we have read and prayed about, and in terms of what we are living through and are bringing to God in prayer.

Let’s start with the passage from Isaiah – this beautiful picture of the leopard lying down with the young goat, and the child safely playing, and of the whole of life being suffused with the presence of God.

An image of peace and harmony, health and wholeness, comfort and belonging and love.

And in these times of anxiety and fear, it’s good to remind ourselves that this is a picture of how it will be when the Messiah truly rules
a picture of our ultimate home
a foretaste of what the Bible calls “the age to come” and we often call “heaven”

Tomorrow, Maundy Thursday, we will remind ourselves that Jesus says, “do not let your hearts be troubled... I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

One day, we will be there.

God’s word of hope, God’s promise. No wonder the Bible contains the phrase “do not be afraid” so very many times. Hope, for troubled times.

But this lovely picture is not just of the End Times. It’s also for us now, as an illustration of how God always intended this world to be. A challenge, even. Maybe in this case it helps to look at it more figuratively – as a picture of the predator lying down with the prey, and the innocence of the little child impervious to the poison of the snake. What might that look like? A world without exploitation? A world without corruption? A world where all are valued for who they are, not for what they are “worth”?

So, let’s keep that thought, and briefly visit the passage from Genesis. The sixth day. “Then let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....”

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

So God creates humans in his image, blesses us, and gives us a job to do

And here the slipperiness of language doesn't help us, because the words translated as "subdue" and "dominion" are in reality much more subtle. Rather than the idea of "dominion" being wielding absolute and authoritarian control, it contains the sense of a wise leader exercising their responsibility for the benefit of those in their care.

Far from being an invitation to plunder and ravage creation for our own ends, it is a solemn charge to nurture and care for the world as gardeners, and care-takers and stewards.

So let's just stop there for a moment, and reflect on one of those words. What feelings and images do they conjure up in your minds – in your souls even? How can that spill over into our response to caring for God's creation?

Gardeners
Care-takers
Stewards

So – how is humankind doing in this divinely appointed task?

We could pause here again to reflect, but I guess we probably don't need to. The answer is almost certainly, "not too well"

We are struggling to keep the average global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels –

Worse we are still squabbling about whose responsibility it is to do this, and using comparisons with other countries' efforts as an excuse not to do more. (Not only are China and India much bigger countries than us, they do a significant amount of the manufacturing of products which we use – we are merely exporting our carbon footprint to another part of the globe)

Our western lifestyle and economies are based on the idea of consumption – of buying more, using more, consuming more....

We have an addiction to plastic which is killing our oceans, our wildlife – and ourselves

Global inequalities grow year on year. 1% of the population own 50% of the world's wealth, whilst 370 million live in absolute poverty, without access to even minimal healthcare or education.

Those in work are working harder, longer, many for a pittance. Others are whizzing round the globe on an endless cycle of meetings

At least, all they were, until coronavirus stopped us all in our tracks. The sheer immediacy of infection, sickness and mortality has forced us to take action. As we heard on Ash Wednesday, 6 short weeks ago “dust you are, and to dust you shall return”. Suddenly it all seems very real.

So yes, there are so many destructive things that humanity is capable of
So many awful things happening around this pandemic

But let us not let them obscure the good things that are happening

Because the toll is so dreadful, it has forced us to take action

Forced us to reassess

To redetermine our priorities

To change our habits

To begin to put health and wholeness before profits and politics

And so, in the midst of so much that is painful, we see signs of hope...

Less travel means less pollution

Less shopping means less waste

The scarcity of common items and activities makes us realise how much we value the routine things of life – and not just in monetary terms

The culture which puts “me” first and centre, is giving way to the greater good of all.

People are looking out for neighbours, keeping in touch with old friends, shopping and delivering and supporting.

Wildlife is recovering.

Human ingenuity is being turned to public good rather than purely private profit

- Fashion houses are repurposing to make surgical gowns and masks
- The Mercedes F1 team has worked with university engineers and hospital clinicians to produce and register a breathing aid to keep patients out of intensive care
- Ventilators are being manufactured in place of vacuum cleaners
- Brewers and perfume makers are switching to making antibac hand gel

It reminds me of another passage in Isaiah which we often read at Christmas which speaks of swords being beaten into ploughshares

We are reminded of our interconnectedness – the health of all is related to the healthcare of the poorest. Amidst all this, please remember our Lent Toilet Twinning project, and continue to set aside any money you are saving from giving something up for Lent, so we can sponsor basic sanitation for some of the world's poorest people.

And we recognise – finally – the importance of those so often overlooked – delivery drivers, social carers, shop-workers, water, gas, electricity, telecoms workers. The unsung heroes in the health service, from porters to lab techs to caterers; as well as the clinicians and scientists.

So, two things to think of as we finish

Firstly

Truly, as Jesus said, the last shall be first, and the first, last. For these are God's ways. In a different translation (NKJV), the story of the creation of human beings has these words

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Him (her) and them. We are created as individuals, but individuals in a community, and it is in community – church, local, global – that we truly reflect the image of God.

And secondly – We can do it! We can change! If the desire is there, we can even now take action to Care for God's Creation, and we can learn to live lightly on the earth.

Some of the actions in the #LiveLent booklet are quite straight forward. Some are quite difficult. Maybe some of them are extra difficult right now – we have tried to give up buying plastic wrapped fruit and veg, but have had to succumb a couple of times. But we will go back to it.

So, whatever you decide to do to make a contribution to Caring for God's creation, please be encouraged. Do it now. Do it later. Keep on doing it.

This week in particular we remember that God is in the business of bringing new life out of death and despair. Let's continue to work with him to make that a reality for his beautiful creation.

The People stayed home.

And the people stayed home.
And read books,
and listened,
and rested,
and exercised,
and made art,
and played games,
and learned new ways of being,
and were still.

And listened more deeply.
Some meditated,
some prayed,
some danced.
Some met their shadows.
And the people began to think differently.
And the people healed.
And,
in the absence of people living in
ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways,
the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again,
they grieved their losses,
and made new choices,
and dreamed new images,
and created new ways
to live
and heal the earth fully,
as they had been healed.

Kitty O'Meara

Maundy Thursday

Address (from Rev Peter Law-Jones)

We all come to faith in different ways. There is no template, no definitive guide to the way we come to a point where the story of Jesus begins to shape our lives and the way we experience the world. Not surprisingly, then, having come to a point where faith in Him begins to shape us, the way we experience the life of faith is going to be, at times, a great joy and comfort, at others a challenge. And one of the reasons why coming together to read the bible, pray and worship is so important is so that we can bring all our experiences to bear on learning and living our faith. So what happens when we can't come together? Even in normal times there are occasions when either we or our brothers and sisters cannot be together, but in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the measures being taken to slow its spread and to protect as many as possible from infection, where separation has become a civic virtue and a medical necessity, how do we find encouragement and assurance? In those normal times that are beginning to feel like a distant memory, on Maundy Thursday we would be commemorating the Last Supper, where table fellowship and hospitality take on a renewed urgency and emotional power. We mustn't of course forget that, but for now I want to focus elsewhere in the story:

Reading - Matthew 26:36-46

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

I particularly want to focus on the fact that Jesus goes apart from his companions. This is one of the rare occasions when he does so and it carries a profound psychological and emotional power: such is the agony of fear in which he finds himself that he becomes for a time isolated from human companionship. His companions, notoriously, fall asleep, but let us now focus on Jesus. Alone, separated from his friends physically and emotionally, he prays for relief which is, to say the least, a while coming. Yet even in the midst of his dismay he does not experience this as a betrayal – that comes in the person of Judas. And so, while it is clear from the gospels and this story, Jesus's followers fumble and things wrong, the only betrayal is the conscious decision by Judas to place himself beyond the reach of friendship with his Lord.

So we are physically distant from one another right now, isolated from our usual contact with friends, family, sisters and brothers in Christ. Ultimately, this is for the best and I hope that we are assured that the only true betrayal is the rejection by Judas, not the bewildered, nervous commitment of those who, as his friends, walked as far with him as they could, were exhausted and fearful at what lay ahead, but kept faith in their own wonderfully human way. They were strengthened by the memory of meals and close involvement with one another; they were encouraged by the teaching they received; they remained inspired by the one who never turned them or anyone else away. The bleakness and fear of separation ultimately opened up the possibility of boundless grace and the eternal presence of the One who died and rose again to the glory of God the Father.

Good Friday

John 19:17-20; 28-30

So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Meditation (from Rev Paul Day)

Today I have chosen just a few verses from John's account of the crucifixion of Jesus. Maybe you could read the whole of chapters 18 and 19 slowly, journeying with Jesus to Gethsemane, through his arrest and trial and then to the cross. Journeying with him as his friends betrayed him and denied him; as the earthly powers conspired against him and as the crowd rejected him. It's a painful journey.

The images of the Stations of the Cross from St James can be seen on the website <https://shirleyparishb90.wixsite.com/live/stations-of-the-cross> or in what we circulated. Perhaps you could meditate on these as you travel the road to the cross with Jesus.

But back to those few verses I have chosen for today.

Good Friday meditations often focus on the words of Jesus from the cross. Reading through all the gospel accounts Jesus spoke seven times from the cross, and today I would like to think of two – when he said "I am thirsty" and then at the end "It is finished".

Earlier in John's gospel is the story we thought about just a few weeks ago in church – the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Remember

what Jesus said to her – “I will give you living water ... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”.

And yet here on the cross the very source of living water is saying “I am thirsty”.

On one level he was expressing a basic human need. In the searing heat of the day, hanging on the cross, in immense pain, he was thirsty. But on another level, we can see a connection between these words and the words in Matthew’s account of the crucifixion “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. The one from whom the living water – the fullness of life – flows has been cut off from that life. Separated from God.

Hanging on the cross he is alone and he expresses that loneliness, that isolation in his words “I am thirsty”.

No doubt at this time of lockdown many of us feel alone. We are cut off from friends and family. Those that we were longing to spend this holiday weekend with are far away. We can talk to them on the phone, and maybe over video links, but we cannot be with them and we miss them. Let us not be afraid to express those thoughts in words. Our disappointment, our sadness and perhaps our anger at what has happened.

Psalm 22 begins with those words that Jesus said from the cross “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me” but it ends as a song of praise. Perhaps our deepest feelings of sadness and isolation can also be turned to praise and thanksgiving when we express them to God.

The second phrase in these verses contains the final words of Jesus “It is finished”.

One could look at Jesus the great teacher, healer and miracle worker hanging on the cross and see it as a sign of failure, and if we were to do that the cry “it is finished” would signify the absolute end. The life that promised so much has ended in failure; it has achieved nothing.

But that is not the Christian story. Those words from Jesus convey a different truth. Not so much “it is finished” as “it is complete”. Rather than it ending in failure there is a real sense of Jesus having accomplished what he had come to achieve in this act of unconditional love for the world.

In our society medical professionals will strive for as long as possible to preserve life, and many will see a death as a failure. But on the cross Jesus recognised that his

death completed a life that he had lived to the full. Perhaps understanding this more fully could help us to face our own deaths without fear as the plain truth is that we all have to die. Learning how to face up to our own deaths is a vital thing for us to do.

In this month's Parish Magazine Graham Smith has written about living with a terminal illness. He talks of how he has moved from seeing death as something to be feared to seeing it as a passage to the eternal. Something that will complete his life rather than simply an ending to his life. I recommend that you spend a few moments reading what he says.

Prayer

Gracious God,
accomplish in us your purposes,
complete in us your work of healing love,
that, though we walk in the valley
of the shadow of death,
we may find you
one step ahead of us,
leading us home.
Amen

Holy Saturday

The Easter Triduum (three days) is the name for the three-day season that concludes Lent, that is Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The empty cross is a symbol of Holy Saturday. It indicates the reality of Jesus' death; of his sharing in our mortality. It is also a symbol of our waiting, waiting for that 'bursting' from the tomb when Jesus rose from death. The empty cross says that the way through to resurrection must always break in from without as something new, it cannot be taken hold of in advance; it is a sign of hope. There has always been a great silence on this day, sometimes known as 'Easter Eve', along with a sense of expectation. Christian theology speaks of the 'Harrowing of Hell' or 'The Descent of Christ into Hell', when he brought salvation to the righteous who had died since the beginning of the world.

Opening Sentence: I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. Psalm 40. v.1.

The Lord be with you

And also with you

Prayer

God of compassion, as we gather in your presence we pray that you will look upon us in mercy. As we faithfully remember your Christ this day fill us with hope for a future of peace and guard us from anything that would hurt or harm us. Through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

Collect for Holy Saturday

Grant O Lord, that as we are baptised into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continually mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that through the grave and gate of death we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died and was buried and rose again for us, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

From Psalm 130:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who would stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

Glory be to the Father...

Reading: John 2. 18-22

The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Homily (Rev Theresa Jones)

Our reading tells us that the Jews, having observed that Jesus spoke with authority, sought a sign from him. In recent weeks, following the outbreak of the Corona Virus, we have had to listen and take note of 'voices of authority'. Daily we have tuned in to politicians and senior health professionals who have offered advice on how we can 'stay safe'. Our lives have changed. From a time of plenty, for many of us, we have moved to exercising caution in terms of making our food eke out to avoid going to supermarkets. We are restricted in our movements and are warned to stay at a distance, even from those in our families with whom we do not live.

Jesus was not into giving signs. What he pointed to was his own body. 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. As we continue through Holy Saturday and await his mighty resurrection on Easter Day we can rest confident in his love and care for us. Many of us have been richly blessed by what Shakespeare called, 'The milk of human kindness', as friends and neighbours have shown a concern for our well-being. If we can recognise it, we do indeed have a sign. A sign of love from many quarters and if we go on in faith and trust in God we can enter again that joy of Easter, in spite of the current crisis. **Amen.**

The Prayers

For the NHS and all involved in patient care.

For all suffering from Corona Virus and for the bereaved.

For ourselves and those in need.

Closing Prayer

Lord, in all times of fear and dread, grant that we may so cast our burden upon you, that you will bear us on the holy wings of the Spirit to the stronghold of your peace.

Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be among us and remain with us always. Amen.

Let us bless the Lord.

Thanks be to God.