

26th March 2023 – Morning Service

Passion Sunday

Margaret Bradley

Call to Worship

We come to offer worship and praise to God because we are ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’.

StF 83 – Praise my soul the king of heaven

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| 1) Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
To his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King! | 3) Father-like, he tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame he knows;
In his hands he gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Widely as his mercy flows. |
| 2) Praise him for his grace and favour
To his people in distress;
Praise him, still the same for ever,
Slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in his faithfulness. | 4) Angels in the height, adore him;
Ye behold him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise with us the God of grace! |

Henry Francis Lyte

Prayer of Adoration

Praise be to you, O God, the maker of the universe. By your wisdom we are created and sustained.

Praise be to you, O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By your love we are redeemed and offered life in all its fullness.

Praise be to you, O God, the source of all that is holy. By your Spirit we are made whole and brought to perfection.

Praise be to you, O God, the Ground of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be for ever. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, we acknowledge that we have rebelled against you and broken your law of love. Our lives have not demonstrated whole-hearted commitment to your way. Our attitudes towards others have not always been loving, just and compassionate. We are truly sorry and ask for your help to turn away from our unworthy and selfish inclinations. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

Collect for Passion Sunday

Almighty God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us with the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve you in holiness and righteousness all our days: through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

STF 795 – Saviour of the world

Jesus, Saviour of the world, come to us in your mercy: we look to you to save and help us.

By your cross and your life laid down, you set your people free: we look to you to save and help us.

When they were ready to perish, you saved your disciples: **we look to you to come to our help.**

In the greatness of your mercy, loose us from our chains, forgive the sins of all your people.

Make yourself known as our Saviour and mighty deliverer; save and help us that we may praise you.

Come now and dwell with us, Lord Christ Jesus: hear our prayer and be with us always.

And when you come in your glory: make us to be one with you and to share the life of your kingdom.

Introduction to theme

Throughout the centuries since the crucifixion of Jesus many people have found that, as they contemplate Jesus' death, they are profoundly moved, and that they experience a feeling of God's love and a sense of release. This is true for people in a huge variety of different ages, cultures and circumstances.

I'm quite content to gratefully accept this as a God-given gift of grace without needing to understand why this should be. I have a gut feeling that the cross is about God's love for the world and for me personally, that it promises life in all its fullness, and that it calls for a response to follow the way of Jesus in order that the world might be the place that God intends it to be. And for me that's enough. But other people aren't as simple, and they've found it necessary to construct grand theories of explanation. As they tried to formulate how this should be, they used language and ideas from their contemporary culture.

One of the earliest images came from the sacrifice ritual in the Jewish Temple, where blood was spilt when animals being offered to God were slaughtered. Unblemished, spotless lambs were killed at the time of the Passover Festival. So Jesus' death was described as being a sacrificial offering made to God, which made amends for sin. As the system of sacrifice came to an end in 70 AD this was no longer relevant to people's thinking. Whereas the concept of animal and human sacrifice was once part of ancient culture, it is repellent and offensive to us today. But we still see the language in liturgy and worship songs.

Another image came from transactions in the market place. Leases on property, animals, people such as slaves and war captives, could be set free/redeemed, by someone who would make payment of a sum of money – a ransom. So, in Christ, God was seen to have paid the costly price, a ransom, in order to redeem us, setting us free to become the people that God wants us to be. It was based on verses in a letter from the Apostle Paul addressed to Timothy and from Matthew's Gospel. This view of Jesus' death as a ransom prevailed for the first thousand years of Christian history. After this time the Eastern Orthodox Church continued to hold onto it, but in the West it was superseded by other theories. Now it's once more appealing to Christians from a wide range of outlook.

Reading: 1 Timothy 2: 5-7

For there is one God: there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus himself, who gave himself a ransom for all – this was attested at the right time. I am telling the truth. I am not lying.

Reading: Matthew 20: 17- 19 & 25-28

When Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified: and on the third day he will be raised.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you: but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Song – How deep the Father’s love for us

- 1) How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss –
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.
- 2) Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life –
I know that it is finished.
- 3) I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart –
His wounds have paid my ransom.

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A Ransom Implies That Something Of Great Value Is Involved.

75 years before Jesus, Cilician pirates operating in the Aegean Sea captured a young Roman nobleman called Julius Caesar. They asked for a ransom of 20 talents to be paid for his release. Caesar laughed at them for not knowing who they had taken and suggested that 50 talents might be more appropriate. The pirates must have been dumbfounded. It’s not every day that a hostage negotiates their ransom up! Caesar was held captive for 38 days until the money was paid for his liberation. Later he went in pursuit of them and had them all crucified.

This has gone on throughout history and unfortunately still goes on. Last year no fewer than 115 incidents of piracy against shipping were recorded, where crew members were kidnapped and released on payment of a ransom. 15 years ago, the yacht of a British couple was boarded by armed Somali pirates and they were held captive for over a year. A sum of over £4 million ransom was initially demanded. Their release was eventually negotiated by a Somali taxi driver from East London who was so ashamed by the actions of his countrymen that he raised \$200,000 from Somalis in Britain and the couple’s family raised the rest.

Another, modern, version of the crime involves high-jacking data on people’s computers and threatening to infect them with a virus if victims don’t cough up a ransom fee.

A few years ago a Methodist minister at Wednesbury raised £800 for the Methodist charity Action for Children by arranging to be ‘kidnapped,’ and to be released only when his congregation had raised a sum of money to secure his ransom. I have a rather uncomfortable feeling that if I was to try something similar people just might decide not to pay up and leave me in captivity!

A ransom implies that something of great value is involved. Jesus revealed how much the world is worth to God, how much human beings are worth to God, how much YOU are worth to God. No one need have a low estimate of themselves. You may think that you are not so good, that your life isn’t worth a fig, but nevertheless God values you. The old Passiontide hymn, ‘Beneath the cross of Jesus’ originally had the line ‘And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess; the wonders of redeeming love and my own worthlessness.’ I was pleased when this was changed to ‘and my unworthiness’ because we are NOT worthless. Everyone is of infinite worth to God.

The South African Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, tells a lovely story about his mother and the Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston. Because Tutu is black the South African government didn't consider that he was worthy to have a vote until he was in his 60s, when universal suffrage was introduced. But he remembers, as a child, walking through the streets of Johannesburg with his mother and seeing Trevor Huddleston doff his cap to her. And that simple gesture made a deep impression upon Tutu. A white man was treating his mother with respect and honour.

Jesus was never about degrading and belittling people. He was about restoring their worth. ALL human beings are precious and of great value to God, and this is implied in the idea of a ransom.

StF 320 – Father, whose everlasting love

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| 1) Father, whose everlasting love
Your only Son for sinners gave,
Whose grace to all did freely move,
And sent him down the world to save: | 4) The world he suffered to redeem;
For all he has the atonement made;
For those that will not come to him
The ransom of his life was paid. |
| 2) Help us your mercy to extol,
Immense, unfathomed, unconfined;
To praise the Lamb who died for all,
The Saviour of all humankind. | 5) Arise, O God, maintain your cause!
The fullness of the nations call;
Lift up the standard of your cross,
And all shall own you died for all. |
| 3) Your undistinguishing regard
Was cast on Adam's fallen race;
For all you have in Christ prepared
Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace. | |

Charles Wesley

A Ransom Implies That A Payment Has Been Made

A 1996 American action film starring Mel Gibson with the title 'Ransom' tells the story of an airline owner's son who was kidnapped. A ransom payment of \$2 million was demanded. Arrangements were made for it to be paid over, but, (spoiler alert!) the boy's father tricked the kidnappers and secured his son's release.

A perhaps more familiar story is that of 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', written by CS Lewis. The lion is Aslan, a large, talking beast who is wise and has kind eyes. When Edmund joined the White Witch, betraying his brother and sisters and the Great Lion himself, Aslan persuades the evil witch to release him. He restores Edmund back to his siblings telling them, 'There's no need to talk to him about what is past.' Relationships are restored and forgiveness is offered. But then it's revealed that Aslan has agreed to be killed in order to save Edmund and to protect the people of Narnia from destruction. Edmund's actions had consequences and Aslan died on The Stone Table, where every evil force had gathered. But he came back to life, and ended the witch's tyranny. The story can be seen as a manifestation of Jesus in Narnia.

The two Bible verses that use the image of Jesus as a ransom don't go into any details of a transaction by saying who demanded the payment. But one of the 3rd century Church Fathers, Origen of Alexandria, developed the image into a big rescue drama that had a similar story to these modern tales. Origen said that the fallen angel, Satan, held all the souls of humanity captive since Adam and Eve had handed them over to him. God offered Satan a costly ransom payment so that we might be released from the tyrant's grip. God entered into our human condition in Jesus. Satan killed Jesus because he wanted to destroy God's rule. It looked as if the forces of evil had triumphed. But when Christ rose from the dead the forces of good proved to be ultimately victorious.

By the 11th century many people found Origen's story rather crude and they began looking for another theory. The theories they came up with, that have stood for almost another 1000 years, were actually less satisfactory.

They proposed the abhorrent idea that GOD required the violence of the cross to appease His wrath before we could be forgiven. As a parent, when my children were disobedient, I didn't require someone else to be punished before I forgave them. I cannot believe that it is so with God, and, if it is, then this is not a Being to whom I care to offer my worship and service. This notion is completely contrary to the assertion of the earlier view, that it was FORCES OPPOSED TO GOD which needed the death of Jesus, in order to destroy God's rule.

If we get past the imagery to the substance, we see that the ransom theory recognises that there are destructive forces present in the world and in our lives, and that it was THESE forces that were responsible for Christ's death. It was NOT something that God willed. But God is stronger and has the ability to break their power and restore the world to its rightful state. We believe that Christ's resurrection gives us a guarantee of God's ultimate victory over all that is ungodlike. Christ triumphs over all forces of darkness, and by his resurrection conquers death.

Song – Here is love

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| 1) Here is love vast as the ocean,
Loving kindness as the flood,
When the Prince of life, our ransom
Shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten
Throughout heaven's eternal days. | 2) On the Mount of Crucifixion
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heaven's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love. |
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William Rees

The Payment Of A Ransom Is To Set Someone Free

The Biblical image of Jesus as a ransom says nothing at all about a transaction taking place between two parties. That was a much later construction, when payments were proposed to have been made to Satan or to God. The analogy has more to do with conveying the idea that Jesus liberates human beings and sets us free from those things that constrain us. And the Gospel accounts show him freeing people, not just through his death and resurrection, but also by his life of service.

What does Jesus free us from? Lots of things, some of them personal and some of them social. Jesus frees us from ignorance about God. Because in him we see what God is like. Jesus saves us from being crushed by a sense of our human weakness, our inadequacies and our failures. Because he shows us that God's grace is stronger than our imperfection. Jesus can enable us to achieve our full potential as spiritual beings. Jesus can free us from feelings and addictions that we feel unable to control. But there's much more to it than this personal aspect. There's also a wider dimension in that the world's social, political and economic systems are corrupt and not as God intended. People are confined and bound by chains of poverty, injustice, oppression, violence and exploitation, violation of their human rights. The Ransom Theory makes it clear that Jesus came to set people free from all this. Jesus said, 'I have come that all may have life and have it abundantly'. As his followers we too will take action to release people from all situations that are freedom-denying rather than life-enhancing.

Different generations and cultures have found their own ways of expressing the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. The Ransom Theory is one of a number of explanations, none of which is completely satisfactory, but I believe that it is a superior alternative to most of the others. For hundreds of years Christians have argued over which is the 'right' one. Now they are finding some unity in this theory, which speaks to our generation with more integrity than other theories do. It uses language that is familiar and comprehensible and relevant. It doesn't just confine itself to the cross, but encompasses the whole ministry of Jesus and the resurrection.

It asserts that, because we are of worth to God, God acts to defeat those powers that are contrary to God's rule and purposes, setting human beings free to experience life in all its fullness. It speaks of a God whose nature is that of a loving Father, who will do anything for his children, rather than a God of wrath whose honour has to be satisfied, like that of a medieval lord. It doesn't require the immoral notion that God required someone's punishment in place of things others had done. It says that Christ liberates us from all that enslaves us, setting us free from our burden of guilt and everything that brings destruction on ourselves and others in a disordered world. It assures us that, despite the presence of evil in the world, God does rule and promises the ultimate victory of God's reign of righteousness and peace.

But in the end, the cross appeals to the heart rather than to the head. And, like me, you may well want to echo the words of Dora Greenwell's hymn: 'I am not skilled to understand, what God has willed, what God has planned; I only know at God's right hand stands one who is my Saviour.'

H&P 425 – Lord, save thy world: in bitter need

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| 1) Lord, save thy world; in bitter need
Thy children lift their cry to thee;
We wait thy liberating deed
To signal hope and set us free. | 4) Lord, save thy world; but thou hast sent
The Saviour whom we sorely need;
For us his tears and blood were spent,
That from our bonds we might be freed. |
| 2) Lord, save thy world; our souls are bound
In iron chains of fear and pride;
High walls of ignorance around
Our faces from each other hide. | 5) Then save us now, by Jesus' power,
And use the lives thy love sets free,
To bring at last the glorious hour
When all will find thy liberty. |
| 3) Lord, save thy world; we strive in vain
To save ourselves without thine aid;
What skill and science slowly gain
Is soon to evil ends betrayed. | |

Albert F Bayly

Prayers of Thanks and Concern

We thank you God for the world that you have created to be our home. For the promise that each one is cherished by you and is precious to you. We thank you for revealing yourself to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and for all that has been accomplished in him. For the assurance that your power of goodness and love is stronger than anything that confronts it.

We thank you for raising up the church through your Holy Spirit and for being present with us now. We rejoice that we are sharing this season of Passiontide with Christians all over the world; that on every continent there are women and men and children who are remembering Jesus's final earthly days, as we are. We pray for these congregations in their huge variety of situations and circumstances, and for the churches in our Circuit. Strengthen all who minister and serve in Christ's name. May the life of Christ be revealed in us.

We pray for those who hold power in the world - politicians, financiers, social media influencers - that you will guide them in the ways of peace and justice and honesty. We pray for those whose freedom is limited because they are in a state of conflict and war, for those enslaved by oppressive and corrupt governments, for all who are held in captivity. Show us how to live as members of one caring human family. We pray for those who have a low esteem of themselves and feel that they are worthless. For those who are held captive by feelings and addictions they feel unable to control. For those bound by poverty, anxiety, stress, depression, grief. For those longing for relief from pain and suffering and illness. For those whose freedom has been curtailed by their caring for others. May all in need find comfort, strength and freedom in the living Christ.

We pray for ourselves. May the passion of Jesus draw us anew to trust you and give our lives to you, liberating us from self-concern, to love and serve others. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

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.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 353 – Jesus is Lord!

- 1) Jesus is Lord! Creation's voice proclaims it,
For by his power each tree and flower
was planned and made.
Jesus is Lord! The universe declares it;
Sun, moon and stars in heaven cry: Jesus is Lord!
- 2) Jesus is Lord! Yet from his throne eternal
In flesh he came to die in pain on Calvary's tree.
Jesus is Lord! From him all life proceeding -
Yet gave his life a ransom, thus setting us free:
- Ch) *Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord!*
Praise him with alleluias, for Jesus is Lord!
- 3) Jesus is Lord! O'er sin the mighty conqueror,
From death he rose; and all his foes
shall own his name.
Jesus is Lord! God sends his Holy Spirit
To show by works of power that Jesus is Lord:

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Closing Prayer

The cross, Christ has died on it. The cross, we will look to it. The cross, we are redeemed by it. The cross, we will carry it. Go in peace, to love and serve God, whose presence is with us always to bless us abundantly. **Amen.**