

## A service for Palm Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2023 (StF)

### Call to Worship: Philippians chapter 2 verses 5 to 11.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written as part of Graham Kendrick's album 'Carnival of Praise' in 1986. Stuart Townend places Graham Kendrick alongside Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley as a supreme hymn-writer and I would not disagree with him. Hymn number 264, 'Make way, make way'*

**1. Make way, make way, for Christ the King**

**In splendour arrives;**

**Fling wide the gates and welcome him**

**Into your lives. Chorus:**

*Make way, (make way), make way, (make way),*

*For the King of kings (for the King of kings):*

*Make way, (make way), make way, (make way),*

*And let his kingdom in.*

**2. He comes the broken hearts to heal,**

**The prisoners to free;**

**The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance,**

**The blind shall see. Chorus:**

**3. And those who mourn with heavy hearts,**

**Who weep and sigh,**

**With laughter, joy and royal crown**

**He'll beautify. Chorus:**

**4. We call you now to worship him**

**As Lord of all,**

**To have no gods before him,**

**Their thrones must fall! Chorus:**

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**Let us pray.**

Heavenly Father, today, on Palm Sunday, we come to you in awe and with gratitude that you, who created all life throughout the universe, should care for sinful human beings so much that you gave your beloved Son, Jesus, to free us from our sins by dying on a cross of agony and shame at Calvary. As we journey through Holy Week, help us to see and hear with new awareness the story of Christ's passion and death and then of his triumph over death, next Sunday. Loving Lord, breathe your love into our lives, so we may love others even as you love us. Amazing God, all honour, glory, power and praise belong to you for evermore.

Faithful God, we thank and praise you for your love that has blessed us throughout our lives, for all that you have given us and done for us, but most of all for the willingness of your dear Son, Jesus, to die upon a cross for our sins. Help us to respond to your grace and goodness by caring for and serving our neighbours in your holy name.

Hear us, merciful God, as we recall how Jesus died to atone for our sins, we come humbly to confess our weakness and sinfulness. We don't always serve you wholeheartedly: we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Help us to live as we are called to live, in harmony with you and one another. As we seek to change our ways, we ask you to forgive us for the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do: for our foolishness and pride, our disobedience and self-centredness. Let us turn from the darkness of unrighteousness and seek the light of your love and truth once more.

Gracious Lord, you hear and answer our prayers, and, trusting that we have been pardoned, we ask you to strengthen us with the Holy Spirit and guide us with the perfect example of Jesus, so our lives may be evidence of our faith and a beacon to draw others to know and love our Saviour. Amen.

***We shall say 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.**

*The third verse of our next hymn, by Charles Wesley, provides a wonderful explanation of the idea of kenosis – God emptied out – in our reading from Philippians: “He left his Father’s throne above – / So free, so infinite his grace – / Emptied himself of all but love, / And bled for Adam’s helpless race.” We shall sing hymn number 345, ‘And can it be’.*

**1. And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain?  
For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

**2. ‘Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds enquire no more.**

**3. He left his Father’s throne above –  
So free, so infinite his grace –  
Emptied himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.  
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me!**

**4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.**

**5. No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!**

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***We come to our prayer of intercession.***

God most gracious and holy, as we reflect upon our journey through Lent, we recognize your goodness and grace, for you have given us this remarkable, beautiful and self-sustaining world and have blessed our lives in so many ways that we know our response should be to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands, doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can. May the perfect example of Jesus, our Saviour be our guide in how we serve our neighbours and play our part in building a better world.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine and Jerusalem, asking that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and peoples, so peace and justice may be established and prevail. We pray, too, for the governments of the world's nations, that they may govern justly and with mercy. Hear our prayer for our enemies and those who wrong us that we may bear a Christian witness and offer peace for hostility and kindness for hatred.

We offer our prayer for healing to the victims of natural disasters especially populations inundated by recent flooding in Malawi, Brazil and New Zealand, those caught up in the tornado in Mississippi, besides everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. Compassionate God, we pray for the leaders of wealthy nations to be generous in offering aid to countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands which are afflicted by droughts and famine. We ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide victims with desperately-needed aid.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, those bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them.

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Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer of our prayer for those around us, by being sensitive to their needs and offering practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

We pray for the whole Church of Christ, that professing one Lord, one faith and one baptism, all whom Christ has called may learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. We pray for everybody who takes

the gospel to the world that they are able to draw all-comers to Christ Jesus through their sincerity and boldness of spirit. And also to all who receive God's Word, that they may discover his holiness and glory.

We thank you and praise you for all your saints and grant them the fullness of your eternal joy. Strengthen us by their fellowship, so we may follow their examples and guide other people to know and love Jesus.

Abba, heavenly Father, we ask you to bless us, our friends and families. Keep us safe in your care. Help us to know and do your holy will, so we may bring the light of your love to this sin-darkened and self-centred world, to the glory of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

**The first Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 21 verses 1 to 11**

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,

“Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:

“Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The crowds answered,

“This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” Amen.

*Graham Kendrick wrote our next hymn for Spring Harvest in 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah.*

*Surely, few descriptions of the passion have been written with greater poignancy than the third verse,*

*‘Come see His hands and His feet,  
The scars that speak of sacrifice,  
Hands that flung stars into space  
To cruel nails surrendered.’*

*We shall sing 272, ‘The Servant King’*

**1. From heaven You came,  
Helpless babe, entered our world,  
Your glory veiled; not to be served  
But to serve and give Your life  
That we might live. Chorus:**

*This is our God, the Servant King,*

*He calls us now to follow Him,  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to the Servant King.*

2. There in the garden of tears,  
My heavy load he chose to bear;  
His heart with sorrow was torn,  
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said. *Chorus:*

3. Come see His hands and His feet,  
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;  
Hands that flung stars into space  
To cruel nails surrendered. *Chorus:*

4. So let us learn how to serve,  
And in our lives enthrone Him;  
Each other's needs to prefer,  
For it is Christ we're serving. *Chorus:*

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**Address:** *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Matthew 21:9*

It is said that a week is a long time in politics and the fortunes of many governments have turned very quickly: one day riding high; the next brought low. Certainly, Holy Week marks that amazing Pessach Festival, or Passover when Jesus changed from one adored by the people to the one whose death they demanded.

Jesus and his followers set out from Bethany after Lazarus, had been raised from the dead, four days after he had been buried, making many witnesses believe he was the Messiah, God's anointed. The problem was there were different ideas about the nature of the Messiah. Many expected the one anointed by God to be the figure from **Isaiah 63** whose clothes were stained with the blood of Judea's enemies. They thought he would destroy the Roman occupiers, restore Judah to the state that had been enjoyed during King David's lifetime, before he compelled God's people to honour their covenant with God. Yet Jesus chose to enter the Holy City on a young donkey, like the humble king from Zechariah, a prince of peace, not a warrior king. Despite this, the huge crowd greeted him with shouts of, '**Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**'

They cast palm leaves and clothing beneath the donkey's feet, as a sign of respect. In fact, had Jesus led a rebellion on the day that he entered Jerusalem, the people would have followed him and he might have succeeded. However, that was not God's plan, for God wins his people by boundless, patient love, not by force.

Although the Son of God lived amongst a people who had been looking for the Messiah for hundreds of years, most of them failed to recognize him because they were blinded by their own prejudices. The hierarchy in the Sanhedrin saw Jesus as no more than an agitator from the province of Galilee which was notorious for false Messiahs who had led uprisings against the occupying Romans, often resulting in severe reprisals and blood-letting among ordinary Jews. They could not see his Godhood through his deeds and teaching, because he did not congratulate them for their observance of the Rules of Righteousness, but pointed out that their customs were actually leading them away from God the Father. Even one of the twelve, the zealot, Judas Iscariot, tried to force his hand, betraying him in hope that, in resisting arrest, Jesus would begin a revolution that would

end Roman occupation. By not resisting, our Lord began a revolution that broke the iron grip of sin and death over mankind.

And so, we move towards the Last Supper, the spiritual agony in Gethsemane, the betrayal by a friend, desertion by his other friends, a show trial, condemnation, brutal abuse and a hideous death. Even Simon Peter, the Rock on which the Church would be formed, denied knowing Jesus when challenged at Caiaphas' palace. However, if the story had ended there, Jesus would have swiftly been forgotten as a good but deluded man. Instead, he was raised from the tomb and forged a new relationship with the Father that offers hope to all-comers.

When Jesus cried, "**It is finished!**" on the cross, you might have thought it was a cry of defeat, but the Greek word '**tetelestai**' means more than that. It was used at the bottom of bills to show that the debt had been paid. In other words he announced that his death had paid the price of our freedom from enslavement to Satan.

Our reading challenges us to face up to prejudice in all its subtle forms, to open our inner eye and see others as Jesus sees them, not as society does. How can we respond to that wonderful love which took Jesus to his death at Calvary? Thanks to Christ, our sins are forgiven, so we are free to serve him because we want to, not because we are compelled to in order to atone for our wrongdoing. Therefore, we can answer our Lord's call joyfully, using all our talents, gifts and graces to reflect the love of Jesus upon a world darkened by selfishness and unbelief. Amen.

### **The second Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 26 verses 36 to 56**

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

At that time Jesus said to the crowd,

"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. Amen.

*'See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down; / Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, / Or thorns compose so rich a crown?' We shall close our worship as we sing a hymn written by Isaac Watts 316 years ago, yet one that I don't think has been equalled. We close our worship as we sing hymn number 287, 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.*

**1. When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.**

**2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
Save in the death of Christ, my God;  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to His blood.**

**3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?**

**4. His dying crimson, like a robe,  
Spreads o'er his body on the tree;  
Then am I dead to all the globe,  
And all the globe is dead to me.**

**5. Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.**

© Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}

**Benediction**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.**