

A Lenten pathway



Journeying from praise to rejection

5th April 2020

As a way of preparing ourselves to worship, find a quiet space in your house, a corner of the lounge perhaps. Place a table with something that speaks to you of the presence of the Divine, some flowers or a plant, a candle, maybe a photo of a loved one.



Set some time aside to become still before God. Light your candle and allow a short few moment of stillness to pervade your sacred space. As you still your heart, regulate your breathing, breath slowly and deeply. As you exhale, let go of all the worries and the list of priorities, problems and tasks that you feel crowding in on you, let them go. As you inhale, breath in the air, life giving, refreshing. Breath in Gods spirit, Gods love and affirmation. Imagine being surrounded by light and wholeness.

Watch the candle flame for a while and reflect on its vulnerability and yet its bold statement of life. Think of people and families affected by COVID 19, the medical staff, those who are essential workers and even the much-maligned politicians who must bear the burden of leading. Feel God peering over your shoulder and imagine what God is thinking and feeling.



A Call to worship

Life is a journey we share with others, for we travel together as a people, on a winding and sometimes hilly road towards our common Jerusalem. Dusty Jerusalem, smelly and noisy Jerusalem, Jerusalem of hopes and fears! Excited Jerusalem, curious Jerusalem,... will it happen? Is God acting at last?

We share our lives, our experiences, our hopes and our fears, even though we are kept apart. With joy and hope we welcome other travellers to share our lives.

We learn from each other; we laugh and cry with each other; we are home with each other, and together we celebrate God's presentness as we are refreshed and made ready for re-creation in our lives and our communities.

(adapted, Rex E Hunt)

Hymn: Ride on Ride on in Majesty - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kio3aRZ84SM&feature=youtu.be>

To access this hymn, place the cursor on the link, press the control key (bottom left on your keyboard) and click on the link.

Here is another version of this hymn to the same tune: "Ride on, ride on, the time is right"

Read or sing it quietly to yourself

*Ride on, ride on, the time is right:
The roadside crowds scream with delight;
Palm branches mark the pilgrim way
Where beggars squat and children play.*

*Ride on, ride on, the critics wait,
Intrigue and rumour circulate;
New lies abound in word and jest,
And truth becomes a suspect guest.*

*Ride on, ride on, while well aware
That those who shout and wave and stare
Are mortals who, with common breath,
Can crave for life and lust for death.*

*Ride on, ride on, though blind with tears,
Though dumb to speak and deaf to jeers.
Your path is clear, though few can tell
Their garments pave the road to Hell.*

*Ride on, ride on, the room is let,
The wine matured, the saw is whet;
And dice your death-throes shall attend
Though faith, not fate, dictates your end.*

*Rise on, ride on, God's love demands.
Justice and peace lie in your hands.
Evil and angel voices rhyme:
This is the man and this the time.*

(John Bell)

A Prayer

Holy and Loving God, we welcome you into the citadel of our soul.
Today we take out the palm branches and wave them enthusiastically shouting
'blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'!
But you have been there all the time...
When we phoned a lonely person and smiled at the stranger.
You were there yesterday when we growled about our neighbours,
on Friday evening when we were short tempered with our family,
when we ignored the tears or changed channels to avoid the pain of so many as the death toll rises.
May we sense the depth of your feeling as you weep over the Jerusalem's of this world.
May we see, as you do, not the greatness of the buildings or the impressive rituals enacted in it,
but rather the greatness of humanity that lies within;
contained, as it is, in the bigger temple of your creations glory.
God may we see you not in the war horse but the humble donkey,
offering us a ride... Amen



The children's prayer: "Somewhere someone"

The kingdom of love is coming because:
somewhere someone is kind when others are unkind,
somewhere someone shares with another in need,
somewhere someone refuses to hate, while others hate,
somewhere someone is patient - and waits in love,
somewhere someone returns good for evil,
somewhere someone serves another, in love,
somewhere someone is calm in a storm,
somewhere someone is loving everybody.
Is that someone you?

(Binkley & McKeel, www.rexaehuntprogressive.com)

Scripture readings: Zechariah 9:9-12 (NRSV)

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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;...

Scripture readings: Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

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."

Reflections: *Journeying from praise to rejection*

1. Just like our Christmas stories we tend to conflate all the accounts of the passion week into one, not seeing how different they are. However, one thing seems to stand out in all of them is the degree of Jesus' intentionality. It seems clear that he has planned and thought about this trip to Jerusalem, its purpose and implications for quite some time. Even allowing for the tendency of the Gospel writers to add their own theological 'flavour' and particular additions, there seems little doubt that he knew full well the likely consequences of his actions.
2. In fact it sometimes seems as if he almost deliberately kicking sand in the face of those who had the power of life and death over him. He had no fear but for those who have become not just his disciples but his friends as well. They came to Jerusalem because that's where Jesus went and they were followers of what they took to be a 'winning cause'; they trusted his judgement.
3. But it was not just a matter of 'showing up' in Jerusalem; Jesus wanted to make some things clear. His entrance, for one thing, was a powerful statement, breath-taking in its simplicity and subtlety; and if there was one thing the Jewish folk had learnt through the years was that you held on to your history and traditions for they defended and defined you. Jewishness was about owning their salvation history and holding to the promises it contained. Jesus knew his history and traditions better than most Rabbi's.
4. Let me explain:
 - From the time of the united monarchy after the kingdom of David, and then his son Solomon, until the time of the first Exile, they had enjoyed their best period of history; self-rule with prosperity and expansion into neighbouring territories. The Temple of Solomon was built ostentatiously to impress all who visited (such as the legendary queen of Sheba). Jewish national theology was posited on this success; God was 'resident' in the Temple and was, de facto, it's defender, on *their* side in any scrap, as shown by the many victories of David's rule. The scriptures (e.g. the book of Proverbs) were so crafted as to imply that if you obeyed the king, did the socially acceptable 'thing' by following the cultic law and worshiped/sacrificed at the temple - you could (generally) expect a long and prosperous life and the country would flourish.

- But this beautiful picture did not last forever. The kingdom first split into Israel and Judah, with each one falling to the superpowers of the age. First the Assyrians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then Ptolemaic and the Seleucid empire. [The Romans came later, but we'll get to that]. The prophets tried to refocus the populace's theology and outlook but were (in their lifetimes) rejected and mostly killed. A good example of this pattern is the life of Jeremiah.
 - After centuries of living under foreign rule, with each coloniser following the same principles of indoctrinating the Israelites to their new way of seeing things, their notions of spirituality and their god(s), the Jewish faith then gravitated to the apocalyptic. Knowing they would never again have the power to achieve this previous level of greatness, they believed that God would and intercede in history and draw things to a conclusion to show the world that the Jews were right all along. God would punish those who had opposed the Jewish causes and a 'Messiah' would arrive who would be sent to initiate this uprising against foreign rule (in Jesus day the Romans) and restore the nation of Israel in all its former glory.
 - In the second century BCE, when the Jews were buckling under the weight of pressure to be 'Hellenised' with their traditions and their faith being rigorously being repressed and persecution abounding, the Jew's had had enough and rebelled, led by the Hasmonaean family (nicknamed Judas Maccabeus – Hammer wielder) and they eventually won their independence and for the first time in five centuries Israel was 'free'.
 - The significance of this for today is that Judas Maccabeus and his men, entered Jerusalem *on this route*, on a war horse, as rescuer and saviour (Messiah), cleansing and restoring the Temple (see the pattern here?). He was hailed by the same cries, the same palm branches and exaltations. Jesus was following in some very powerful footprints! Still today Jews celebrate *Hanukkah* (the one festival that is not in the Torah) in commemoration of this event! No wonder the populace praised him!
5. Jesus was making a point, but not the one that was expected. For although he was entering Jerusalem in the fashion of a king (as in the prophecy of Zechariah) it was not to wage war *but to declare peace*, to in fact destroy the weapons of war and domination. However, how easy it is for those who think in terms of domination and control to misinterpret such events. The ancient world had no distinction between religion and politics as we claim to have today. Every act was seen in binary terms, you were either part of the system as a whole or its enemy.
 6. The Jewish leaders were caught in a trap of their own making. They had sought a comfortable place, accommodating their faith and yet obeying the Romans and thereby enjoying a good life; a position they would come to regret. For the Romans who believed in their own superiority; militarily, politically, culturally and theologically – this whole procession was too much, Jesus was rubbing their noses in it! Although they might not have understood the finer nuances of Jesus' message, they could see that he 'stirred things up', i.e. irrespective of what he taught he was a troublemaker.
 7. But I return to my opening point. Jesus, entering Jerusalem as he did and cleansing the temple as he did, was intentional and deliberate. He was not seeking popularity and praise, he knew how fickle crowds could be, especially when their wishes were not met. [One recalls the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand when people wanted to make him a king by force (John 6:15).] What he was doing was typically Prophetic. Many of the ancient prophets emphasised their message by powerful and unpleasant illustrations [see the example of Ezekiel 4:1-13] to appeal to people to see spiritual reason and change their ways and thoughts. [It is interesting that Greek the word 'to repent' is to change ones mind.]
 8. Today's crises (COVID 19) has exposed the world's thinking on many areas of human interaction. The message of Jesus still seeks to enter our Jerusalem's. It is a message of peace, tolerance, understanding, acceptance and support. It seeks to include all, to help all, to love all, to share with all. It is a message which the Romans never really understood, and one which religion did but chose to ignore. It's a message that will increasingly haunt the stock markets and those who think in binary. We may well stand on the roadside and cheer now but will we be cheering for the deeper prophetic message of the true Messiah?

A time of prayer for the world *

(Ruth Morton)

God, our loving parent

We imagined that today we would be in the crowd cheering You as You rode into Jerusalem.

Instead, we pause, bewildered, in a layby in our journey.

Calm our anxieties for ourselves and those close to us so that, trusting that underneath are the everlasting arms, we can look outwards to others in their time of need.

We pray for Your church in this place – for Leigh and the leaders as they experiment with new ways of worship, community and service.

And for all our brothers and sisters in the world-wide communion of faith as they, like us, face the challenge to be Your body in the world.

We thank You for the Prime Minister and leaders of our country and ask that they have wisdom, courage, strength and health to guide us through this crisis. For all citizens- that we will put aside selfish desires for the good of all.

We remember those who are facing risks and making personal sacrifices to keep us safe and to provide us with what we need.

Those directly in contact with the virus:

Nurses, Doctors, Pharmacists, Lab Technicians, Carers and other health workers.

Police, who are trying to ensure that people do not spread infection.

All who work to bring us clean food: farmers and growers, truck drivers, staff in supermarkets, cleaners.

The life of every person in this country has changed within a week.

We especially lift up:

Parents of new babies who can't have the support of family or friends.

Families and older people who are living in inadequate or dangerous homes.

All those who are facing unemployment and financial difficulties

People who are enduring pain and weakness

but cannot have surgery or treatment until the virus has been controlled.

Those who grieve alone for loved ones who have died.

(We name those whom we hold in our hearts.)

We know that this pandemic is infecting every country in the world.

Although we are isolated - save us from insular thinking.

We pray for countries where limited resources, drought, poverty, ignorance, conflict, corruption or self-interest contribute to the loss of many lives.

Where we learn of opportunities to relieve suffering open our hearts and hands to help.

Lord, save us from retreating into our comfortable burrows

and guide us in using the resources we have been gifted

- personal, technological and financial – to reach out to others

In Jesus' name we pray.

AMEN

Hymn: The Servant King - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCAdWs-ZyEk>

To access this hymn, place the cursor on the link, press the control key (bottom left on your keyboard) and click on the link.

A prayer of blessing

Go into Holy Week, clinging to hope amongst the darkness.

Go with joy, knowing that resurrection is around the corner.

Go with peace and seek a better world. Amen.

(Tim Baker, *The Vine* is compiled and produced by twelvebaskets)

* Thanks to Ruth Morton for sending her prayers for inclusion in our prayers of worship today