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Subject: Reading Reflection and Prayers for Passion Sunday
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Hi everybody

Once again, while we can't meet in person, I've put together some prayers, readings and reflection for this Sunday which I hope you may find helpful as we pray and worship at home. Many thanks to Sarah Carter who has found hymn resources on YouTube - those in the choir will have received these this afternoon but I am happy to forward it to anyone else who would like those links. I've put the prayers and reflection both in the body of this email and also as a separate Word attachment, so use whichever works best with your device. You are of course welcome to use all these resources in whatever way you like, and whenever you like, but I shall be offering the prayers and reflecting on the readings at 10.30am, as that is when we would have been having a group service at Baxterley, and it will be nice to think that a number of us could do likewise.

In the meantime, prayers for us all continue amidst the challenges of this time. Let's look out for each other. Do please let me how you're getting on, and if there is any way in which I can support or pray for you.

I'll be sending out more prayer and worship resources for Holy Week and Easter; let me know if you'd rather have those sent as a printed copy, or if you'd not get anything at all (I won't be offended!) Otherwise, it'll be another email, which is proving a useful way of keeping in touch.

Much love

John

Passion Sunday Collect, Readings, Reflection, Prayers

Collect

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Readings

Romans 8.6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. for this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

John 11.1-45

The Gospel reading today is a very long one, so I won't type it out in full. But do look it up and read it in your Bible if you can. If not, don't worry – a short summary of it follows in my reflection.

Reflection

An urgent message is sent to Jesus from two of his closest friends, Mary and Martha. Their brother, Lazarus, is very seriously ill. Surely Jesus, who has healed complete strangers, will come to their village of Bethany without delay, and bring the healing that is so desperately needed. But he doesn't. He waits a full forty-eight hours before even setting out on a journey that will itself take several days. By the time he reaches Bethany it seems he is too late. Lazarus is both dead and buried. Both Mary and Martha meet Jesus with the same opening words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died". Are they words of rebuke, blaming Jesus for the death of Lazarus? Or words of puzzlement, stemming from their confusion as to why Jesus should have waited so long before coming to the aid of his friends? Or perhaps they are words that reflect the faith that the sisters still had in Jesus as the one who truly has the power to save. Somehow, I suspect they may express all of those feelings. There is something heart-wrenchingly powerful in that challenge that is also a veiled question: Why, Lord? Why weren't you here earlier. Why did my brother have to die?

"Why, Lord?" is a question that is often asked, but which very rarely appears to receive an answer. If we're seeking an explanation from above for why misfortune has come upon us, or on those we love, or on our world, the heavens seem to remain resolutely silent. The Almighty appears disinclined to respond to our cries. But that does not mean that the "Why, Lord?" question does not matter, or should not be asked, or that it falls on deaf ears. Mary and Martha's words are similar in spirit to those found in several of the psalms, where lament, anger and trust all merge as the psalmist expresses unvarnished feelings to God and about God.

The truth is that, for the most part, "Why, Lord?" may look like a question, but it isn't. We don't need an explanation or interpretation of why the world is as it is. We don't need to be informed and brought to a fuller understanding. We need to be comforted and consoled. We need to be held, and we need to be heard. 'Why Lord?' is more likely to be a cry of protest or of pain than a question. We live in a world that is not as it should be, a world in which there is suffering that appears to be utterly without purpose or meaning. In coming before God and crying, "Why, Lord?" we are doing what countless others have done before us in such situations. To ask the question does not denote a lack of faith; indeed, it is only the person of faith who truly does ask it.

Before thinking about Jesus' response to Mary and Martha, it is worth considering how he does **not** respond. Jesus does not rebuke either of the two women for their temerity in challenging him. He does not become defensive or seek to shield himself from words that must surely wound. Neither does he offer excuses or explanations; maybe there was a pressing reason why he could not have set out earlier, but the Lord does not use that to deflect or distract from the hurt and disappointment that Mary and Martha feel. As the Psalmist also discovered, God is big enough to take whatever charges we throw at Him, just as a parent willingly absorbs the blows of a toddler having a tantrum.

Jesus does not just allow the sisters to express their pain and grief and anger; he shares it too. The shortest verse in the Bible occurs in this Gospel story. "Jesus wept". Mary and Martha weep, but they do not weep alone. When we weep at the sorrows of the world, or from our own private pain, we do not weep alone. Jesus' tears are tears of the utmost compassion. He is the one who has entered fully into the human condition and shares our sorrows and our tears.

This may be part of the reason why this Gospel is set to be read today, the fifth Sunday of Lent. It is a day sometimes known as Passion Sunday, to mark that point when the season of Lent becomes most intense, as the death of Jesus looms ever nearer in our thoughts. Passiontide is a time to remember the God who in Jesus has entered our world, divesting himself of all majesty, to take upon himself the cruel blows of human beings at their worst and to suffer on the cross, with us and for us.

But the story does not end there, just as the story of Jesus does not end on Good Friday. In summoning Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus gives to Mary and Martha an assurance that his words promising resurrection and life are words of power and of truth. Unlike Jesus, Lazarus will die again; but he and those who mourn now know that the iron grip and fear of death has gone. Today is the beginning of Passiontide; but it is also the anticipation of Easter, our celebration of the ultimate sign that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life, the one who has triumphed over the power of the grave. At the end of the story, Lazarus' tomb is empty. In two weeks' time, we will rejoice and marvel at another and greater empty tomb. And on that day we will sing: Alleluia!

Intercessions

Lord of life and Creator of all, you brought all things into being through your word and breathed into us the breath of life. Look in mercy upon the world that you have made, and upon the whole human family in every nation. Give to all peoples a spirit of co-operation and determination as we face the common crisis of the coronavirus pandemic. Strengthen our communities and bless the work of all who labour for public safety and well-being.

Lord of love, you wept with compassion at the grave of Lazarus your friend. Surround with your love all those who suffer and who mourn. We hold before you the families and friends of all who have been recently bereaved, thinking especially of those from our own communities and church family who have died in recent weeks and days, including Jill White, Alan Bridgewater, Richard Haswell, Trevor Williams and David Powell. May those who mourn be assured of your presence and your love; sustain them in their grief and comfort them in their loss.

Lord of power, you healed the sick and raised to new life those for whom life appeared over. Pour out your resurrection power on all who are laid low, with sickness, sorrow or infirmity. We pray for all in hospital, those who are ill at home, those receiving treatment and those for whom no treatment is possible. We give you thanks for all who work in providing medicine and care; and for those working to furnish them with the equipment and resources that they need; strengthen and encourage them in all their labours, and sustain them and refresh them when they are weary.

Lord of grace, you described your disciples not as servants but as friends, and accepted the hospitality of Mary and of Martha. We thank you for the gift of friendship, and we pray that the current physical distancing of us from one another may be matched by a growth in the bonds of friendship, within the church and throughout the places where we live. We thank you for the growing networks of volunteers within our communities who are looking to ensure that nobody is left isolated or uncared for. We thank you for all who work in shops and for delivery companies, keeping us supplied with the things we need.

Lord of all goodness, you long for the flourishing of all creation and of all people. We pray for those for whom the current situation is most difficult and challenging; those who are separated from the people they love; those who are not safe in their own homes; those who are homeless; those who are facing deprivation; and those for whom the fears and anxieties all around are a threat to their mental well-being.

Lord of Life, you are the resurrection and the life. We thank you that even the grave itself is no barrier to the working of your great power. During this time of Lent, as we enter more deeply into the mystery of your passion, awaken us to the reality of your risen life, that, when Easter comes we may celebrate with joyful hearts and with voices raised in triumphant praise.

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