

25th February 2024 – Morning Service

Lent 2 – A Suffering Messiah

Margaret Bradley

Lent Liturgy – Towel & Basin

John 13: 1-5 (6 – 17): Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Lord Jesus, suffering servant to everyone, help us to follow your example. Give us the strength to seek out, and to perform acts of service for those around us. We take a moment to think about all those in our society who are in serving or caring roles such as teachers, doctors, nurses, carers, social workers, ministers, and community magistrates; for all those who volunteer and work tirelessly to serve others whether in their family, congregation, church, community or by fundraising and campaigning for those in some of the world's poorest communities. Lord Jesus, remind us that the King who leads us does so with humility as well as majesty, and cause us to build your Kingdom by your Spirit, rather than by might or power – that we might be channels for more love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our world. **Amen.**

Call to Worship

On the second Sunday of Lent, we come to worship the one God, who, in Christ, shares in the suffering of the world. *'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our iniquities.'* (Isaiah 53:4)

StF 8 – God with us

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| 1) God with us: Creator, Father, Bringing everything to birth; Mother of the whole creation, Fire of stars and life of earth: Down the countless years composing, From the earth's evolving night, Love's response to love, and forming Mind and soul to seek your light. | 3) God with us: Unwearied Spirit, From the birth of time and space, Surging through unconscious being, Joyful, Life-Creating Grace: Through the centuries you find us; You, as God, inspire our prayer; Life and Power at work within us, Love for ever, everywhere! |
| 2) God with us: Redeemer, Brother, Friend for ever at our side, Here, in flesh, you walked among us, Taking up your cross, you died. Crucified, despised, rejected, Perfect Love, who shared our shame, Streaming from the cross, your judgement, Full of mercy, clears our name. | 4) God, Transcendent, far beyond us, Closest Friend, unfailing Guide: Through the ages, wronged, affronted, In your poor, still crucified! God with us: convict, forgive us; By your holy love destroy All that hinders peace and justice: Fill this aching world with joy! |

Prayer

Great God, we think of the awesome universe that you have created, vast and full of interest, with all its enormous variety of different plants and animals and human beings, each one unique and precious to you., and we are amazed at your power and greatness.

Selfless God, we think of the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross, demonstrating the wideness of your love for us and for everything that you have made, even when we cause you grief by ignoring you and disobeying you. We think of times when we have caused you hurt and pain, when we have added to the sufferings of the world by our actions or by our apathy, and we are overwhelmed by the reassurance of your patience and forgiveness.

Present God, we feel your nearness to us now, and we are moved by the knowledge that you are ours and that we are yours. And so, we bring our praise, our worship, our adoration for all that you are and all that you mean to us.

Collect for Lent 2

Christ, Son of the living God, who for a season laid aside the divine glory and learned obedience through suffering: teach us in all our afflictions to raise our eyes to the place of your mercy and to find in you our peace and deliverance. We ask our prayer in your name. **Amen.**

Responsive Psalm 22: 1-11

The song of a man in a distress. We are told that it was on the mind of Jesus as he hung on the cross. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, and are so far from my salvation, from the words of my distress?

O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer; and by night also, but I find no rest.

Yet you are the Holy One, enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

Our forebears trusted in you; they trusted, and you delivered them.

They cried out to you and were delivered; they put their trust in you and were not confounded.

But as for me, I am a worm and not human, scorned by all and despised by the people.

All who see me laugh me to scorn; they curl their lips and wag their heads, saying,

'He trusted in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him deliver him, if he delights in him.'

But it is you that took me out of the womb and laid me safe upon my mother's breast.

On you was I cast ever since I was born; you are my God even from my mother's womb.

Be not far from me, for trouble is near at hand and there is none to help.

Reading: Mark 8: 31-38

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Reflection - The Son Of Man Must Suffer Much

The idea of a suffering Messiah poses problems for some people. It's an obstacle for members of other world religions and for people who have no religious faith. And the idea was repellent to the first disciples of Jesus when he spoke to them of his fate. Divinely-appointed men are associated with performing miracles, with power, with success and victory and glory. They are not associated with vulnerability and losing anything, let alone losing their lives.

Yet Mark's Gospel is dominated by the death of Jesus. Around the same amount of space is devoted to his Passion as there is to his life. Today's passage marks the turning-point at which the atmosphere changes. Up until now the Gospel has been concerned with answering the question, 'Who is he? Who can this man be?' Peter says that he is the Messiah, God's anointed one, and from then onwards the dominant theme becomes that of the cross, with Jesus appearing to regard his execution as being inevitable.

Mark says that Jesus spoke 'plainly' to the disciples of his coming suffering and death and resurrection. It's unlikely that he was quite so clear and precise in his predictions, because the later behaviour of the disciples just doesn't bear this out. They don't seem at all prepared for what was to come. However, as conflict and hostility between himself and the authorities mounted, Jesus must have foreseen the likelihood, that they wouldn't carry on putting up with him for much longer, and that he could come to a similar end as his forerunner, John the Baptist, who had been beheaded. In Scripture, people who remained faithful and obedient to God are ultimately vindicated. Jesus no doubt trusted that the same would apply to him, and he probably referred to his rejection and his vindication in general terms, rather than with the precision that could later be written up with the benefit of hindsight.

Although it was inconceivable to his disciples that a Messiah could be anything but a victorious and glorious figure, Jesus accepted his role as a suffering Messiah. I have to say that I find myself far more drawn to a suffering Messiah, with a role of bringing in God's Kingdom, than I am to a 'Champion' Messiah, and for three reasons:

1) A suffering messiah reveals that God shares in our pain.

Firstly, in our own times of suffering we are upheld by the knowledge that Jesus endured pain too. The only thing that helps give meaning to our own experiences of pain and distress, and to unspeakable acts of violence and adversity that are faced by people in other parts of the world, is the belief that God, through Christ, is sharing in it with us.

Pierre Abelard was a monk and important theologian who lived in the 13th century. He described how one day he and his friend Thibault were walking in the woods when cries of agony led them to a rabbit caught in a trap. They freed it, but it died in Thibault's arms. Abelard felt a strong sense of outrage at its innocent suffering, and he asked those questions that so many of us ask in similar situations. Why is there suffering in the world? It makes you wonder if there IS a God. And if there is, how can we speak of a LOVING God? It would appear that our Creator is cruel and sadistic to allow such things or, at best, totally indifferent towards us. Abelard could explain his own suffering. It was a result of his own choices and actions. He had been castrated by the father of a girl student, Heloise, whom he was tutoring and with whom he had fallen in love and had an affair, but wasn't in a position to marry. But the rabbit's suffering was totally undeserved. Thibault agreed with his friend, but he didn't question the existence, or the love, of God. He perceived that Jesus' suffering was evidence that God was constantly sharing in all the world's suffering. He pointed to a fallen tree beside them that had been sawn through the middle. There was a dark ring where it had been cut across. Yet the ring goes up and down the whole length of the tree. Thibault said that Christ's life was like that ring – a bit of God that we see. We believe that God is constantly caring, forgiving, healing, because of what we see in Jesus. But we don't think the same about the pain and the agony of Calvary. We think that all that has stopped. The two friends concluded that it hadn't and that the cross reveals God's continuous participation in all the pain of the world.

Because of the sufferings of Jesus, we are led to believe that God isn't an indifferent, impassive figure, exalted and remote from the world, untouched by human life. We see in Jesus not only a God who cares about our sufferings, but a God who actually shares with us in them. We see a God who has chosen to enter into our darkness, who understands pain and who agonises with us. And this is a great comfort, when we're undergoing pain and distress, to know that God is alongside us and knows how we feel. That's one reason that I'm drawn to the idea of a suffering Messiah.

StF 273 – Here hangs a man discarded

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| 1) Here hangs a man discarded, A scarecrow hoisted high, A nonsense pointing nowhere To all who hurry by. | 4) Life, emptied of all meaning, Drained out in bleak distress, Can share in broken silence Our deepest emptiness: |
| 2) Can such a clown of sorrows Still bring a useful word, When faith and love seem phantoms And every hope absurd? | 5) And love that freely entered The pit of life's despair, Can name our hidden darkness And suffer with us there. |
| 3) Yet here is help and comfort For lives by comfort bound, When drums of dazzling progress Give strangely hollow sound: | 6) Christ, in our darkness risen, Help all who long for light To hold the hand of promise Till faith receives its sight. |

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2) *The sight of undeserved suffering can bring about a change of heart*

One reason that I'm drawn to the idea of a suffering Messiah is that it reveals how God shares in our pain. Another is because I see how the sight of undeserved suffering can bring about a change of heart. There are powerful examples of situations where people have been prepared to accept sufferings themselves in order to bring about a change in attitudes; to bring about justice and peace – the values of God's kingdom. I give just one illustration.

60 years ago, people of colour in the United States had no civil rights. They faced injustice and discrimination, humiliation and beatings. Martin Luther King was an American Baptist minister who led non-violent acts of civil disobedience to secure civil and economic rights for African Americans. His methods were motivated by his Christian beliefs and by the example of Mahatma Gandhi who had secured rights for Indians in South Africa, and Indian independence from British rule, without resorting to any violence. We are approaching the 59th anniversary of a charge on 600 black, unarmed marchers, who were walking from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery, in a peaceful demonstration calling for racial equality. The brutal police attacks, which took place on 7 March 1965, and the horrifying images of the beaten marchers, aroused national public outrage and marked the turning point in the campaign for justice.

18 months previously, around a quarter of a million protestors took part in a march upon Washington, following weeks of peacefully violating laws that they considered unjust. A few days later, four little black girls were killed and twenty more were injured by bombs planted in a Baptist church by white supremacists. In response to the events of that summer and autumn, King made a moving speech that included these words: 'Burn our homes and go burn our churches early in the morning and bomb them if you please, but we will still love you. We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning the victory, we will win not only our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process. We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force.'

Film footage shown on the TV shocked those who were able to view the harsh treatment that was being inflicted and the undeserved suffering that black people were enduring. It took another two years before voting rights for racial minorities were passed and in 1968 King was assassinated, as was Gandhi and as was Jesus. But King's words express God's way of changing the world. 'I will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that I will win you in the process. I will match your capacity to inflict suffering with my capacity to endure suffering. I will meet your physical force with soul force.' This is how the world is transformed. And Jesus' message was not just that he must suffer, but that those who follow him, including me and you, must be prepared to face similar consequences as we continue his ministry of transforming the world so that it conforms with God's values and becomes the place of co-operation, equality, forgiveness and peace that God intended.

StF 359 – Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice

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| <p>1) Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice, Your life in love so freely given; For those who took your life away You prayed, that they might be forgiven; And there, in helplessness arrayed, God's power was perfectly displayed.</p> | <p>3) Though helpless and rejected then, You're now as risen Lord acclaimed; For ever by your sacrifice Is God's eternal love proclaimed - The love which, dying, brings to birth New life and hope for all on earth.</p> |
| <p>2) Once helpless in your mother's arms, Dependent on her mercy then, At last, by choice, in other hands, You were as helpless once again; And, at their mercy crucified, You claimed your victory and died.</p> | <p>4) So, living Lord, prepare us now Your willing helplessness to share; To give ourselves in sacrifice To overcome the world's despair; In love to give our lives away And claim your victory today.</p> |

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3) A suffering messiah is an encouragement to a struggling church

A suffering Messiah gives us comfort at a personal level, in our own times of distress and anxiety, through the knowledge that God is sharing in our pain with us. A suffering Messiah shows a new way to those who would seek to transform the world, by inviting them to take risks and become vulnerable in order to bring about a change of heart in people. Thirdly, a suffering Messiah offers reassurance to believers wondering whether God has forsaken the church.

The Gospels were written when the early Christian community was a minority group, not generally regarded with great enthusiasm. Some members faced persecution and even death. There was much heart-searching and expression of doubts as to whether the movement could survive. But followers gained strength and encouragement that Jesus had met with all this too and he had not been forsaken by God. He had come through.

Today we see an alarming decline in Christian commitment and in Church attendance in this country. The latest statistics issued for our own Methodist church are worrying. Because members are predominantly older people, the rate of loss is likely to speed up as they die. Numbers of those offering for the ministry have declined, so that we face a serious shortage of presbyters. It's becoming harder for congregations to find people who will hold essential offices such as stewards and treasurers. But our faith is centred around death and resurrection, and, if Christianity is to experience resurrection, it may be that we have to face death first. We may be tempted to despair of the future. But the subsequent vindication of Jesus after his rejection, and the growth of Christianity to a world-wide faith, gives us the hope that God's Spirit will continue to move in new ways and that God's Kingdom will not ultimately be shaken. And so, the season of Lent provides an opportunity to focus upon the mystery of a God who, in Christ, shares our suffering, and who calls upon us to share in Christ's suffering, so that the world might be transformed. We trust that as we share in Christ's cross, so we will share too in the prospect and hope of resurrection.

StF 662 – Have you heard God’s voice

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| 1) Have you heard God's voice; Has your heart been stirred? Are you still prepared to follow? Have you made a choice to remain and serve, Though the way be rough and narrow? | 3) In your city streets will you be God's heart? Will you listen to the voiceless? Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start, Will you share your faith with the faithless? |
| <i>Ch) Will you walk the path that will cost you much And embrace the pain and sorrow? Will you trust in One who entrusts to you The disciples of tomorrow?</i> | 4) Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith And believe it could be different? Will you share your views using words of grace? Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? |
| 2) Will you use your voice; will you not sit down When the multitudes are silent? Will you make a choice to stand your ground When the crowds are turning violent? | <i>Ch) We will walk the path that will cost us much And embrace the pain and sorrow. We will trust in One who entrusts to us The disciples of tomorrow.</i> |

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Giving Thanks

We bring you our thanks, O God, for the life that you have given us and for the hope of your will being done on earth. We thank you for Jesus, for his life and his commitment to the cause of righteousness and justice; for his sacrificial love for others; for his obedience to death and for his exaltation to glory. We each thank you for the strengthening presence of your Holy Spirit in times when we have most needed it. And we give thanks for those throughout history, and in our own time, who have been prepared to take suffering upon themselves in order to transform the world into the place you intend it to be.

Prayers of Concern

We believe that you agonise with the sufferings of the world and so we too share in your anguish with those in other nations who are affected by war and acts of terrorism, who are oppressed, who are poor, starving and affected by disease and illness. We commit to you all who are working for justice and human rights, for a cease in military offensives and for the provision of humanitarian aid. May followers of the way of Jesus take up his cross until no-one suffers any more. May your kingdom come: may your will be done.

We pray for those known to us whose bodies have been weakened by illness, pain or old age. For those whose mental capacities are impaired. For those suffering from depression or stress. For those whose grief caused by the loss of a loved one is slow to heal. Enfold them all in their affliction and vulnerability. Let us see your full resurrection glory that puts an end to all sorrow, crying, pain and death for ever and bring us all into the fullness of your eternal joy. May your kingdom come: may your will be done.

We pray for your church throughout the world as believers observe the solemn season of Lent. We hold before you any who are being persecuted because of their faithfulness to the Gospel. We pray for the church in our own land, suffering through people’s apathy and indifference, and for those congregations who have grasped the Gospel truth that in order to find new life it is necessary to die. We pray for our Circuit, committing to you all acts of worship and activities that are held within it. Renew us, so that every congregation might be an inclusive community which serves its neighbourhood and that every Christian might be a witness to your grace. May your kingdom come: may your will be done.

And we join in saying the prayer that is common to all Christians everywhere.

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 334 – Praise to the Holiest

1) Praise to the Holiest in the height,
And in the depth be praise;
In all his words most wonderful,
Most sure in all his ways.

2) O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

3) O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail;

4) And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self,
And essence all-divine.

5) O generous love! that he, who came
As man to smite the foe,
The double agony for us
As man should undergo;

6) And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach his followers, and inspire
To suffer and to die.

John Henry Newman

Sending out and Blessing

Go forth into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold fast to what is good. Return no-one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Honour all men and women. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit be with each of us, throughout this season of Lent and always. **Amen.**