

## WINCHESTER, EASTLEIGH & ROMSEY CIRCUIT

### Service at Home Passion Sunday

Sunday 23rd March 2023

*prepared by Pat Fry*

On this Sunday, known as Passion Sunday, it is traditional to spend time pondering the holy mystery of the meaning of the Cross, of our Lord's sacrifice. So instead of following the set lectionary from John's gospel, I am going to take this opportunity to share with you some word pictures that illustrate aspects of the Cross which I have found helpful. None of them should be seen as a complete picture, but each draws our attention to one aspect of the holy mystery at the heart of our faith.

#### **Prayer of Approach,**

Gracious God, though we are in different places and may be worshipping at different times, yet we are united in seeking you. As we focus on the Cross, help us this morning to clear our minds, to focus our thoughts, to hear your word for us and to be aware of your love surrounding us in our own homes. Amen.

#### **Hymn 271: Come, wounded healer**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKzCz79PvRc>

Come, wounded Healer, your sufferings reveal the wounds you accepted, our anguish to heal. Your wounds bring such comfort to body and soul to all who bear torment and yearn to be whole.

Come, hated Lover, and gather us near, your welcome, your teaching, your challenge to hear: where scorn and abuse cause rejection and pain, your loving acceptance makes hope live again!

Come, broken Victor, condemned to a cross - how great are the treasures we gain from your loss!

Your willing agreement to share in our strife transforms our despair into fullness of life.

Martin Leckebusch (b 1962): tune: Slane

The Old Testament reading for today is a well-known passage from Ezekiel. It needs a visual imagination; I always think of the elephant's graveyard in the Lion King when I hear this.

#### **Old Testament reading: Ezekiel 37: 1-14**

Though Ezekiel wrote for a particular time and place, the picture of desolation he presents echoes many people's experience. For those of us who live alone, lockdown may have felt like being stuck in a valley of dry bones; sometimes the routine of an exhausting, tough job, or the routine of church life feels a bit like it. It could be a picture of a long battle with illness, disability, grief or loneliness. It is the witness of many Christians that it is the wind of God's spirit blowing through those circumstances, that enables them to see their situation with new eyes, to see the signs of life. The presence of the Spirit is sometimes only apparent through the actions of caring people.

For some of us, wrestling with the complex theology and unfamiliar language surrounding the cross seems like struggling to make sense of dry bones. One tragedy of the Church today is that many people have dismissed our faith as nothing more than a dried up relic of the past. So we are going to look at four pictures which I hope will overcome the barrier of churchy language.

#### **Picture 1 - The snake on the pole**

**Reading: John 3: 13 -17**

I want to concentrate on the picture here- not on the much loved words of John 3 16, that sum up the Gospel message, but the picture of the snake on a pole – and it is a strange picture.

What on earth have snakes got to do with it? When Moses was leading the people on their journey through the wilderness they were troubled by snake bites. God told Moses to set up a bronze snake high on a pole and tell them that anyone who had been bitten should come and look at the bronze snake and then they would be healed.

So Jesus is saying, in the same way, when I am lifted up on the Cross, those who see the truth of what is happening there, those who really look, will find their deepest needs met, find wholeness.

## Picture 2 Slaves set free

### Reading: Mark 10: 42-45

One of the ideas that we often use in talking about what the Cross means is to say that we were slaves to sin, but now we have been set free – ransomed by Jesus' sacrifice. This is a recurring theme in Paul's letters. But the only Gospel reference to ransom is the one you have just read.

This is how I think about it: we are in Roman times. Imagine a teenager, scarcely more than a child. The Roman army conquered his homeland; he and his brothers and sisters were carted off as slaves, separated, and each sold to a different wealthy Roman. The slave's life was miserable, working all hours, no freedom at all, a prisoner in a foreign land. Then someone pays the ransom – he's set free with money in his pocket. Now he can go where he likes and hold his head high with no fear of being put into slavery again. What's more, his brothers' ransoms have also been paid. According to St Paul that's the kind of wonderful joy that knowing the forgiveness shown by the Cross gives to people.

At the United Church we have been following a Lent course based on the film musical, *Les Misérables*, based on Victor Hugo's epic novel. It is a wonderful story illustrating the truth of this text. The story begins with Jean Valjean, who has served nineteen years hard labour for stealing a loaf of bread, being released on parole but finding every door shut against him until a saintly, elderly bishop gives him food and shelter for the night. Hardened and embittered by his suffering, Valjean steals the bishop's silver and goes on his way. Arrested by the police and brought back he expects condemnation, but the bishop tells the police

the goods were a gift, the man is free to go. He tells Jean Valjean, "I have bought your soul for God."

Amazed and bewildered Jean Valjean goes on his way and gradually learns to let go of hatred, make a fresh start, and live a kindly and compassionate life. Faced with a series of moral dilemmas, several times he risks his own life to save others and experiences the joy of a child's love, faith in God and, finally, peace of mind.

The message to hold on to: we too can know the joy of God's forgiveness and transforming grace through the love of Jesus.

### Hymn 345: And can it be

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMdPtWht7FA>

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?

'Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depth of love divine.  
'Tis mystery all, let earth adore  
let angel minds enquire no more.

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!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffuses 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.

No condemnation now I dread:  
Jesus and all in him his 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.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) H&P version

### **Prayer of Praise:**

*'Tis mystery all, let earth adore,  
let angel minds enquire no more"*

God most high,  
as we recall your love in Jesus, we are filled  
with wonder. All our attempts to put it into  
words fall so far short of what we want to say.

How can it be that He who was with you before  
the world began, who shared in your plan from  
before the dawn of time - how can it be that He  
limited himself to human frailty, in one time  
and one place, living a vulnerable earthly life  
for our sakes? How can it be that He accepted  
such suffering at the hands of ordinary people,  
people like us?

How can it be that, now victorious, free from  
the limitations of time and space, he still goes  
on loving us, still pours out the gift of the Holy  
Spirit, even when we go our own way, ignoring  
Him?

We cannot explain it, but we rejoice in it,  
offering our praise and worship,  
rejoicing in the certainty that this is your way of  
perfect love, for all time and eternity Amen

### **Picture 3 The rings in a fallen tree**

**Reading: Colossians 1, 15, 19-20**

God was in Christ reconciling the world to  
himself - not Jesus struggling to persuade an  
unwilling, angry God to forgive, as some people  
have misinterpreted it, but Jesus demonstrating  
the Father's love. The classic illustration of this  
comes from the mediaeval theologian, Peter  
Abelard.

Imagine a tree that has been chopped down.  
Where it is cut, you see the rings, the rings that  
show the nature of the tree's whole life. The  
cross shows us the nature of God for all time,  
vulnerable, sacrificial love demonstrated by  
Jesus. But we must not push that image too far:

chopping the tree down ended its life – the  
Cross is not the end. The life of God, the life of  
Jesus never ends. Perhaps today we should say  
the Cross is God's DNA.

### **Picture 4 Jesus in the junk box**

Eddie Askew tells a delightful story in his book  
*Love is a Wild Bird* (published by The Leprosy  
Mission)

Browsing in a junk shop, he found a battered  
crucifix in a box of unwanted odds and ends.  
His first thought was to rescue Jesus, clean up  
the crucifix and put this image of Jesus in a safe  
place, a proper place, in his study. But then the  
thought came into his mind. No, Jesus never  
wanted to be rescued. He spent his time among  
the people society regarded as outcasts, he  
would want his image to be here, among the  
things people ignore or mistakenly regard as of  
no value. Eddie Askew concluded with this  
prayer: "Lord of old and new, open my eyes to  
your presence in everyone I see today."

### **Prayers for ourselves and others**

Lord Jesus your cross is rooted in the reality of  
earth: Forgive us when we shut our eyes to the  
pain around us. Lord, in your mercy . . . .

Forgive us when we offer platitudes, fail to  
communicate your truth in a way that is real to  
the people around us. Lord, in your mercy . . . .

Lord Jesus your cross reaches wide to embrace  
the whole of suffering humanity.

In quiet let us bring to God our concern for  
someone we know who is suffering . . . .

In quiet let us lift up to God the people of war  
torn countries . . . .

In quiet let us lift up to God people  
experiencing desolation for whatever reason . .

Lord, in your mercy . . . .

Lord, your Cross points to the glory of heaven.

Give us a vision and a confidence in your love  
that will enable us to live as you intended.

Lord, in your mercy . . . .

So help us to keep the picture of the cross in our minds, that we too may be grounded in reality, far reaching in our compassion, and always seeking the kingdom of God.

Through the love of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

**Hymn 287: When I survey the wondrous Cross**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDkuxElcpdl>

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.

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.

See from his head in 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?

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.

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

**Prayer**

O Christ, as we reflect on your journey to Calvary, enable us to be participants in your way, not just curious bystanders.

As you forgave, give us the love that can forgive. As we witness the new life of your Resurrection, empower us with faith and hope to live the Good News. Amen.

Adapted from Prayer of Palestinian women,  
A Procession of Prayers, ed. John Carden,  
World Council of Churches 1998

**The Grace**

As you say the words of the grace, picture in your mind the people you want to hold before God

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**To use at another time:**

**An alternative way of prayer**

Some of you will know that dance has been my hobby for many years. I had the opportunity to spend a day celebrating the events of Holy Week through dance. We were invited to stand in a space and use movement to meditate on the Cross while listening to gentle meditative music. Even if you need to remain seated, and have only limited arm movement, it is possible to follow this pattern.

Choose a favourite gentle hymn or piece of slow meditative music. I use Pachelbel's Canon

1. Raise your arms up together and then bring them down as low as you can in front of you to represent Jesus coming to earth.
2. Lift your hands to your heart, then spread your arms out wide to complete the shape of the cross, reaching out to all..
3. Bring your hands forward to meet in front of you in a gathering movement, draw them to your heart, then lift high, remembering how Jesus in his earthly ministry reached out to everyone, showing them God's love and drawing them closer to God.

Repeat 1 and 2

4. This time let your arms drop, wait with head bowed, as you reflect on Jesus' death
5. Gradually lift your hands up, then throw your arms open wide and high in a gesture of praise, as you rejoice in the Resurrection

Repeat as many times and as slowly as you like.

Adapted from Dancing through Holy Week a suite of dances compiled by Miggy Scott