



REFLECTIONS

by

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CONNEXIONAL REFLECTIONS FOR HOLY WEEK 2023

Anthony Boateng, Vice President

(All scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV)

PALM SUNDAY

Friends let me warmly welcome you all. It is a delight to join with our President, the Reverend Graham Thompson as we walk together through Holy Week with these devotions. I'm Anthony Boateng and I have the privilege of serving alongside Graham as Vice President this year. We're so grateful that you are joining us on this journey.

This Palm Sunday, I would like to focus on two verses from Matthew, chapter 21 – which describes Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem. To complement this reflection, why not take some time today to read and ponder the whole episode in Matthew 21, verses 1 to 11?

We might see “the triumphal entry” as a very suitable theme, not only for this Palm Sunday, but also at this point in our nations' history, as we prepare for the Coronation of King Charles the Third next month. Matthew paints an extraordinary scene: Jesus wobbling into Jerusalem on a donkey, crowds going ahead chanting the battle hymns of Israel, shouting ‘Hosanna’, which means, ‘Save us now!’. It all might be described as “the Coronation of King Jesus”.

What we will see in the days ahead are the most astonishing developments the world has ever known: Jesus will be crowned with thorns, and enthroned on a cross.

Today, as we begin these reflections, I would like to think about “the Gentleness of Jesus”.

Describing the scene, Matthew writes in chapter 21 of his Gospel, verses 4 and 5:

⁴ *This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet:*

⁵ *‘Say to Daughter Zion,
“See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey ...”*

As I have reflected on Jesus' journey into Jerusalem and on to the cross, I have been reminded of Nelson Mandela, the former prisoner and president of South Africa. He called his autobiography “Long Walk to Freedom”, and the film, based on the book, has the same name.

One of the many heightened moments of crisis comes as Mandela's heart is torn in two: between, on the one hand, those who wanted to remain in enmity – including his own wife, Winnie, and his closest supporters – and on the other hand, seeking the greater good through pursuing reconciliation with those in government – the ones who had persecuted his people so fiercely and deprived him of his own liberty for so many years.

We know, of course, the decision Mandela made. He famously said, *“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then [your enemy] becomes your partner”*.

As we look on at this curious Coronation, we know Jesus has embarked on the longest, greatest walk to freedom this world has ever known, bringing peace and reconciliation to a divided creation. Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah. As he looked in prophetic vision all those years previously, he was struck by the **gentleness** of the King on his donkey: *“See, your king comes to you, **gentle** and riding on a donkey ...”*

We are called to be like our King – and to be like the donkey who carries his presence into the deepest, darkest conflicts of this world.

It prompts me to reflect on a host of questions. Perhaps you could join me in pondering these today:

- Society is deeply divided, and the Church seems to be increasingly under attack. How can we gain fresh perspective and engage with those who have different objectives from us, respectfully listening and sharing our own heartfelt desires?
- How can we engage in peace-building and thus show ourselves to be children of God?
- How can we show leadership in trusting the Lord and in offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us?
- Why do we find it so difficult to accept reconciliation when it is offered to us?
- And why do we seemingly find it all too easy to view those with whom we disagree, even within the Church, as our enemies?

Friends, let’s seek to be like our King Jesus in his gentleness, and like his donkey in carrying his peace-making presence into a deeply divided world.

Prayer

For our prayer today, I would like to read some words of the famous hymn, *“Make me a channel of your peace”*.

So, let us pray:

*Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred let me bring your love.
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord
And where there’s doubt, true faith in you.*

*Make me a channel of your peace
Where there’s despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there’s sadness, ever joy.*

*Oh, Master grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul.*

Lord, make me a channel of your peace, we pray, for the sake of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord; Amen.

Closing sentence

As we close, I look forward to joining you again later in the week. May the Lord be with you 'til we meet again.

TUESDAY

Welcome back to our Holy Week reflections.

On Sunday – which was, of course, Palm Sunday – we thought about the curious Coronation of King Jesus, who wobbled into Jerusalem on a donkey with the crowds going ahead, chanting the battle hymns of Israel, shouting “Hosanna”.

Events are going to develop in the most astonishing ways. Our King will be crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross. Today, in our Holy Week reflection, we see opposition building.

First, came the Sadducees. If you were to read on in Matthew’s Gospel from where Graham left us yesterday, you would find the temple leaders increasingly questioning Jesus’ authority to reign as their King. His response throughout, to their relentless questioning, was consistently calm, clear, challenging and courageously authoritative. Their many attempts to catch Jesus out and corner him failed every time and proved to be utterly futile.

Our reading today tells of their final attempt. Why not take some time to read and ponder the whole episode later today in Matthew 22, verses 34 to 40?

The Pharisees hear that Jesus has silenced the Sadducees and so they play what they think is their trump card, asking him about the Mosaic Law. *“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* they ask.

Jesus’ answer leaves the Pharisees speechless, and the crowd amazed at his wisdom:

He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸ *This is the greatest and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

It seems to me, the danger in our day and age is that we can get those two commandments the wrong way round. We can make the second, to love your neighbour as yourself, the greatest command with our focus on social justice.

Holy Week is an opportunity to make sure our priorities are right. From this greatest commandment flows our commitment to worship: we express our love for God in praise and prayer. It has been one of my great concerns as Vice President, throughout this year, to raise the question of the state of our worship. Does our approach to worship demonstrate a longing for revival?

And from this greatest command to love the Lord our God also flows the outstanding characteristic of our Methodist heritage: our emphasis on holiness.

When it looked as if the Methodist movement had stopped growing in London, almost 250 years ago, John Wesley wrote to one of its leaders, reminding him never to neglect to emphasise the call to holiness: "Do not forget," he wrote, "strongly and explicitly to urge the believers to 'go on to perfection.' When this is constantly and earnestly done, the word is always clothed with power."

It was Donald English, the world-renowned Methodist Minister and only President of the Conference to hold office twice, who once stated that it was the early Methodist's holiness that gave them their power: not that they claimed to be holy, but they longed to be holy.

That seems to have been Wesley's view too. Reflecting on the purpose of the Methodist movement which had grown under his ministry, he asked the question, 'What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?' and answered, 'To reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land.'

So, in this Holy Week, let us not forget our *raison d'être*. Let us passionately and persistently seek a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a revival of holiness that will see our mission and ministry once again clothed with power from on high.

Let's close with a prayer:

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,
ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord; Amen.

I'll see you again tomorrow. Until then, may the Lord be with you.

WEDNESDAY

Our Holy Week reflections continue today as we follow Jesus on the journey to the cross. Today, the plot thickens. We have already witnessed the coronation of Jesus as he wobbled into Jerusalem on a donkey. We have watched as he re-established the rightful use of the Temple as a place of prayer, expelling the money-changers. And we have seen opposition grow as the religious leaders of his day increasingly challenged and rejected his reign.

Today, we see just how intense the opposition has become. The religious leaders plot to kill Jesus.

Why not take some time later today to read and ponder the whole passage – Matthew, chapter 26, verses 1 to 16?

This is a chapter in which dreadful darkness is mingled with deepest devotion. Between the religious leaders' plot to kill Jesus and Judas' agreement to betray him, we find the most beautiful account of costly love.

True to form, Jesus continued to eat with outcasts right to the end. Here he is, in the home of Simon the leper. Whilst he was there, Matthew tells us, *"a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table."*

The disciples were angry and said, *"this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor."*

They saw only the waste. Jesus, however, saw the costly love and the deep devotion. Listen to what he said:

"Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial."

Next month, the world will look on as King Charles the Third is crowned in Westminster Abbey. The most sacred moment of the Coronation service will be the point at which he is anointed with oil, symbolising the empowering of the Holy Spirit. I hope and pray it will be a meaningful and memorable – even lifechanging – moment for him.

Today, we look on as the King of kings is anointed. Normally, kings are anointed for life. Jesus is anointed for death. He will be crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross. He is the Servant King who will lay down his life for the world.

Coronations culminate in the subjects expressing their loyalty to the new Monarch. In our reading today, many proved to be traitors – plotting against and betraying their true King. But amidst all the plots and betrayal is a beautiful, gentle, quiet scene of deep devotion and lasting loyalty – expressed in costly action.

Jesus added a final comment about the woman who anointed him for his burial. He said, *“Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”*

Sure enough, here we are – almost two thousand years later and almost three thousand miles away, celebrating the good news – and we too our remembering this woman, just as Jesus promised.

Holy Week offers us the opportunity to consider where our loyalties lie. As the journey to the cross continues, we are drawn into the story and must inescapably take sides.

Let’s reflect today on how our daily lives, even in the darkness in which we often live, might more truly reflect our loyalty to our Lord.

Let’s close in prayer, with the words of an ancient prayer for Holy Week:

Almighty God, whose dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Graham will be with us tomorrow and I’ll be back on Easter Day. May the Lord be with you as you watch and wait with him in the coming days.

EASTER DAY

Today, we come to the end of our reflections which have taken us through Holy Week. We have thought of the Coronation of the King of kings, of his reign and rejection. We have seen him crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross. Today, we arrive at his Victory!

All around the world today, Christians will be greeting one another with the traditional words:

Allelujah! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen Indeed! Allelujah!

Please do take the time today to read and ponder on one of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Today, I’m reflecting on Matthew, chapter 28.

Here, we read of a Great Reversal, made manifest in nature itself: a great earthquake, the heavens rent asunder, an angel, visible on earth. An unmovable stone rolled away. The seemingly unassailable guards, shaking with fear, becoming like dead men.

And in this fearful scene, a word of peace is spoken – by the angel, to the women – *“Do not be afraid”*.

It's the greeting for which angels are known within the Gospels. And Good News is spoken – it is spoken of Jesus, the one who was crucified and laid in the tomb: *“He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said”*.

The angel's message delivered, the women leave the tomb, almost as quickly as they had arrived. If they had come with overwhelming grief, they left with a strange mix of emotions: fear, mingled with great joy.

Running to tell the disciples, they heard another greeting. This time, the voice of Jesus himself. They came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

But then, they were on their way again: *“Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to them; “go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*

So, perhaps there is a rhythm to Easter:

- Pondering an Empty Tomb
- Hearing a word of Peace – not simply from an angel, but from the Risen Lord himself
- Drawing near, at his invitation, to worship him
- Then going, at his command, to tell the Good News

And perhaps that strange mix of emotions – fear mingled with great joy – was not for those women alone. Perhaps that is the way it is supposed to be for all of us. On Easter Day, we catch a glimpse of a New Creation, already begun. And yet, we are – though New Creations in Christ – still living within this Old Creation. Our resurrection joy, as great as it is, will never be unmingled, until all Creation is renewed.

So, on this Easter Day, let's celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ with great joy, and let's resolve to live New Creation lives, in the power of the Holy Spirit, shaped by those Resurrection Rhythms:

- Pondering the Empty Tomb
- Hearing the Word of Peace
- Drawing Near to Worship
- And Going, to tell the Good News of our Risen Saviour.

Let's close in prayer:

Most glorious God,
who on this day delivered us
by the mighty resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ,
and made your whole creation new:
grant that we who celebrate with joy
his rising from the dead
may be raised from the death of sin
to the life of righteousness;

through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Thank you so much for joining this devotional journey through Holy Week to Easter Day. May I wish you a very Happy Easter!

Allelujah! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen Indeed! Allelujah!