

# Open Space

SAINT STEPHENS SOUNDWELL

APRIL 2020

## Palm Sunday and Holy Week

LIKE MANY of you, I've celebrated Palm Sunday many times. I know how to shout 'Hosanna!' at the top of my lungs as Jesus makes his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But what I did not know until this week is what the word 'hosanna' actually means.

ALL these years, I thought it meant some churchy version of 'We adore you!'... or 'You rock!' or 'Go, king!' *It doesn't.*

In Hebrew, it means something less adulatory and more desperate.

Less generous and more demanding. It means, 'Save now!'

### Confession:

This year, I approach Holy Week tired, scared, and hungry.

Tired of God's hiddenness or absence, and tired of my own lonely, unsteady heart.

Scared by my own lack of faith at times.

Hungry for a would-be gardener God to find me at the tomb and call my name.

Hungry for a million small and large and ordinary and extraordinary resurrections.

This is me, cloak and palm branches at the ready, waiting with a mile-long list of expectations for a mighty king to come down the mountain and rock my world.

This is the meaning of my Hosanna – **Save now.** Not, 'I love you.' Not, 'Your will be done.' Not, 'I praise you as you are, you gentle, vulnerable, weeping, suffering God.'

**Save now.**

If the Palm Sunday story is about anything, it's a story about disappointed expectations. A story of what happens when the God we want and think we know doesn't show up, and another God – a less efficient, less aggressive, far less muscular God – shows up instead.

When that happens, when our cries of 'save us now' are met with heart-breaking silence, our hosannas go dark and our palm branches wither.

We walk away, we close our hearts, and we deny and betray the image of God in ourselves and in each other. If push comes to shove, our hosannas give way to hatred, and we strike to kill.



Historians tell us that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he asked his disciples to secure a donkey for his journey down the mountain into the holy city. In their compelling book, *'The Last Week: What the Gospels really teach about Jesus' last days in Jerusalem'*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that *two* processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday two thousand years ago; Jesus's was not the only Triumphant Entry.

Every year during Passover – the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000 – the Roman Governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west.

He would come in all of his pomp and imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome demanded their complete loyalty, obedience, and submission.

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### Mission Partners with St Stephens:

Bristol City Centre  
Soup Run  
Bristol/Uganda Link  
Christian Aid  
Community of  
the Sisters of the Church  
Emmaus  
Fair Trade  
One25 Project  
The Bristol Noise

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St Stephens  
SOUNDWELL

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## Palm Sunday and Holy Week

The Jewish people could commemorate their ancient victory over Egypt and slavery if they wanted to, but if they tried any real time resistance, they would be obliterated without a second thought.



As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd.

Unlike the Roman emperor and his legions, who ruled by force, coercion, and terror, Jesus came defenceless and weaponless into his kingship.

Riding on a donkey, he all but cried aloud the bottom-line truth that his rule would have nothing to recommend it but love, humility, long-suffering, and sacrifice.

So often, I think I know exactly what kind of saviour I need.

The saviour of the swift repair, the majestic intervention, the tangible presence, the butter soft landing.

But here's the thing: *that saviour is not Jesus.*



If there is a single day on the liturgical calendar that illustrates the dissonance at the heart of our faith, it is Palm Sunday. More than any other, this festive, ominous, and complicated day of palm branches and hosanna banners warns us that paradoxes we might not like or want are woven right into the fabric of Christianity.

God on a donkey. Dying to live. A suffering king. Good Friday.

These paradoxes are what give Jesus's story its shape, weight, and texture, calling us at every moment to hold together truths that seem bizarre, counterintuitive, and irreconcilable.

On good days, I understand that these paradoxes are precisely what afford my religion its credibility.

If I live in a world that's full of pain, mystery, and contradiction, then I need a religion robust enough to bear the weight of that messy world.

I need a religion that empowers me, in Richard Rohr's beautiful words, 'to live in exquisite, terrible humility before reality.'

But the question is: will I choose the humble and the real? Or will I insist on the delusions of empire?

Will I accompany Jesus on his ridiculous donkey, honouring the precarious path he has chosen?

Or will my impatient and broken hosanna undermine my journey?

Yet, despair and hope travel the road to Jerusalem together... just as they travel every road we take; despair at what we often bring upon ourselves and hope in Him who travels the road with us and for us... the only one not infected with self, and doubt, or complete trust in God.

For those of us who struggle to reconcile the role of God's will in the death of Jesus, Palm Sunday offers us a terrible, beautiful, please pay attention clue: it was the will of God that Jesus declare the coming of God's kingdom.

A kingdom of peace; a kingdom of slow, self-emptying love; a kingdom of radical embrace, radical patience, and radical risk that demands from us a degree of trust, vulnerability, and courage that empire can't even imagine.

In His death, Jesus unflinchingly fulfilled the will of God. He died because he exposed the ungracious sham at the heart of all human kingdoms, holding up a mirror that shocks us at the deepest levels of our imaginations. Even when he knew that his vocation would cost him his life, he set his face 'like flint' towards Jerusalem. Even when he knew who would get the last laugh at Calvary, he mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride.

What, I wonder, would Jesus-on-a-colt have to say about our obsession with ease and efficiency, prosperity and certainty, safety and immunity? Where and how would his parade-of-the-radically-vulnerable speak truth to today's centres of power?

I don't mean for a minute to write glibly, as if the Jesus to whom I daily cry, 'Save now!' doesn't break my heart. He does. Every single time I pray my yearning hosanna and Jesus doesn't give me what I long for, my heart breaks again.

The truth is, I want and I want and I want, so much more than I praise and I praise and I praise.

I know that I'm supposed to love the God-on-a-colt who overturns all my expectations of what divinity should look like and act like.

In theory, I do love him. But in practice, I daily pass him over, train my eyes on the horizon, and hold out hope for the emperor.

In the end, my solace is this: it's not that I hold paradox, it's that paradox holds me. I am held and embraced by a God who is too big for thin, one-dimensional truths—even my own, most cherished, one-dimensional truths. I am held by a God who sticks with me even when I won't stick with him. A God who accepts my worship even when it is mingy, half-baked, and selfish.

A God who knows all the reasons my heart cries, 'Save now!' and carries those broken, strangled cries to the cross for me and with me.

Still. Still the truth is, I am afraid of what lies ahead. Who knows how many deaths lie waiting around the corner? How many sorrows, disappointments, farewells, and jagged endings I or you must face before resurrection comes home to stay?

I can't imagine most of it, and sometimes I can't bear any of it.

But Jesus can. If anything in this Christian story is true, then this must be true as well: Jesus will not leave us alone. There is no death we will die, small or big, literal or figurative, that Jesus will not hold in his crucified arms.

So welcome to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. When we get there, so is our God. There are our hosannas, broken and unbroken, hopeful and hungry. Blessed is the One who comes to die so that we will live.

LISA

# COVID-19

AT THE TIME of writing, we have within hours received guidance from our Archbishops, +Justin and +Sentamu, that our usual pattern of Sunday services and other mid-week gatherings must be put on hold. But, this most certainly does not mean we have stopped being 'Church.'

They have said, 'It has always been the historic vocation of the Church of England to be the church for everyone. William Temple, one of the great Archbishops of Canterbury and York of the last century, is often quoted as saying that we are the one organisation which exists for the benefit of its 'non-members.'

As the challenge of the coronavirus grips the world, and as the Government asks every individual and every organisation to rethink its life, we are now asking the Church of England in all its parishes, chaplaincies & ministries to serve all people in a new way.'

They go on to say, 'Being a part of the Church of England is going to look very different in the days ahead. Our life is going to be less characterised by attendance at church on Sunday, and more characterised by the prayer and service we offer each day.'

We may not be able to pray **with** people in the ways that we are used to, but we can certainly pray **for** people.

And we can certainly offer practical care and support.

Please do carry on supporting the local foodbank and buy extra provisions for it. Ensure the night shelters wherever possible are kept open.

There are many very encouraging schemes happening right across our country in communities to focus on caring for the most vulnerable, so do continue to play your part in those.

Then by our service, and by our love, Jesus Christ will be made known, and the hope of the gospel – a hope that will counter fear and isolation - will spread across our land.'

**'This is a defining moment for the Church of England.'**

Are we truly a church for all, or just the church for ourselves?

We urge you sisters and brothers to become a different sort of church in these coming months: hopeful and rooted in the offering of prayer and praise and overflowing in service to the world.

Please, therefore, join us in this great challenge; and pray for our Government and nation, for each other, and especially for those who work in our health and emergency services.'

Like you, I've followed the development of this 'Coronavirus' story, and as I have, I've been struck by how events like this make the world seem very small.

Events which start off half a world away and seem very remote, can in a very short space of time draw close to home.

Travel to exotic places is (or was, and will be again sometime soon) so much easier and more common than it used to be.

We return home with memories to cherish and expanded horizons – but it's easy for us to bring less desirable mementos too.

The 17th century poet and priest John Donne famously wrote:

**'No man is an island.'**

Sometimes we forget just how connected we are. We need to be sensible and take the public health advice offered (and with due regard to our own vulnerabilities), without becoming unduly anxious.

This current outbreak reminds us of our common humanity, irrespective of national borders, economic or social status, or anything else that usually divides us.

St Paul describes the church as 'the body of Christ' – one body, made of many parts, or members. He says, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it'. (1 COR 12:26).

The same could be said of our world: if part of it suffers, we are all affected. Let's not fear unnecessarily – but let's all play our part in seeking the health and wellbeing of everyone.

With every blessing

**LISA**

## National Day of Prayer & Action

CHURCH leaders in Britain and Ireland have urged Christians to take part in a **NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER AND ACTION** about the coronavirus on **Sunday 22 March**.

People are asked to light a candle in their window at 7pm on Sunday as a visible symbol of the light of life, Jesus Christ.

The call has been issued by the presidents of the ecumenical grouping Churches Together in England: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the RC Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Churches, the CTE president for the Orthodox Churches, and the CTE Pentecostal president.

As well as calling for prayer for the Government and those working to contain the virus, such as health-care workers, and those who are most vulnerable, the statement lists some actions that Christians might take:

'Alongside your prayers, take the opportunity to telephone or email someone who is isolated, buy some additional food for your local foodbank, or offer to deliver shopping for an elderly neighbour.'

## APRIL CYCLE OF PRAYER *BEGINNING SUNDAY OF EACH WEEK*

05	St Stephen's Infant School	Bob and Nancy Emery, Ken Fox Lynn, Bernard & Brett Francis & Louisa Julie, Shaun, Josh & Hollie Fudge	James Road Jubilee Road Lansdown Close
12	St Stephen's Junior School	Matt, Jenny & Lauren Gait Sheila Galsworthy, Pat Garner Brian Grant, Geoff and Joyce Harris	Lansdown Road Larch Road Lees Hill
19	Kings Forest Primary School	Ivor Harris and Teri Young Wayne Harris and Nicholas Topps Ruby Harrison, Carolyn Hawkins	Leicester Square Middle Road Midland Road
26	The Tynings Primary School	James Head, Stella Hoare Mike and Jayne Hudd, Cherilyn Hughes Jean and Barry Hulbert	Morley Close Morley Place Morley Road

## APRIL 2020 DIARY

### REGULAR WEEKLY GROUPS:

TUESDAYS	01.30pm	} <i>Knit &amp; Natter: suspended for the time being</i> <i>See &amp; Know: suspended for the time being</i> <i>(For toddlers &amp; carers)</i> <i>(Term time)</i>
WEDNESDAYS	01.00pm	
THURSDAYS	09.00am	
	01.00pm	

### SERVICES AND OTHER GROUPS/MEETINGS/EVENTS:

**Cancelled until further notice!**



E&OE

## FROM THE REGISTERS

### SINCE FEBRUARY

#### Funerals:

● February 27: **Michele (Mike) Botta** (62). The celebration of Mike's life was held at St Stephen's Church, followed by the Committal at Westerleigh Crematorium.  
*Please hold his partner, Rachel; his children, Pino, Dante, Sofia, Olivia and Max; his brothers, Raf and Gino, as well as Mike's extended family and many friends in your prayers.*

● March 06: **Elaine Mary Cox** (73). The celebration of Elaine's life was held at St Stephen's Church, followed by the Committal at Westerleigh Crematorium.  
*Please hold Elaine's husband, Alan; their two girls, Bernice and Treena, and their families; as well as Elaine's extended family and her many friends in your hearts and prayers.*

● March 09: **Donald Marchant** (89). The celebration of Donald's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium.  
*Please hold his wife, Patsy; his brother, Harold, and their families and all Donald's friends in your prayers.*

● March 13: **Jacqueline Sheppard** (Jackie) (85). The celebration of Jackie's life was held at St Stephens Church.  
*Please hold Jackie's children Gary and Brionny and all the family and friends in your hearts and prayers.*

● March 18: **Betty Courbois** (92). The celebration of Betty's life was held at Westerleigh Crematorium.  
*Please hold her children, Martin, Richard, Hilary and Ian, as well as their families and all Betty's friends in your prayers.*

#### Wedding

● March 7: **David Gray & Lynne Gray** were married at St Stephens.  
*We wish them every happiness in their new life together. Please hold them in your prayers.*

### SAINT STEPHENS SOUNDWELL



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