

Preface¹:

Ride on in Majesty



A Devotional for Lent 2013

There is a Palm Sunday hymn that always grabs me by the throat.

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty! Hark! all the tribes Hosanna cry;
O Savior meek, pursue Thy road
With palms and scattered garments strowed.*

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die!
O Christ! Thy triumph now begin
Over captive death and conquered sin.*

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty! The wingèd squadrons of the sky
Look down with sad and wondering eyes
To see the approaching sacrifice.*

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty! Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh;
The Father, on His sapphire throne,
Expects His own anointed Son.*

*Ride on, ride on, in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, Thy power, and reign².*

The hymn paints a picture of Palm Sunday as a journey. Scripture records a number of journeys:

- Abraham and Isaac heading for Mount Moriah,
- Moses fleeing Egypt to Midian and then back to Egypt,
- God's people, Israel, travelling for forty years to the promised land,
- David fleeing to the wilderness from Saul and later again from Absalom,
- Elijah fleeing to the desert and then to Mount Horeb,
- The return from the Exile,
- And many others...

But what about the Journey of Christ? And not only the journey of Passion Week... What about the Journey toward the cross? What if we could page through the photo-album of this journey over Lent and prepare our hearts for Easter?

That's the hope for this little booklet and my prayer is that we, along with the "wingèd squadrons of the sky" would look with wondering eyes to worship the One who came in "lowly pomp" to "ride on to die." The idea is to immerse ourselves in the words and actions of Christ, riding toward Jerusalem and Cross.

The booklet follows the lent fast days with readings for each day excluding Sundays which are worship and feasting days.

¹ These devotions were written by Theo Groeneveld for the congregations of Emmanuel and Grace Presbyterian. Copies may be made as long as the source is acknowledged.

All quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

² Words: Henry H. Milman, 1820. Music: Hebron, Lowell Mason, 1830

Ride on in Majesty

(1) EXPECTATION AND MISSION. (WED 13 FEB)

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel. (Genesis 3:15)

All journeys start with a plan.
Christ's journey was no exception...

Back in the Garden of Eden – at the point where it all went wrong – there is a promise and a journey road map. Humankind is at war with the serpent, but hope is expressed: There is *One* who will defeat the serpent.

But the *One's* victory would come at a cost – He would be struck. He would suffer. His victory would come at a cost. From the outset, the painful cost of this journey was known – *but He undertook the journey anyway!*

As we begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, we start with this incredible thought from Genesis: In the wake of humankind's plunge into sin, a journey is planned: a human, a descendent of Eve, would walk a painful path to victory over evil.

(2) TRAVELLING INCOGNITO. (THU 14 FEB)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

One hears fairy tales of kings who travel around their countries as beggars to see their kingdom more clearly. But these stories don't come even close to how John describes Jesus' journey.

The word John uses for "Word" is *Logos* and John uses it to describe Jesus' deity in a profound way...

In John's milieu *Logos* meant logic, reason, rationality, principle and meaning. At the beginning of his gospel John reminds us that Jesus, the *Logos*, has been with God from the beginning and that the *Logos* is inextricably connected to the beginning of the world. He is the One and only.

On this Valentine's Day, consider this: Deity pitched a tent in our midst. *Logos* put on skin. The most glorious One travelled incognito.

(3) BIRTH. (FRI 15 FEB)

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

And so the journey begins... Well, it is actually already 9 months along and has been prophesied for centuries. But here in Bethlehem a frightened cry of new born baby and a mother's panting relief breaks the silence of the night and a proud father sits in awe at the responsibility of raising a child.

Already the Christ Child has had a rough ride: Bullied by bureaucracy to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem and forced by the poverty of His parents to be born in a shelter reserved for barnyard animals, the Son of God is found in the form of a helpless baby who is rubbed with salt and swaddled in clothes and nursed and changed like any other baby.

BUT the event is too significant to go entirely under the radar. Outcasts of society (shepherds) and the Elite Thinkers (Magi) are summoned by angels and a star. Their worship and gifts remind us that we dare not miss the magnitude of this moment. The Word has been made *flesh* and indeed dwells among us.

We can sleep in heavenly peace.

(4) CONNECTING TO US. (SAT 16 FEB)

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

In the Jewish Culture of the day, baptism was usually reserved for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. John introduced a new baptism – a baptism of repentance.

But why should Jesus need to be baptized? After all, He was without sin and so He did not need to repent. And why would the baptism be so significant that God would actually speak from heaven when Jesus was baptized?

It is an important question.

The only answer that makes sense is that at the beginning of His ministry Jesus *chose* to be baptised and that this really implied that He, the Sinless One, was identifying Himself with the sinful ones, that is you and me.

The analogy I often use is that it is as if in baptism He was climbing into our dirty bathwater and that our dirt stuck to Him. His baptism indicated the role He would play as our Sin-Bearer.

As you come to Sunday, celebrate the fact that He chose to be our Sin-Bearer.

(5) TEMPTED LIKE US. (MON 18 FEB)

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 2:12-13)

Immediately after the baptism, the Holy Spirit placed Jesus in a place of temptation. As if publicly revealing His intention to be the Sin-Bearer was not enough! But it was vital to show that the Sin-Bearer could not be corrupted by the collective guilt of humanity that rested on His shoulders.

And so Satan tempted Him. Mark's account is brief and wild – it is not a tame encounter. We are reminded that Satan's attack was designed to isolate, expose and intimidate Jesus. But Jesus withstood the temptations and from Matthew and Luke we know that He resisted temptations to be self-sufficient, impressive and powerful. He did this by commitment and obedience to God's Word.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it best: *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Hebrews 4:15-16)

(6) HIS MISSION STATEMENT. (TUE 19 FEB)

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19)

Right at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus attended the synagogue in Nazareth and read this passage, which is known as a Servant Song, from Isaiah 61 and then claimed that this passage was fulfilled in His coming.

Those who heard it were initially impressed and then discounted it because He was so *ordinary*. "Isn't he the carpenter's boy?" "Didn't we watch him growing up?" They judged the book by the cover. They let their expectations be shaped by their experience. They thought that help had to come from far away. They weren't ready for God to work from the inside out!

From the unexpected position of the Word made Flesh, the Son of God had in mind to do something beautiful: Good News, Freedom, Sight, Release and Favour. This was His agenda and His mission!

(7) TRANSFORMING LIVES. (WED 20 FEB)

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken... (Luke 5:8-9)

Right at the beginning of His public ministry Jesus called disciples. His agenda was to transform lives and the way He planned to do that was to let them spend time with Him.

Right at the very beginning, when He had used Peter's boat as a pulpit platform, Jesus invited Peter to deeper water and unconventional obedience: "throw your net on the other side" didn't really make sense as a fishing strategy!!

Peter is profoundly affected – but it more than admiration for Jesus' eloquence or miraculous power – it is the sense that He is in the presence of holiness. We are reminded of Isaiah who sees the Holy Throne of God while he is in the temple and cries "Woe is me – I am undone – I am a man of unclean lips..."

Already transformation has begun and this is what He came to do. Are we ready to let Him touch us?

(8) HIS THREE AREAS OF MINISTRY. (THU 21 FEB)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

From the very beginning Jesus did three all important things:

- He **taught** people about God. We as human beings develop warped pictures of God – Jesus told many parables that corrected these distortions.
- He **preached** the Good News. Jesus revealed God's love and compassion, His message was about a God of grace and mercy not a God of rules and regulations.
- He **healed** the sick. This included delivering people who were demon-possessed. He could break the power of evil and He could restore the broken.

Today the church should still follow in His footsteps: Getting people's pictures of God back on track through winsome and accurate teaching, bringing hope and comfort by preaching and proclaiming God's graciousness towards us and by defeating evil and healing brokenness.

(9) HOW HE HEALED. (FRI 22 FEB)

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (Mark 1:40-42)

Although many were healed by Jesus, this passage gives us a snapshot of a single healing from start to end.

The man had leprosy – a horrible alienating and brutalising disease that robbed people of their health, their dignity and their relationships. The man is desperate. He begs for help. Jesus is filled with compassion – the Greek word for compassion (*splangtha*) implies that and sounds like it comes from the gut: He is oh-so-willing to heal him.

There is good reason that this is the first healing that Mark describes in detail. Leprosy was considered incurable and the Rabbis taught that only the Messiah would be able to heal leprosy. But what is significant here is not *that* the Messiah heals leprosy, but *how* He heals: willingly and compassionately.

(10) HIS TEACHING: SUBVERSIVE. (SAT 23 FEB)

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.
(Matthew 5:3-11)

One of Jesus most famous sermons is the Sermon on the Mount. It starts on an incredibly subversive note. From the outset Jesus is dynamiting preconceived ideas and calcified theologies.

What would your definition of "blessed" be?? We tend to think that being healthy, powerful, successful is to be blessed. But Jesus turns this on its head. Look at His list of blessed people: the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungering, the merciful, the pure, the peacemaking, the persecuted and insulted ones.

Listen to the comfort Jesus offers them: God's Kingdom is Yours; God will comfort you; You will inherit the earth - you will fulfill God's purposes; your hunger will be filled; you will receive mercy; you'll see God; you'll be called God's

Children; and you'll be certain of your heavenly citizenship.

At the very start of His teaching Jesus makes it clear: He has not come for those who have it all together, but for those who struggle and strain.

(11) HIS TEACHING: GETTING TO THE HEART. (MON 25 FEB)

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement..." (Matthew 5:21-22)

When He taught about the Law, Jesus made it clear that He was not going to abolish it but fulfil it (Mt 5:17). When He taught about murder, He pointed to the heart attitudes of hate and disdain. When He taught about adultery, He pointed to the heart attitude of lust. When He talked about oaths, His concern was about basic integrity from within. When He tackled the issue of generosity it had to come from within and not be for show.

The bottom line: He revealed that God is interested in our attitudes and motives and not simply external compliance to laws and rules. He revealed a God who cared about who we *are* not only what we *do*.

(12) HIS TEACHING: REAL PRAYER. (TUE 26 FEB)

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. (Matthew 6:6)

It is in the teaching on prayer that Jesus was incredibly subversive. For the Pharisees and Rabbi's, prayer was a matter of impressing God. It was about praying in public. It was about letting people and God see how pious they were.

Jesus indicates that prayer is a private matter. That God hears us behind closed doors. He gave us the "Our Father" prayer: a prayer of intimate trust that draws us into a trusting relationship with our heavenly Father.

His teaching on prayer, fasting and worrying all carry the same key thought: God is good and you can trust Him:

- He hears our most intimate prayers
- We can ask about basic things like daily bread
- He knows what we need even before we ask Him
- When we fast we should rejoice because we know He is with us.

To have treasures in heaven is to have our eyes on God and not on the things of the earth, to pray is to know that God is good and that He cares about us. To pray is knowing that when we seek we will find and when we knock, the door will open.

(13) HIS TEACHING: THE BOTTOM LINE. (WED 27 FEB)

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." (Matthew 7:24-25)

This parable ends the Sermon on the Mount. It reflects the purpose of Jesus teaching. He did not teach to fill the disciples' heads with knowledge or to sharpen their rhetorical skills – He taught them because He wanted them to build their lives on a different foundation.

This is a real challenge: the other foundation, the sand, is the one we all are tempted to build on. It seems so attractive, so easy, so much the done thing, but it does not last. It will not withstand the storm. Jesus is the Caring Teacher – the One who cares for our long-term well-being more than for our short-term convenience.

But even more significantly, the Rock He wants us to build on is not a set of philosophies or principles. The Rock we build on is our relationship with Him and our understanding of His identity. When Peter confesses that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus calls that confession the Rock on which the Church will be built. We are to build our lives on who Jesus is and all He has taught us.

(14) WHAT DID IT COST HIM? (PART 1) (THU 28 FEB)

Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."²⁰ Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Matthew 8:19-20)

What did it cost Jesus to be with us?

In the verses above we see just one example of the price Jesus paid as He came into our world to be with us.

We could list more:

What was it like

- ...for the Sinless One to be constantly in the presence of sinners?
- ...for the One who created the world to need a nappy change?
- ...for the One who authored the laws of physics to learn ABCs?
- ...for the One who lit the fires of the sun to be tired on a hot day?
- ...to command an army of angels yet have bickering disciples?
- ...to see Your Father misrepresented by religious bigots?
- ...to face the prospect of the trial and the cross?
- ...to be whipped and nailed?
- ...to be separated from the Father?

It cost Him a lot!

(15) WHAT DID IT COST HIM? (PART 2) (FRI 1 MAR)

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

In all likelihood Paul is quoting from an early Christian Hymn that celebrated the sacrifice and exaltation of Christ. The early church grasped and realised that the glory of Christ lay in the sacrifice that He had made.

They were awestruck and humbled at what He did:

- The serpent offered Adam and Eve equality with God and they grasped for it, desperately trying to be something. Jesus chose not to grasp (although it was within His reach) and made Himself nothing.
- They tried to be like God, Jesus made Himself like us.
- They became disobedient whereas He remained obedient.
- The only similarity between Adam & Eve and Jesus is death. They deserved death and He chose death to set them free.

(16) WHAT SUSTAINED HIM? (SAT 2 MAR)

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.
(Mark 1:35)

This is one of many occasions where the Gospel Writers give us a glimpse of our Lord's devotional life. In view of the price He paid and the enormity of His mission, Jesus found and made time to pray.

Solitude and prayer were foundational to His journey. He prayed before choosing disciples – spending the night in prayer. He prayed early in the morning before days of healing and teaching the masses. His prayers prompted Him to move from one region to another. He prayed over the sick and He prayed over the five loaves and two fish. He prayed for Peter who would later deny Him. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, courageously aligning Himself to the Father's will.

He was sustained by a prayerful relationship with His Father. So should we...

(17) LIFE AND SOUL OF THE PARTY... (MON 4 MAR)

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and `sinners'?" ¹⁷On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
(Mark 2:16-17)

Jesus called Levi, the Tax Collector, to be a disciple. Levi threw a party for his friends so that they could meet Jesus. They were a sorry bunch. Tax Collectors weren't popular and so they didn't have too many friends who were upstanding citizens.

It is significant that Jesus didn't only socialise with the "sterilised" (those who washed their hands and limited their social interactions to those who were also "spotless.") Jesus chose to connect with the broken and bruised – the outcasts and those who had failed. Among His inner-circle were folk who had been prostitutes, tax-collectors, zealots (subversive political activists) and fishermen. The Pharisees were mistaken – they had missed their failure : self-righteous pride that prevented them from recognising the light and love that shone from Jesus. The tax-collectors and sinners saw themselves and Jesus a little more clearly...

(18) CELEBRATING LOVE. (TUE 5 MAR)

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. (John 2:1-2)

We know the story: They ran out of wine for the wedding feast and Jesus turned water into wine. But here are a few stunning thoughts:

1. Jesus and His disciples were invited. The passage implies that the twelve had already been chosen. Jesus must have been an amazing person if the couple felt comfortable to invite Him and His friends. (Maybe the 12 extra mouths caused them to run out of wine!)
2. Jesus took ceremonial cleansing water (representing the Law and salvation by works) and turned it into wine (representing life and fullness.) He made plenty of it and it was really good.
3. When His mother, Mary, intercedes for the couple in their wine shortage, Jesus answers that His time has not come, but makes wine anyway... why is that? It is because He has two weddings in mind: the one before Him and the one involving the Church as the bride and Himself as the Groom. The wine needed for the second wedding would be the wine of the new covenant – His blood.

Jesus was welcome at the wedding because of the warm person He was. He made wine for the wedding celebrating the couple's love, but it was a poignant moment for Him as He considered the price to be paid for His Bride.

(19) ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS #1: SEEING OUR HEARTS. (WED 6 MAR)

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." ⁴⁸Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." (John 1:47-49)

Nathanael was sceptical – His friend Philip was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, but Nathanael knew that the scriptures didn't say much about Nazareth. (Nazareth was Israel's equivalent of Pofadder!)

As he got closer, Jesus complimented him on his integrity. This just heightened the reading on Nathanael's fake-o-meter – he thought Jesus was just buttering him up with flattery.

Then Jesus gobsnacks him with simple statement: "I saw you under the fig tree..." Now what is so special about that? Why is Nathanael so impressed? The answer lies in understanding that fig trees provided really cool shade in the heat of the day and that it was a popular place to pray. It is very likely that just before Philip arrived, Nathanael was praying about the Messiah – that he was longing for the Messiah's coming. Jesus is using code language – He is telling Nathanael that God has heard His prayers and that the answer is standing before him.

Nathanael worships spontaneously – He knows the Messiah sees our hearts and longings and that He hears us when we pray.

(20) ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS #2: GOD SO LOVED. (THU 7 MAR)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Nicodemus was a Pharisee with doubts and questions. He came to see Jesus at night. Jesus is extremely blunt with Nicodemus – He doesn't beat about the bush. "You must be born again!" But Nicodemus doesn't understand.

So Jesus tells a story Nicodemus knew: How Moses had a bronze serpent lifted on a pole which became the substitutionary healer of the people of Israel when they were bitten by sin-deserved serpents in their camp.

And then Jesus reveals that He will be lifted up – that He will be the substitute. After telling the story, Jesus puts it even more plainly: this is about Love. It's about a Love that gives, a Love that offers life, a Love that rescues and saves.

Nowhere else in the gospels is the message as clearly articulated to an individual than it is to Nicodemus – later we see Nicodemus making a vague effort to defend Jesus before the rest of the Pharisees and we see him helping Joseph of Arimithea get Jesus buried in the tomb. We don't know what decision he made...

But we know this: with urgent, complex and compelling argument, Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to believe... How passionate are we for the lost?

(21) ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS #3: THIRSTY? (FRI 8 MAR)

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ... ²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way toward him...

(John 4:7-30)

Jews and Samaritans hated each other. Normally true blue Jews walked around Samaria, but Jesus went through Samaria. He rested at a well in the heat of the day when no-one would expect to find anyone at the well.

But someone came. A broken and shamed Samaritan woman. She'd had five husbands who abandoned her and she was with a sixth guy who wouldn't even marry her. She is confused about men, about God, and about worship. Jesus asks her for a drink of water – which leads to a conversation. At first she is playful maybe even flirty, but the conversation soon leads to deeper topics: Spiritual thirst, living water, repentance, worship and the Messiah.

Toward the end of the encounter the woman says: "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." What she is really saying is "Please let it be You!" And Jesus affirms this. The encounter ends with an abandoned water jar: she has experienced love, grace and acceptance in a way that has her rushing to the townspeople she had been avoiding and saying "Come and See!" When we take time to see His love and acceptance for us – no matter who we are and what we have done – we know: He really is the Saviour.

(22) ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS #4: PENETRATING. (SAT 9 MAR)

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" ⁷ "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." (John 5:5-8)

Legend had it that when the waters of the pool of Bethesda were supernaturally stirred, the first one in was healed. As a result a mass of broken humanity gathered around the pool.

The man at the pool had been sick for a long time. Jesus asks him a penetrating question: "Do you want to be well?" The man answers with excuses... Then Jesus heals him, but the rest of the passage shows how the healed man gets into trouble for carrying his mat on a Sabbath and blames Jesus. First he blamed no one for helping him, now he blames the One who healed him.

Jesus meets up with him and warns him to embrace his healing and to stop sinning (playing the blame game.) Our Saviour is interested in more than simply healing bodies – He wants to heal souls too!

(23) CALMING THE STORM (MON 11 MAR)

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴ Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" ²⁶ He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. (Matthew 8:23-26)

Matthew uses the Greek word "*seismos*" to describe the storm. For a landlubber tax-collector not used to sailing it must have seemed like an earthquake in the water! It was a storm that even scared the experienced fishermen among them.

Jesus deals with the storm as though it were a naughty child. While Matthew doesn't recount Jesus actual words, Mark does: "Be quiet! Be Still!" And the disciples are amazed at His authority over nature.

But I am intrigued about something else... Why was He asleep? Was He tired? I think so. But I think there is more to it than that. He slept because He knew that He was in the Father's hands and He could handle whatever came His way. Sometimes I lie awake at night, worrying about things that scare and challenge me... It helps me to remember that He is in my boat and that He is asleep – secure in His power and the Father's love – and when the storm needs stilling He'll do it. And then I can sleep too...

(24) ANOTHER STORM (TUE 12 MAR)

When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. (Mark 5:2-3)

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has just calmed the storm and got out of the boat. There they are met by a human storm: A man ravaged so by evil that he lived among the tombs, was untameable, crying out and cutting himself with stones. A man trapped in a darkness of thousands of voices calling for his self-destruction.

What brought him from the tombs to meet Jesus? If we read on, we see that the demons in the man know who Jesus is and understand the power He has over them. So the question is: "If the demons were afraid of Jesus, why did the man come to meet Jesus? Why not run away?"

The answer to this question gives us a stunning insight: The troubled man, recognising that there was something that frightened the demons, knew that he needed to get to One the demons feared. When he gets there, the demons beg Jesus to let them go into the nearby herd of pigs. Jesus allows them to do this because it reveals their true colours – the demons lead the pigs in a mass suicide run over the cliff and into the sea. Satan comes to steal, kill and destroy, but Jesus the Messiah sets captives free!!

(25) HIS AMAZING PATIENT LOVE (WED 13 MAR)

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³ But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6:32-34)

Jesus has had a busy and emotional time: He has heard about the beheading of John the Baptist, His disciples have returned from the 2-by-2 preaching trip He had sent them on and Mark tells us that the crowds were keeping them so busy, they did not even have time to eat. He wanted some quiet time in a quiet place.

We can understand – John the Baptist was his relative and probably the only person alive who really understood who He was... The disciples were giddy with their experiences and needed debriefing. They needed quiet, they needed space.

But it was not to be... The crowd worked out where He was going – and got there ahead of Him. He could have been irritated, after all, He had earned some time out! But with incredible love and commitment Jesus acts from His heart – He reaches out to them with gracious love, care and compassion. And He teaches them and then, because they are far out in the countryside, He feeds them too. In this passage we meet a Saviour who always has time for us!

(26) SHEPHERD DEFINITION (THU 14 MAR)

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me- ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-and I lay down my life for the sheep.(John 10:2-15)

The shepherd image is one of the most important frameworks for understanding God's dealings with humanity. David uses it in Psalm 23, the prophets use shepherd imagery, Jesus applies the shepherd title to Himself and yesterday we saw Him acting as a shepherd.

John 10 reveals some important aspects of this image:

- He enters by the gate – He does what is right – He is holy and good.
- The watchman opens the gate – The prophets foretold Him
- He knows the sheep, He calls them by name and they recognise Him
- He lays down His life for the sheep.

I love to read this passage alongside Ps 23...

(27) SHEPHERD (AND OTHER) PARABLES (FRI 15 MAR)

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ... (Luke 15:3)

The Triplet of Parables in Luke 15 are called the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. These titles concentrate on that which was lost and end up putting the emphasis in the wrong place. Maybe we should call them the *Searching Shepherd*, the *Ransacking Maiden* and the *Running-to-embrace-Father*.

Luke notes that Jesus told these parables to a group that contained many people who were far from God (Luke 15:1-2) These parables are about finding
- A Shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for his one lost sheep!
- A Maiden who moves and sweeps everything to find the coin!
- The Father who looks out for and runs to his returning son!

These three beautiful parables tell us what God is like. The parables invite us to get into the skin and thoughts of the shepherd, maiden and father and experience their longing, their love and their joy at finding. What is God like? Look at the face of Jesus as He tells you these three beautiful stories and you will know.

(28) SABBATH SHENANIGANS (SAT 16 MAR)

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28)

Jesus was always getting into trouble with the Pharisees for transgressing their Sabbath regulations. Fanatical Observance of the Sabbath had become the icon of Jewishness. The Pharisees had developed hundreds of rules about the Sabbath. The observance of these rules gave them status and power. Status when they were seen to observe the Sabbath and power when they could prosecute those who "transgressed."

A very high percentage of Jesus' miraculous healings landed Him in hot water because He performed them on the Sabbath. On this particular occasion Jesus' disciples had walked through a grain field where they'd idly picked some grain heads to nibble at. The legalists pounced and Jesus rebutts: "You've got this back to front! The Sabbath is there to *serve* people and *not* to enslave them."

This damaged people's perception of God. The day of rest God had given to Adam and Eve had become a hard day of rule-keeping in the Pharisees' hands. A day to remember the Creator had become a cruel taskmaster and pretty soon a Sabbath-keeper would have to think of God as pedantic and hard to please. Sabbath Legalism angered and distressed Jesus (Mark3:4) By choosing to heal and do miracles on the Sabbath, Jesus was hijacking the legalists... It was as though He was saying: "Now *this* is what the Sabbath-giving God is like!"

(29) JESUS AND THE KIDS (MON 18 MAR)

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Mark 10:13-14

When looking at this passage, people concentrate on the importance of kids. Children need to be loved, protected, brought to and taught about Christ. I have no quarrel with this sentiment. Others concentrate on the qualities of children that Jesus invites us to emulate: their trusting nature, their readiness to believe and to willingness to act on that belief. Again, I have no quarrel with that.

But what about the wonderful thought that people *wanted* their kids to be near and with Jesus and that they *wanted* Him to bless them? What do we do with the lovely story of the kids who are dancing and singing around Jesus on Palm Sunday? And look at the little boy with the loaves and fishes – he was lining up to share his lunch with Jesus!

Children are born with fake-o-meters. They can smell a fake a mile away. The fact that Jesus was inundated by children and their parents tells me that He was real, warm and safe and the children *loved* being with Him.

(30) COMPLETING HER HEALING. (TUE 19 MAR)

²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." ²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. ³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:27-30)

This woman had suffered greatly and had exercised great and risky faith. She had a condition of continuous bleeding. Jewish ceremonial laws declared women to be unclean during menstruation. This made her permanently unclean – any one who touched her was made unclean and she was not allowed to go to the temple. Her condition left her physically weak, socially disconnected and spiritually alienated.

Jesus was rushing to heal Jairus' daughter and so one has to wonder why Jesus stopped and asked "Who touched my clothes?" This meant that she would have to reveal her story and risk Jesus and the crowd being angry with her because whoever she touched while still sick would have been "unclean." But Jesus doesn't want to embarrass her, He wants to affirm her. He wants to complete her healing. He wants her to experience the love she had been missing and end the alienation she had felt: So He looks her in the eye: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. *Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.*"

Jesus wanted to heal the whole person: Body, Soul and Spirit. Healing only her body would have been a job half done – He loved her too much to do that.

(31) LAZARUS (WED 20 MAR)

Jesus wept. John 11:35

Most of us know the story of Lazarus, but let's review the main points:

- Lazarus was sick and his sisters requested Jesus to come and heal him.
- Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters but He deliberately delayed going
- Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus was dead but that he would be raised
- He chose to arrive at the point that death was considered irreversible
- He comforts Martha and Mary individually
- He goes to the graveside and raises Lazarus from the dead.

Wait a minute! There's one detail left out... Just two words, two simple words that don't make sense at all! Why did Jesus weep? He knew that the story was going to have a happy ending, He knew that in a moment or two He was going to call Lazarus out of the grave – so why does He weep? It just doesn't fit!

There are two reasons that the Son of God weeps here at Lazarus' tomb: Firstly His tears reveal His incredible compassion for Mary and Martha and their friends. He feels their pain and sadness – He weeps *with* them. Secondly His tears reveal His frustration at the grip that death has over humanity – He sees everyone defeated, demoralised and dispirited by death and through His tears He commands: "Roll away that stone!"

(It's important to note that this miracle is the tipping point in the conflict with the Pharisees: John 11:53 tells us "So from that day on they plotted to take his life.")

(32) TRANSFIGURATION. (THU 21 MAR)

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:28-31)

The self-designation that Jesus used most often in the gospels was "Son of Man." This title emphasised His humanity – He was the Word made **Flesh**. The Transfiguration takes us to the other title that was rightfully His: " *Son of God*" - He was the **Word** made Flesh. The timing of the Transfiguration is significant as Jesus has resolutely turned His face toward Jerusalem.

In the events that would follow, the disciples' understanding of Jesus and His mission would be severely tested. They would see Him arrested, tried, tortured, humiliated and killed. It would be difficult to see beyond His humanity.

The transfiguration is an important balancing experience: The dazzling white appearance spoke of His holiness, deity and glory. The presence of Elijah and Moses confirmed that He was the long-awaited Messiah and more than just a carpenter from Nazareth. The encounter would end with God the Father speaking from heaven: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him."

(33) DETERMINATION! (FRI 22 MAR)

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. (Mark 10:32)

This passage always gives me the chills. They're heading for Jerusalem. It is now common knowledge that the Pharisees and Saducees (I call them the "religious mafia") want Jesus dead.

Conventional wisdom would tell one to lie low, to ease up a bit, to take up guerilla tactics, to operate from the shadows. But Jesus doesn't lie low, He doesn't stay under the radar. He is resolute!

On more than one occasion He has told the disciples that the Son of Man would be arrested and crucified. Maybe at those times the disciples may have felt that Jesus was being overly negative and pessimistic, that the pressure was just getting to Him, that He had a persecution complex. But now they are astonished and even afraid. He isn't drifting along the road while chatting to the disciples. He isn't stopping to smell the roses... they can barely keep up with Him! Jesus is route-marching to Jerusalem – He is determined – He is deliberate – He has an appointment at Golgotha – He has a job to do – and nothing is going to stop Him!

(34) HIS GREAT LOVE. (SAT 23 MAR)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34)

Jerusalem: The symbol of God's people who should have been a light to all the world, but for Jesus the place where He would be betrayed and killed. Yet the gospels reveal that Jesus wept over this city on more than one occasion. This account in Luke's gospel is fairly early in Jesus' ministry, but on Palm Sunday (which is tomorrow) Jesus would weep over the city again.

His tears reveal an incredibly beautiful picture of the intensity of God's love for us. The image of the mother-hen reveals the intimate relationship He would have with us. The pain of rejection is expressed with such sadness – but with such clarity: Jesus isn't concentrating on His pain as the Rejected One, He is seeing how their rejection has cost them. Their rejection of Him means that they are chicks who have chosen to do without the protecting wings of the hen.

(This booklet doesn't provide devotions for Sundays but for Palm Sunday it is recommended that you read the hymn in the preface slowly and thoughtfully...)

(35) THE FIG TREE AND THE TEMPLE. (MON 25 MAR)

Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. (Mark 11:13-14)

What did the poor fig tree do? Why did Jesus curse it? To understand this fully, we need to get the sequence of events:

- On Palm Sunday (yesterday) Jesus stopped off at the temple but it was late and so went to Bethany where He stayed the night.
- The next day, Jesus is on His way to the temple and sees the fig tree in leaf. He is hungry and the tree in leaf should have had lots of little buds which, although they weren't figs, were edible and promised a good crop of figs.
- Jesus goes to the temple and overturns the money changer tables and chases out the traders, because they have desecrated the only place in the temple where a Gentile could pray.

Jesus came to the temple on Sunday and was heart-achingly disappointed at what He saw there. It was a beautiful building but there were traders and money-changers when there should have been pray-ers. The next day the fig-tree disappoints in the same way, it looked good but offered nothing of substance. Then Jesus drives people out of the temple. This is not an act of temper, but deliberate action – He has no time for showy religion and empty promises. The next day the tree is withered and dead – this is what happens with hypocrisy.

(36) VITAL QUESTIONS (TUE 26 MAR)

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: `Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: `Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

When people are terminally ill, those around them make the most of every conversation – they do their best to hear the last words of the person who is dying. There is an urgency in Jesus during this final week – He is not doing many healings – He is teaching. He is clarifying people's picture of God. He is doing all He can to help them be clear about God's nature and what God requires.

What does God require of us? Is it many rituals, laws and traditions? What do we have to do to please Him? Is it Sabbath day observance, kosher food and gentile avoidance? How are we to understand all the Old Testament laws? What holds it all together?

Jesus answer is incisive: It is love. Love for God, and love for people. By the end of the week He will show His love for God by saying: "Not my will but Yours" and He will show His love for us by laying down His life for His friends.

(37) PLEADING IN PRAYER (WED 27 MAR)

And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:44)

Jesus ate the Last Supper with His disciples. It was the Passover Meal which commemorated the rescue of the Israelites and the sparing of the first born through the blood of passover lambs. Ironically Jesus now offers them salvation and rescue through the death and sacrifice of God's first-and-only Son.

They walked in the evening quietness to the Garden and Jesus talked to them about being the Vine onto which they would be grafted as branches. That they could have life and abundance while being connected to Him.

Now it all comes to a head. Now the Lamb and Only Son must choose the will of the Father so that He can be the Vine. Now He must say yes to the cross. He had a choice – He could choose. The choice was not easy – hellish pain and abandonment lay ahead of Him. The temptations of the forty days in the wilderness come back to test and tempt Him. He is in agony – the weight of humanity's collective guilt is being placed on His shoulders – He must carry it as surely as He will carry the wooden cross on which His body will be hung.

When people are under great stress, their blood pressure increases and tiny capillaries under the skin burst, and sweat carries the blood through the pores. He sweated blood. This is not a cameo moment, there is no fake drama here. Jesus must choose... and the Only Son chooses to die, to be the Vine and the Lamb.

(38) IN FULL CONTROL (THU 28 MAR)

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"⁵ "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.)⁶ When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. (John 18:4-6)

The events as described by John would be comical if we didn't know where it was all going. When Jesus replies, He literally says "I, I am He." Anybody familiar with the Old Testament and Moses and the Burning Bush would recognise the significance of the "I am." Jesus is identifying Himself as God and as He does so His glory is revealed (this happened to the priests when God's glory came into Solomon's Temple) and the soldiers collapse on the ground and Jesus has to ask them again who they are looking for and He hands himself over to them instructing them to let His disciples go.

Jesus is not a helpless victim – He is the willing Lamb.

- He knows what is going to happen and goes out to meet them, taking initiative
- He invites Judas to betray Him: "Friend, do what you came for." (Mt.26:50)
- He negotiates the release of the disciples
- He heals the ear Peter chopped off and stops all resistance to the arrest
- He Peter that He could summon a legion of angels to save them.

He chooses the cross and lets nothing get in the way – This is our God!

(39) THE ENORMOUS PRICE (GOOD FRIDAY)

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

How does one even begin to do justice to Good Friday in a few paragraphs? The physical suffering was cruel: unbelievably cruel. Historians tell us that not many people survived a Roman flogging. Medical doctors have described crucifixion as a diabolical symphony of pain. Yet Jesus refused the narcotic of wine-gall that was offered Him.

The spiritual suffering was even worse. At the sixth hour the skies darkened and Jesus cried out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" This was the moment at which the full-penalty of our sin came upon Him – He who had been one with the Father and Spirit from eternity and to eternity was separated, cut off from God – He experienced Hell (eternity-without-God) for all of us. In earth time it was only three hours, but spiritually it was my eternity-without-God and your eternity-without-God and every other human being's eternity-without-God.

That's what He carried on the cross, and at the end of the ninth hour He offers a triumphant cry - "It is finished!" The Greek word is "*Tetelestai*." It is a judicial and commercial word which meant that the sentence had been served, that the debt had been paid! **It is done!** Our guilt has been paid for. Now all that remains is for physical death to be defeated and so, in full control, Jesus surrenders His Spirit – choosing to die physically so that physical death can be defeated too. What an incredible Saviour!

(40) OUT FOR THE COUNT? (EASTER SATURDAY)

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:24)

In his song, "The Champion", the gospel singer Carman Licardello uses the analogy of a boxing match between Jesus and Satan to explain the crucifixion (he takes some poetic licence but I think it makes the point) and I can think of no better way to end these devotionals than by quoting a part of his song to whet your appetite for tomorrow's celebration...

Forty days and nights they fought, and Satan couldn't touch Him. Now the final blow saved for the final round. Prophetically Christ's hands came down and Satan struck in vengeance! The blow of death felled Jesus to the ground.

The devils roared in victory! The saints shocked and perplexed as wounds appeared upon His hands and feet. Then Satan kicked Him in His side, and blood and water flowed. And they waited for the 10 count of defeat... God the Father turned His head, His tears announcing Christ was dead! The 10 count would proclaim the battle's end.

Then Satan trembled through his sweat in unexpected horror, yet... As God started to count by saying, 10...9... 8... 7...

Have an awesome celebration of Resurrection tomorrow: He is our CHAMPION!

If you have found these devotions meaningful, you can make a donation to Janice Taylor, a missionary supported by our congregation.

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