

Circuit service for March 28th 2021: “Let the land produce living creatures and let us make humankind in our image”

Prepared by Jon Skeet and Gerry Duggan

Call to worship

Welcome to worship, wherever you are, however you are worshipping. Our combined worship is better because you are here, actively celebrating and sharing God’s unconditional love.

In this last Sunday in Lent, we are thinking about the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his sacrifice of love on Good Friday, and God’s creation of animals and humans in Genesis... along with all the previous days of creation we’ve considered over the past five weeks.

What links all of that? Relationships – or, to use a more active word, relating. How do we relate to Jesus as he rides on a donkey? How do we relate to Jesus as he hangs on the cross? How do we relate to animals? How do we relate to the earth in all its beauty and precarious abundance?

We open our worship, approaching God by “making way” – putting Jesus first in our lives.

Hymn: StF 264 Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives

Author: Graham Kendrick CCLI: 121074

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK6XuYhL7JI>

Alternative: H&P 162, “Trotting, trotting”

1. Make way, make way, for Christ the King
in splendour arrives;
Fling wide the gates and welcome Him
Into your lives

Chorus

*Make way (Make way), make way (make way)
for the King of kings (for the King of kings);
make way (make way), make way (make way)
and let his Kingdom in.*

2. He comes the broken hearts to heal,
the prisoners to free;
the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance,
the blind shall see.

Chorus

3. And those who mourn with heavy hearts,
who weep and sigh,
with laughter, joy and royal crown
he’ll beautify.

Chorus

4. We call you now to worship him
as Lord of all,
to have no gods before him,
their thrones must fall!

Chorus

Reading 1

Our first reading tells the story of Palm Sunday – of a crowd relating to Jesus in praise and blessing, as Jesus relates to them in humility, riding on a donkey.

Reading: John 12:12-19

Palm Sunday reflection

Hello. I'm Gerry Duggan and I'm standing in solitude in the vestibule of the Methodist Church in Tilehurst.

For the past five weeks we've been taken on a journey using Ruth Valerio's book 'Saying Yes to Life' in which she writes that for too long the theology and practice of caring for people and the planet have been side lined in the Christian faith and her prayer is that her book will play a small part of bringing them to the centre and root them firmly in our Churches and Christian lives.

This week is the final chapter. It also coincides with Palm Sunday: the Sunday before Easter when we celebrate Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

I want to reflect on the version of the events as they are recorded in John's gospel in chapter 12 verses 12-19.

John reflects on Jesus' triumphant entry to Jerusalem by telling us that on hearing that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem people took branches of palm-trees and went out to meet him shouting:

Praise God!

God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord!

God bless Israel.

I found myself imagining what it would have been like to have been in the crowd. Now, to understand why there were so many people waiting for Jesus, it might be helpful to know that some of the people who lived in Jerusalem had recently been in the town of Bethany which is about two miles away. And had witnessed Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life again.

The buzz of this as the news spread, would have been quite sensational. And then to hear that Jesus was planning to travel to Jerusalem would have caused an even greater stir. But, it wasn't all positive. The Pharisees certainly weren't pleased and in verse 19 the threat of how many people are following Jesus is clearly felt as they said "You see, we are not succeeding at all! Look, the whole world is following him!"

Just to pick up on the atmosphere at the time, the gospels don't give a detailed description, but using some imagination, it would have been noisy and a little bit chaotic. There wouldn't have been much room between people and there was probably a bit of jostling to get a good view and I'm sure in the heat of the day there would have been a few choice smells as well.

There may have been some people who tried to get a better view and climbed the trees that lined the road, this may have dislodged some palm branches, which were gathered up by those below and placed in Jesus' path as he rode past them.

Having just had a year without being able to be amongst large groups of people this may stir different emotions for us now.

So the significance of the palm comes from the fact that people threw them on the floor as Jesus passed by to line the way. They didn't have a red carpet in those days, but I feel it's the rustic equivalent. They recognised Jesus as being the Son of God which their praise and adoration reflects. They'd seen the miracle performed on Lazarus and wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus, to see him with their own eyes. I'm pretty sure, had I been there, I would have been just as curious.

Palm Sunday is a complex Sunday for Christians. Whilst this brief recollection of the events around Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem mostly conjures images of happiness and joy of marvel and wonder, we also feel the undercurrent of the mood amongst the Pharisees and members of Herod's followers, that will continue to spiral as we lead into the drama of Holy Week.

Prayer

Loving Lord Jesus - there are times Lord, when the strong voice we have when we're part of a crowd, suddenly becomes small and inaudible when we are alone. Jesus, forgive us for the times when we've not had the courage to speak up.

We are sorry Lord for the times when perhaps we have doubted ourselves and lacked confidence to speak up for what we believe in. Jesus, be our protector and our guide.

Thank you, Jesus, for the amazing example you showed us of how much you love us, despite all our faults and flaws. We will remember this week the sacrifice you made for us, the ultimate sacrifice as a result of your unconditional love for each and every one of us. For those who have lived, for everyone who is living now and even for those whose life has not yet begun.

We humbly offer this prayer to you loving Lord Jesus.

Amen

Reading 2

Our second reading continues the Genesis creation story we have been following over Lent. This is the sixth day, the final day of creation before God rests on the seventh day.

Reading: Genesis 1:24-31

Prayer of adoration

God of the donkey, of the palm branch, of the crowds; God of livestock and of wild animals; God who created us to live in harmony with your creation: we praise you. We marvel at the wonder of your creation, and agree – it is *very good*. We thank you for placing us within this miracle; for giving us the task of caring for this part your enormous universe.

We praise you for creating humans in your image, so that we may glimpse your glory in each person we meet, and stand on holy ground in each encounter.

Following the example of Jesus, we kneel before you, offering ourselves in humble service to you, O Lord and King.

Amen

Our next hymn celebrates creation, and echoes the Genesis reading in reminding us that God "made all things well" – including us! "God saw all that God had made, and it was very good." It's easy to forget that God doesn't just love us in spite of our flaws, but God celebrates us for being exactly who we are, made in God's image. We are included as bright, beautiful, wise, wonderful. We are not set apart from the rest of creation – we take our part *in* creation.

Sometimes “All things bright and beautiful” is talked about a little dismissively, but perhaps it holds more depth than we give it credit for. Between this, “Once, in royal David’s city” and “There is a green hill far away,” Cecil Frances Alexander has made the most important aspects of Christianity accessible to all.

Hymn: StF 100 / H&P 330: All Things Bright and Beautiful

Author: Cecily Frances Alexander

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HyWkC64X08>

*All things bright and beautiful,
all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful,
the Lord God that made them all.*

The cold wind in the winter,
the pleasant summer sun,
the ripe fruits in the garden,
he made them every one:

1. Each little flower that opens,
each little bird that sings,
he made their glowing colours,
he made their tiny wings.

3. He gave us eyes to see them,
and lips that we might tell,
how great is God Almighty,
who has made all things well.

2. The purple heathered mountains,
the river running by,
the sunset, and the morning
that brightens up the sky.

Alternative: Lovely Jubby, by Doug Horley: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Juw0TpaOM>

Reading 3

Our third reading tells of the death of Jesus. But Jesus is not the only person present. Think about how each person in the reading relates to Jesus. The person mocking him; the centurion recognising his divinity at last; the women, both named and unnamed. What was each of them feeling? How would they carry that moment into the rest of their lives? How did it affect their relationships with other people, and their relationships with God?

Reading: Mark 15:33-41

Prayer of relating

God has blessed us with the gift of prayer as one of the ways we can relate to God. We pray in concern for others, in confession, in thanks, in awe, wonder, and praise... and in conversation; in dialogue. This prayer is the heart of today’s act of worship, putting the way we relate with God, each other, and our planet at the centre of our thoughts and lives.

We remember that we do not pray *to* God – we enter a time of prayer *with* God. We reflect that we are in a holy space. Let us pray.

God, you have invited us into a relationship with yourself, from the moment of our creation. You have saved us from the flood, led us through the wilderness, been present in our exile, and called us to your Holy places. You have shown your love to us in the crucified and risen Christ, grown your church from mustard seeds to spreading vines. We need you in our individual lives, in our families, and in our church – your church. We want you at the heart of all we do, think, and say. We ask for your Spirit of wisdom and inspiration.

At the same time, we acknowledge those times we have turned our faces away from your love. We think of the times our actions *within* your church, and *as* your church, have hurt others. We are sorry for every time

we thought that relating well with you somehow meant abandoning those you created in your image. Please help us repair what we have damaged in your name, and let us see others through your loving eyes.

Pause

God, creator of all people, we pray for individuals and communities. We ask for your guidance for those making decisions affecting millions, particularly thinking of the Covid-19 pandemic. We pray that this time of global crisis may help us to value our connections with each other, recognising our shared humanity. Help us see the impact we have on each other, acting on your call to love our neighbour as ourselves. May we be self-giving, just as Jesus gave himself for us.

We thank you for those who have chosen a path of service: for those who look after our health; those who keep us safe; those who volunteer; those who serve through political leadership. We ask that you help us to value that service, individually and as a society.

Pause

God, creator of all things, we marvel at your universe. Help us to recognise and value your handiwork as we relate to our planet in everyday life. As today we think particularly of the creatures of the world, we reflect on the times we have not been the good stewards you asked us to be. We think of the many species driven to extinction by our shared greed, and the farm animals mistreated in the cause of efficiency. Help us to be aware of the impact of our actions on your creation.

We look back on the last five weeks, and consider light, earth, sea, sky, water, plants, fish and birds. God who connects all things, we ask for your insight into how to compromise our needs with those of the planet. May we feel your urgency in restoring balance to nature, taking hard decisions to reverse the damage we have done through climate change, pollution, deforestation and more. May we follow as your Spirit leads.

Amen

Hymn: StF 727 / H&P 343: [God in his love for us lent us this planet](#)

Author: Fred Pratt Green CCLI: 2564065

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4AeZoZatu8>

1. God in his love for us lent us this planet,
gave it a purpose in time and in space:
small as a spark from the fire of creation,
cradle of life and the home of our race.
2. Thanks be to God for its bounty and beauty,
life that sustains us in body and mind:
plenty for all, if we learn how to share it,
riches undreamed of to fathom and find.
3. Long have our human wars ruined its harvest;
long has earth bowed to the terror of force;
long have we wasted what others have need of,
poisoned the fountain of life at its source.
4. Earth is the Lord's: it is ours to enjoy it,
ours, as his stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollution, misuse, and destruction,
good Lord, deliver us, world without end!

God, present in all connections

My home office has cables everywhere. I don't claim to have done a good job in keeping them tidy, but at least my desk is reasonably clear. The cables themselves don't look like much, but they enable everything else to work together. What use is a webcam if it's not connected to anything? Or a microphone? Or a monitor? Some of my gadgets can work – at least for a time – without being plugged into anything, but everything is more useful when it's connected to something else.



I'm a software engineer, and in computing we've recognised the value of relationships for a very long time. A huge proportion of the information in the world is stored in *relational databases*. A relational database links pieces of information together. For example, a street address isn't very useful on its own – but when it's linked to information about a person, which might then be linked to an online shopping order, that's when things start to become interconnected. In this respect, I think computing has accidentally revealed a glimpse of God.

Principles of good relating

God existed before all things – so God clearly *can* exist without relating to anything else. But God chose not to leave things that way. I was struck by this quote from Thomas Finger, in the first chapter of "Saying Yes to Life": "God was the only reality there was. Creation could only happen, therefore, if God opened up a space within herself, as it were, where this could occur. But in so doing, God would limit, and humble, Godself, allowing creatures to exist in a free space within her."

If we agree with this, there are some profound implications. I'll only consider two of them now, but you may wish to roll that quote around in your brain a bit more later. Firstly, if we exist "in a free space within God" we are created in relationship with God. We are not independent from God; our relationship with God is a core part of who we are and *how* we exist.

Secondly, that act of creation was self-giving. I'm reminded of the God In Love Unites Us report that we have discussed within the Circuit, and that District Synod considered on March 20th. The report offers these "principles of good relating":

- All significant relationships should be built on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honest, mutual respect, equality and the desire for the mutual flourishing of the people involved.
- It is through that self-giving, rather than through self-seeking, that the self flourishes and begins to experience life in all its fullness.

The report goes on to note that "it needs to be recognised that the universal Church's historic emphasis on self-sacrifice has often been misunderstood and misused in a way that is destructive of the well-being of the ones abused – often women." I agree, and urge caution – while still affirming the main points highlighted by the report.

The self-giving nature of Christ's love

That self-giving aspect of good relating is repeated throughout the Bible, and emphasized by Jesus in instructions such as "love your neighbour as yourself", "love one another as I have loved you", and "love your enemy." Of course, the ultimate example is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Reflecting on the passage from Mark's gospel, and bearing in mind our Lent theme of environmental awareness, I'm struck

by “darkness falling across the land” – as if this is a sign of the relationship Jesus has with the whole of creation, that the sky itself grieves his death. Almost every verse within this passage speaks of some form of relationship, whether it’s between humans and Jesus, between humans and God in Trinity, or between God the Son and God the Creator. I would love to linger on each verse and consider its implications further, but I don’t wish to outstay my welcome in your place of worship. Instead, perhaps you’ll join me in the group discussion next Wednesday evening, where we can dwell within the Word together.

We relate to Jesus in praise, adoration and recognition on Palm Sunday. We relate to Jesus in his sacrifice on Good Friday – a sacrifice to restore right relations between ourselves and God. On Easter Day, we celebrate the relationship of life between Jesus and creation, that God’s love has power over death. But in that trilogy of events, we can’t skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. We can’t choose to ignore the sacrificial aspect, only keeping the bits which are more comfortable.

[A relationship with God includes a relationship with God’s creation](#)

That’s the impression that Ruth Valerio’s book has increasingly left with me: that over the centuries, the relationship between humankind and nature has been one of “pick and choose”. We have made it one-way, taking what we want from creation without giving back, and without considering the impact our actions have on other people. We must consider that our relationship with God *includes* our relationship with God’s creation – that a right relationship with God must involve a right relationship with the planet.

This week’s creation passage focuses on animals and people. What does a self-giving relationship with the animals in the world look like? We might consider wild animals, livestock, and domestic animals separately. What acts of self-giving or self-denial would slow and eventually stop the pace of species extinction? For those of us who still accept meat in our diet – myself included, by the way – what can we do to improve the welfare of those animals, and reduce the impact of livestock agriculture on climate change? What can we do to take better care of domestic animals? This last aspect is probably the one where I find a self-giving relationship easiest to think about: I have three cats, and I can confirm that cats don’t have owners – they have staff.

Our relationships with other people include more than just those we see in person, or even those we may provide donations for via charities. In our deeply-interconnected world, the subject of each day of creation is impacted by our everyday decisions – what we eat and drink, how we consume energy, what we purchase and from where, how we dispose of waste and more. I’m hoping that the focus we’ve maintained on the environment this Lent will help every one of us to be more aware of our impact as individuals and communities, and how this isn’t just a humanitarian concern. It should be core to our faith life, rather than a “nice to have” that we never get around to addressing.

That is a source of hope as well as challenge, however. Once we acknowledge that our environmental relationship is part of our relationship with God, we can ask in confidence for the help of the Spirit in setting it right. We know that it *will* take sacrifice, that it *will* be hard – but we know that God is with us in our struggles, and knows what it means to give of oneself.

[Conclusion](#)

Let us look on God’s creation and agree it is very good, and worth honouring.

Let us look on God’s self-giving relationship with us, and use it as a model for our lives.

Let us look on each other as bearing the image of God, and work together for life in all its fullness, in every place and every form.

Amen

Our final hymn sets us as the foot of the cross, struggling to comprehend and express the magnitude of the sacrificial love Jesus shows for us. (For more reflections on this hymn, you may wish to read my father's article on it, published just over eight years ago: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/13170/skeet-on-watts-edited-corrected-1-4-131.pdf>)

Hymn: StF 287 / H&P 180: When I survey the wondrous cross

Author: Isaac Watts

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MF9tVfTMXs>

1. 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.
2. 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 through his blood.
3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingling down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?
4. 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.

Blessing

May God who opened up a space inside herself to include us in creation, continue to bless us in all our relationships.

May we recognise God's presence in every bird call, every tree, and every new dawn.

May we see God working in our lives, connecting us with all of creation.

May we feel God's everlasting love for us, expressed from the beginning of time and demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

We celebrate blessings today, tomorrow and evermore in the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen