

Wise men came after Jesus' birth with spices; after his death, Nicodemus came with a vast quantity: fit for a king. Was it from respect or was it to make up for not having been more open in following Jesus in life?

These tombs were intended for multiple use: a *new tomb* points back to the practice that if an object was special for God, 'holy', it should be unused. Practically it also meant that there could be no doubt about whose body was no longer there on Easter morning: and there would be no bones to be collected in a year or so and stored in an ossuary as was customary for our story moves on to the day of Resurrection.

Prayers for others based on Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

Remembering Jesus the Suffering Servant, let us remember before God suffering individuals and communities close by and far away...

'He was despised and rejected by others':
We remember before God those scorned by others
and rejected by the society in which they live
because they are somehow different and so threatening...

'A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief':
We remember before God those who are
consumed by grief and overwhelmed by sorrow
on their own behalf or that of others...

'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted'
We remember before God those oppressed militarily, politically,
culturally, or economically
by their own people or by nations from far away...

'By a perversion of justice he was taken away'
We remember before God those for whom justice is denied because
of prejudice or the vested interests of the powerful...

'He was cut off from the land of the living'
We remember before God those whose lives are cut short
through war, through want, through ignorance,
through the inaction of those who could or should do something...

Lord, please hear these and all our prayers, which we bring to you in Jesus' name. Amen

District Resources for Holy Week 2020

Bible passages are quoted in this booklet from the NRSVA

Pages could be written on each of our Holy Week texts, most of which have come from the Lectionary. When you read and meditate on the passages, as always differing aspects will jump out at you. Below are offered a few ideas and pointers from each passage.

Four of our readings come from Isaiah, and talk about 'the Servant'. We don't know who was in the minds of those who first spoke and recorded these words. Sometimes the Servant seems to be identified as a person: at other times, to have a collective identity as God's ancient people Israel or as a part of Israel. But the figure of the Servant became identified with Jesus by his earliest followers - see the story of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8

Monday: Isaiah 42:1-9, John 12:1-11

God is identified as source of the Servant's call and strength: this is no self-appointment. He is God's chosen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, bringing God's justice which has to be '*brought forth*' (1) and '*established*' (4) suggesting on-going and long term project.

This isn't just for God's ancient people but '*to the nations*' (1) and '*in the earth*' (4): are these simply two ways of saying the same thing, or might they have different trajectories?

Bringing God's justice is like shedding light (6): but the Servant goes about this in an unusual way. He will act without fuss and self-advertisement, won't harm damaged people (3) described in those pictures of the '*bruised reed*' and '*dimly burning wick*'. We can compare his mission (7) to that which Jesus set out in his 'Nazareth manifesto' Lk 4:16-21

Mary's service to Jesus was anointing his feet. Whatever her motivation Jesus accepted it and linked it to his forthcoming death (7). This must have cost Mary in other ways that the expense of the ointment. She was making herself particularly vulnerable: especially in wiping feet with her hair (3). She couldn't have known what Jesus' reaction would be. Judas' pompous put-down (5) echoes that picture of 'breaking a bruised reed'. The story offers two pictures: of making ourselves vulnerable, and of totally inappropriate words or acts in the face of others' words or acts of vulnerability.

Crowds came to see Lazarus because of what had happened to him (9) and because of him people were coming to believe in Jesus (11). God having been powerfully and undeniably at work in his life was a powerful witness. An elderly Church leader I knew would talk of the 'need for a Lazarus' in the Church, meaning someone whose life Christ has changed so much that others were challenged into faith.

Tuesday: Isaiah 49:1-7, John 12:20-36

'Listen': pay attention all people (1). Even then a challenge, how much more so now when we have even more background noise to distract us from listening and paying attention (which may not be the same thing) to God! The Servant's words are God's words: 'a sharp sword', 'a polished arrow' (2): things which you ignored at your peril. Words, messages not easily deflected: see *Hebrews 4:12*

The Servant will be involved not only in the restoration of God's ancient people to God (5) but through that 'light to the nations' theme God's 'salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (6). At the time of the Jewish exile, God's ancient people responded to the awful thing that had happened to them by looking either inwards (as in Ezra and Nehemiah) or outwards as here. Which way do we look?

Our readings from Isaiah have emphasised God's inclusiveness. And now in John's Gospel some 'Greeks' ask to meet Jesus (21). They soon disappear from the story: we don't know if they ever met him. But their appearance seems to indicate a shift in Jesus thinking 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (23).

We note Jesus' statement of purpose about the direction of his journey toward the Cross (27) reminding us he is no helpless victim (see also 15:12-27) and how in John's Gospel, suffering and glory seem to collide (28).

Wednesday: Isaiah 50:4-9a, John 13:21-32

In yesterday's reading God's words were compared to weapons. Perhaps this leaves us with the suspicion that these words may be destructive, like real weapons. Here, the words spoken by the Servant are to 'sustain the weary' (4), to encourage, to keep going. But before the Servant can speak to others, he has himself had to listen (5): the teacher needs to be taught.

people whom the Romans crucified went, a place of bodily agony. It was a particularly nasty way of killing people, which of course is why the Romans did it, to be a powerful deterrent to anyone who thought of messing with them. People could take a long time to die on crosses.

They suffered thirst: so did he. It was another aspect of Jesus 'being numbered with the transgressors', of Jesus sharing in our human experiences of pain, weakness, helplessness as he hung upon the cross. Jesus' experience of dereliction of 'My God, my God' is beyond our comprehension: 'I thirst' is an experience he holds in common with many people in many places: not just of need but of helplessness. The Lord of all creation in want of a sip of water and unable to give himself one: sharing a tragically common human experience.

John 19:30: 'It is finished'

As we read John's Gospel, we see a somewhat different aspect: that for John the cross is a place for reigning, like a throne. And so are Jesus' last words from the cross in John's Gospel. 'It is finished' has the sense of 'it's accomplished' rather than 'I'm done for': Jesus has come through it all and even the physical death that he is about to undergo cannot change that...

Luke 23:44-49: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'

And Jesus dies...

Saturday: Lamentations 3:9, 19-24, John 19:38-42

The writer of Lamentations was in a bad place: his troubles filled his head, overwhelmed his thoughts, depressed his soul (20), how such things do in our experience too. And then in a 'light-bulb' moment (21) his knowledge of God breaks in and changes everything: *therefore I have hope* May God's hope keep us and bring us through in these difficult times

In Jesus' burial it's not family or close followers who are involved. It was not normal Roman practice to return crucified bodies to families, but Joseph as an establishment figure could deal with Pilate in ways they could not. His intervention as an outsider is a vital part of the story: for there needed to be a definable and obvious tomb to evidence Jesus' forthcoming resurrection.

Good Friday: A meditation on Jesus' words from the Cross

Luke 23:32-38: 'Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing'

One of the things that this 'suffering servant' of Isaiah would do would be to make *'intercession for the transgressors'* *Is 53:12*. He would pray on behalf of people who did wrong things...

We may understand what Jesus was about on the cross as dealing with the wrongdoing and wrong living, the 'sins' of all the world once and for all and forever, sorting out 'transgression', human wrong doing and wrong being on a vast scale. But here I suggest he prays specifically for those people who were at this time persecuting him: doing as he had told his followers *'pray for those who persecute you'* *Matt 5:44*: He was praying for the Roman soldiers gambling for his clothes, the crowd shouting abuse, even the Temple authorities and Pilate for their perversion of justice in sending him to the cross.

Even in the terrible situation that Jesus was in, he remained true to what he had told his followers of the vital importance of forgiveness, so important that he built into the template Christian prayer *Matt 6:12*. In praying *'Father forgive them'* Jesus was walking the walk as well as talking the talk, from a depth that God willing we shall never have to.

Luke 23:39-43: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'

Jesus died as he lived, in dubious company: and in what would be the places of honour on either side of a royal throne, the places requested by two of Jesus' disciples earlier *Mk 10:37* were two bandits. In Isaiah's words from long before, and quoted by Jesus just before his arrest *Lk 22:37*, he *'was numbered with the transgressors'* *Is 53:12*.

However lawless one of these bandits may have been, he recognised that Jesus was innocent and undeserving of punishment, unlike himself. But he believed more than this, he saw further than what was immediately obvious, even from his cross. That request *'Remember me when you come into your kingdom'* suggests that he believed that what was happening wasn't going to be the end of Jesus: and that whatever was happening, where Jesus was going, involved, however unlikely under the circumstances, some kind of kingdom: That the man beside him wasn't some unfortunate victim of the system, or a poor deluded lunatic, but was someone much, much more significant.

And he hoped that, bad man as he might have been, terrible things though he might have done, that Jesus would remember him for good. He just asked to be remembered, he didn't ask to come along. Perhaps, probably he wouldn't have presumed that much. The bandit had no time to sort his life out, to put right all he'd done. And he wasn't asked to, as Jesus didn't just promise to remember him, although that might have been wonderful. Jesus promised much more: that the man dying beside him could come along with him to the place to which he was indeed going, which he here calls 'paradise'. He, Jesus, would sort out the bad stuff, the making judgment liable stuff.

If Jesus was in some way putting himself in solidarity with human beings in a bad place by allowing himself to be crucified, the bandit was promised that he would be in solidarity with Jesus in a much better place. However we may interpret the *'today'* bit (a cause of much theological angst), we hear Jesus' promise of a life to come with him, in God's place: a place to which he invites damaged human beings, people like us to accompany him. A place where he has promised that he is preparing us room *Jn 14:2*

John 19:26-27: 'Mother, there is your son...'

In Jesus' infancy, Mary heard Simeon prophecy of herself in respect of her son that *'a sword will pierce your own soul too'* *Lk 2:35*. She had heard Jesus' teenage talk of *'my Father's house'* *Lk 2:49*, in contrast to their family home. She had heard him say *'my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'* *Lk 8:21*. Jesus will have obeyed the commandment to honour his parents *Ex 20:12*: but being Jesus' mother can never have been easy and sometimes it must have been heart-breaking. Simeon was proved a true prophet.

Now, in another time of heart-break, Jesus is as her eldest son, properly concerned for her welfare in a society that had little regard for unsupported widows: we must assume thirty years on that Joseph is

dead. Why John, not one of the men described in Scripture as his *'brothers'*, keeping it in the family as we might expect? We don't know: perhaps because as yet they didn't believe in him although one became a very significant leader in the earliest Church. Christian legend says that Mary went to live with John at Ephesus.

Even from the cross, Jesus gave appropriate respect, remembered proper concern, took due responsibility for his mother...

Mark 15:33-35: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

They're not words new in Jesus' mouth. They're old words, from the beginning of Psalm 22, which continue *'Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?'* What was Jesus doing as he said those words? Was he beginning to recite *Psalm 22*, which moves from dereliction to assurance in its last verses but just didn't get there? Do the words represent Jesus' feelings of the faraway-ness of God, as any and all of us might feel in his physical position, in a very bad place?

Or do those words represent something deeper and darker and far more terrible than this: that in some way we shall never fully understand, the one who *'was in the beginning with God'* *Jn 1:2*, who told his followers *'Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me'* *Jn 14:13* was at that moment in time and at that place as far as was possible alienated and estranged, in a place of ultimate Godless-ness? Luke recorded Jesus saying: *'Father, forgive them'* and *'Father, into your hands...'* Here is no talk of 'Father'

For Roman cross met Jewish Law. *Deut 21:23* *'...anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse'*: for 'tree' read 'cross'. St Paul meditating upon this suggests that somehow Jesus became *'sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'* *2 Cor 5:21*. That somehow he as the perfect one at that time took into and upon himself the effects and penalties of human corporate and individual wrong doing and wrong being, of 'sin'... as far as possible within the essential unity and indwelling-ness of the Trinity, that that faraway-ness of the Father, that alienation from the Father was real for Jesus at that moment. Jesus had gone to the place of ultimate lost ness and alienation. And Jesus had chosen, in obedience to the Father's will and for the sake of all creation, to go to that place of his own accord.

Within our human experience, we can think of awful places, terrible times and situations that we call 'God forsaken'. What was happening upon the cross was God-forsakenness to bring to an end all God-forsakenness.

John 19:28-29: 'I am thirsty'

If those previous words spoke of Jesus going somewhere that only he as Son of God could go, these words show him somewhere that the others beside him were at that time too: somewhere the thousands of

As then, so now in the weary time in which we find ourselves, we need to be sustained by the Lord. For we all too easily run on empty: the pictures of both giving out and taking in offer a powerful reminder to us in our lives of serving Christ.

Judas and his actions are difficult to deal with and need more space. Judas is introduced from the start (with hindsight) as the one who would betray Jesus. Jesus in his humanity must have had some knowledge that betrayal would be part of his path: but did he know all along it would be Judas? How difficult it would be to live with someone closely and to know that what you do and say and reveal will not make any difference

And yet Jesus turns around that his friend has sold out and is arranging arrest which will lead to death to talk of God's glory (31)!

Thursday: Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

We are reminded that Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover around the time of his death: including the meal of the lamb that signified God's rescue of God's people: lambs as sacrifice for sin came later.

Jesus, revealed in glory as *'a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered'* *Rev 5:6* fulfils both roles. In the Baptist's witness he is *'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'* *Jn 1:29*. St John notes that the Romans did not need to break any of Jesus' bones (19:33) linking this to *Ex 12:46* about the Passover lamb's bones to be left unbroken.

Jesus as 'Lord and Teacher' (14) does what people in positions of authority usually do not do: he deliberately humbles himself, in this case by washing his disciples' feet. Peter finds this hard to take at first, and he isn't alone because we're not always too keen on letting others 'serve' us: it changes the dynamic of our relationship.

But Jesus' actions aren't just about letting ourselves be served. *'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you'* (15)