

Devotions for Holy Week

By Pastor Josh and Heidi Quinn

Palm Sunday – The Stone the Builders Rejected

Matthew 21:33-46

Holy Week opens with Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, celebrated by Christians for centuries as Palm Sunday. Afterward, Jesus entered the temple and told the people and the religious leaders there a number of parables, including this one about the ungrateful, murderous tenants. The tenants of the vineyard killed the king's son, thinking that that would allow them to inherit the vineyard, but instead, the king returns and gives the vineyard to other, more deserving tenants. Jesus concludes the parable with a quote from Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Jesus, of course, is the cornerstone. And the stone that wasn't good enough in the builders' eyes to be of any use, the Lord marvellously made into the chief foundation stone of the whole building, a building that God himself was erecting. Jesus goes on to tell us that he, the stone, will be our undoing, either because we fall on it in anger and with rejection, like the Jewish leaders who had Jesus crucified, but on whom the stone then fell in judgement; or we will fall on the stone in repentance and faith, recognizing that we are already broken without God. Then the stone will truly break us, so that we can be made whole again.

Prayer Focus: Hebrews 3:12-14 says, "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end." As we begin the lead up to Easter Sunday, contemplating and meditating on all that Christ has done for us, pray that your heart would remain soft and open to God's leading and voice as you hold firmly onto Christ, the Chief Cornerstone of our faith.

Monday – All Are Invited to the King's Feast

Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus continues his storytelling in the temple with another parable that has similar themes to the previous one. Everyone is invited to the king's son's wedding banquet, offering life to the full, as Jesus says in John 10:10. But like the murderous tenants in the first story, many of the Jews rejected the initial invitation to the feast, and as a result, it is being offered to all, no matter what our creed, socio-economic status, ethnic background, language or gender. When the invitation is sent out, all manner of people come, good and bad, and Jesus lays down a stern warning: the invitation is for all, but it must be accepted on the King's terms. The invitation can be rejected outwardly, like the first group of people who decided not to come to the feast and even killed the messengers inviting them, or we can reject it inwardly, like the guest who showed up the feast dressed in the wrong kind of clothing. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23 that, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" When we truly accept God's offer of love and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ, we must acknowledge him as both the one true king of the universe, as well as the king of our own lives. All that you are and all that you do is now centred on Jesus and his call to follow him—to be his disciple.

Prayer Focus: Paul writes in Titus 3:3-5a that, "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." As you pause to think about all that God has saved you from and for, take time to thank him for his great salvation through Jesus Christ. Pray for those around you who do not yet know about his love, that they would be drawn to him and their hearts would be open to him. Ask God that you would be filled with compassion toward others as you remember his generous invitation to you.

Tuesday – Death and Taxes

Matthew 22:15-33

The Pharisees and Sadducees were tenacious, and did not give up on challenging Jesus very easily. In this passage we have two scenes. First the Pharisees come along and try to trap Jesus with a question about taxes, and then the Sadducees try to confound him with a question about the resurrection. The Pharisees were a conservative religious sect, concerned with preserving Jewish religion and culture. They opposed Rome, but did not usually advocate for violent rebellion. There were many that believed that Jesus was coming to do just that, and establish his kingdom on Earth. The Pharisees were trying to trick him into making a statement that could be used to charge Jesus with insurrection. The Sadducees were a more liberal religious sect, composed of wealthy and aristocratic priestly families who had quite a bit of influence and power even in Roman-ruled Judea. They denied the truth of the resurrection, so their question was an attempt to make Jesus look foolish. Jesus turns the script around and answers each group in a way that leaves them confounded. If the Pharisees truly understood the Scriptures and the power of God, they would have known that all authorities are ultimately subject to God, and are to be treated as such. Daniel sought to administer well and submit to the enemy kings of Babylon. However, when Nebuchadnezzar became too full of himself, God drove him to insanity until he would "...acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes" (Daniel 4:25). Moreover, if the Sadducees had truly known and believed the omnipotent power of God, they would have known that not only does God create life, he can also resurrect people from the dead. God has the power and authority over all aspects of his creation.

Prayer Focus: Romans 11:33-36 lays out the greatness of our God: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." There are many things that happen in our lives and in the world around us that we don't understand, or that are difficult or terrible. We need to be reminded at times that God's ways are not ours, that our limited human intellect could not possibly understand all that God is and all that he does. Take a moment to ponder God's power, his greatness, his creative ability, and how he is ultimately reconciling all things to himself. Thank him that he is sovereign, that he sees all things, great and small, and holds it all in his hands.

Wednesday – The Greatest Commandment and the Greatest Son

Matthew 22:34-46

The Pharisees and the Sadducees continued to question Jesus. An expert in the law asked him what the greatest command was in the scriptures. He responds with the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This central tenet of the Jewish faith was recited by faithful Jews every day in the morning and the evening, and would have been deeply familiar to them all. But very significantly, Jesus doesn’t end there, and proceeds to tell the expert in the Law that there is second law like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Jesus teaches us that we can’t have one command without the other—without love for neighbour, our love for God is without purpose, and vice versa. These two commandments are what all the Scriptures point to, and are what should characterize the life of one who has put their faith in Jesus Christ. Afterwards, Jesus proceeds to tell the Pharisees about WHO is at the centre of the Scriptures: the Messiah, David’s Son, who is also the Son of God. Their mouths were shut by the audacity of Jesus’s claims, and they did not dare question him anymore.

Prayer Focus: Paul reiterates Jesus’s words in Galatians 5:13-15, where he writes, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” Take some time to meditate on and perhaps recite the Shema out loud, stating the truth that God is one, and he is worthy of all our love. Ask him to help you put that love into action, to truly love our neighbours as ourselves in practical and meaningful ways, to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” as James writes in James 1:19.

Maundy Thursday – The Broken Heart of God

John 13:18-32

At the beginning of the Last Supper, we have the scene where Jesus washes his disciples' feet, demonstrating the kind of servant-leadership and servant-lifestyle he calls all of his disciples to live out. We are called to live self-sacrificially because of Jesus's own great love for us. That love was not an easy road to walk, and it caused him great grief. Jesus knew who was going to betray him, and yet he still washed Judas's feet and ate the Passover meal with him. His grief over the betrayal comes to the surface in verse 21, where it tells us that "Jesus was troubled in spirit, and testified, 'Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.'" Jesus loved his disciples and wanted to warn them that he was going to be betrayed, but his warning also came with a profound revelation of who Jesus was. He tells them in verses 19-20, "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." Read it again. Jesus says, "I am who I am." When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, God said to him, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex 3:14). Jesus was the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, God in the flesh, and despite being heart-broken at Judas's betrayal, he continued to "love them to the end" (John 13:1).

Prayer Focus: If Christ himself faced many trials and sorrows during his time on Earth, we cannot expect to escape unscathed, and in fact Jesus tells us in John 16:33 that, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Ask God to bring to mind some times that you have faced difficulties and trials and problems, and then thank God for bringing you through them, and for walking with you each and every moment of each and every day.

Good Friday – A Crown, A Robe, and the Inauguration of the King

John 19:1-16a

Before Jesus was crowned with glory, he wore a crown of thorns. Before he was clothed with his resurrection body, he was clothed with a purple robe and mocked as the King of the Jews. Before he ascended into heaven, and was seated at the right hand of the Father, he ascended the Hill of the Skull, where his throne was the cross. Because of his great love for us, this was the price Jesus gladly paid to bear our sins and reconcile us to God when we were utterly unable to do it ourselves.

Prayer Focus: John was known as the Disciple of Love because his life was so profoundly changed by the revelation of God's great love for him through the life and death of Jesus Christ. 1 John 4:9-10 tells us, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Not only did John know that God loved him personally, he knew that God has that same love for each and every one of us. Take some time to reflect on the depth and breadth of Christ's love for you, that he would be willing to go to the cross to atone for your wrongdoings. Thank him for his sacrifice.

Saturday, the Easter Vigil – From Darkness, Light

Matthew 27:57-68, Luke 23:50-56, John 1:4-5

The place between Jesus's crucifixion and his resurrection can be a dark place to dwell. Waiting can be filled with uncertainties and with great sadness. In Matthew's account, Jesus's body is wrapped, and placed in a tomb with a large stone rolled in front of the entrance, with Roman soldiers standing guard. In Luke's account, the women, who had been following Jesus throughout the whole ordeal, prepared spices and perfumes to place with his body, but since the next day was the Sabbath, Luke tells us, "They rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). Their circumstances forced them all to take a day of rest and to dwell upon the seeming finality of Jesus's death. It reminds us of how in the beginning, after God had created the heavens and the earth, everything was still shrouded in darkness. But "...the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters," and out of the darkness God speaks and light is created, and "God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:2, 4). Similarly, even now from out of the darkness of Jesus laying dead in the tomb, we see a light beginning to shine. As the apostle John says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). Though things seemed so dark, and the disciples probably felt like they were in a fog, God was still at work – and was getting ready to do something new. From the darkness of the tomb, a light shines forth, leading us to Resurrection Sunday.

Prayer Focus: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3). Behind us stretch thousands of people who have loved and served God for centuries, not least of which is Jesus, who endured so much for us. Take a moment to think about all the countless saints who have persevered in their faith, usually in complete obscurity, facing persecution and trouble, but hanging on to the end. Ask God to help you persevere in the same way, and to be encouraged by the thought that we don't walk a path that hasn't been trod by others.

Resurrection Sunday – A New Temple, a New Creation

Matthew 28:1-10, John 20:1-10

In the Old Testament, the Temple (and originally the Tabernacle) was where the presence of God dwelt with humanity. At the crucifixion of Jesus, we see the veil that hid the presence of God from people torn in two, opening up access to God's presence. But where does his presence now dwell? Jesus had referred to his body as the temple, which would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days (John 2:19), and while Jesus was on earth, he was the place where the presence of God dwelt among human beings. Jesus came as the new Temple, and was resurrected as a new creation, with the new heavenly body that we also will have some day. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." Amazingly, not only is Jesus the new Temple where God dwells with his people, now all those who put their faith in Jesus become temples of the Holy Spirit as well, with God's very presence living in each of us. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). And when people put their faith and trust in Jesus, the new creation we will be at the resurrection actually begins here and now! "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul continues this theme in Romans 8:8-11 where he writes, "Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you." Because Christ was raised from the dead, we, too, have the hope and promise of resurrection, and the new creation that has begun within us will one day be brought to its fullness.

Prayer Focus: "The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said!" (Matthew 28:6) He is risen indeed! Rejoice! Go forth in fullness of joy and give praise to the God of our salvation!

Happy Easter!