

Palm Sunday 5th April 2020 – Rev Sheena Gabriel – Godalming Unitarians

I'll be offering this service via Zoom at 11am for those able to join me online.

This is a version for use at home.

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting *If you have a candle you may want to light it*

Today is Palm Sunday, in the Christian calendar the start of Holy week, when we recall the story of Jesus of Nazareth entering Jerusalem on a donkey - his last fateful ride – cheered by the crowds, hailed as a King, yet leading to suffering and death.

So today we light our chalice as a memorial flame for all those great souls through history who have taken the path of selfless service. And may this light shine on all those in our own times, who are sacrificing their lives or well-being, for the benefit of others.

Prayer - Blessing in the Chaos

*To all that is chaotic in you,
let there come silence.
Let there be a calming of the clamouring,
a stilling of the voices that
have laid their claim on you,
that have made their home in you,*

*that go with you even to the holy places
but will not let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life with wholeness
or feel the grace that fashioned you.*

*Let what distracts you cease.
Let what divides you cease.
Let there come an end to what diminishes and demeans,
and let depart all that keeps you in its cage.*

*Let there be an opening
into the quiet that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find the peace
you did not think possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.*

Jan Richardson - from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*

Short time of silence

Bible Reading (drawn from Matthew and Luke's Gospels)

...(Jesus) went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he was near Bethpage and Bethany, close by the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying "Go to the village opposite, and as you enter you will find a tethered colt (donkey) that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why you are untying it?'... say the master needs it.'

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

*"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

The disciples did as Jesus had directed; they took the colt to Jesus and throwing their cloaks on its back lifted him onto it. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, others cut branches from trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds that went ahead and that followed were shouting, 'Blessed is he who comes as a King in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest' Some Pharisees in the crowd said to him 'Master, reprove your disciples', but he answered, "I tell you if these keep silent the stones will cry out."

As he drew near and came in sight of the city, he shed tears over it and said “if you too could only recognise on this day the way to peace! But it is hidden from your eyes! Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you...they will dash you and your children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing, because you did not recognise the moment of your visitation.”

Reflection

Reflecting on this story I wonder at the mind and will of Jesus. He enters Jerusalem seemingly *knowing* he will die there, having predicted his death on several occasions. He chooses to enter the city in a way guaranteed to draw the attention of religious leaders. And soon after, the same crowds who sing praises, will turn against him with shouts of “crucify”.

Jesus in this passage is identified as fulfilling Hebrew prophecy – taking on the role of the suffering servant who would bear the afflictions of his people. But for those who struggle to accept the doctrines that have grown up around him, what are we to make of his actions? Was Jesus simply deluded - a good, but misguided man with a messiah complex? Or a radical socialist, whose outspoken words inevitably cost his life in the political climate of his day? Did he have a death-wish? Through the distant lens of history, we can't easily separate myth from fact.

To my mind, from what the Gospels tell us, Jesus was a Jewish wisdom teacher with a passion for truth and justice; his anger at religious hypocrisy, his defense of the poorest and weakest in society, his conviction of the love of God, were such driving forces, he could *not* keep quiet, even as it cost him his life. He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice that comes from living out his truth. And this is a story that's been played out in different ways across the centuries; Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero – countless men and women who take the path of selfless service and pay the price – including many in our own time.

Hymn: 'Blessed Spirit of my Life' (from purple hymnbook 'Sing your Faith') no. 11

Blessed spirit of my life, give me strength through stress and strife.

Help me live with dignity, help me know serenity.

Fill me with a vision, clear my mind of fear and confusion.

When my thoughts flow restlessly, let peace find a home in me.

*Spirit of great mystery, hear the still, small voice in me.
Help me live my wordless creed as I comfort those in need.
Fill me with compassion, be the source of my intuition.
Then, when life is done for me, let love be my legacy.*

(Words and tune by Shelley Jackson Denham b.1950)

Sometimes the call to sacrifice comes in unexpected ways, not sought after; times in history, when ordinary men, women and children, whole communities even - are compelled to put their own needs aside for the greater good. We are living in such times right now. And I've been reminded of 2 extraordinary stories of courage and sacrifice which seem relevant to the situation we find ourselves in.

An account of the Ebola outbreak in Nigeria in 2015 – told by Niniola Soley (in abridged form.)

My aunt - Dr. Ameyo Adadevoh - contained the first case of Ebola in Nigeria. She paid with her life. Patrick Sawyer left quarantine in Liberia and collapsed at the airport in Lagos, Nigeria. He was on his way to a meeting of the Economic Community of West African States in Calabar.

When Patrick arrived at my aunt's hospital, another doctor diagnosed him with malaria. My aunt saw him the following day and suspected Ebola, despite never having seen an Ebola patient before. Patrick denied being near anyone suffering from the virus, but she insisted on him being tested.

While waiting for test results, Liberian government officials and the patient himself, insisted she discharge him, so he could attend the conference. She resisted his release. They threatened to sue her for a violation of human rights, but she remained steadfast for the greater public good.

Though she didn't have the proper protective gear or protocols, she created an isolation area in her hospital to continue his treatment and protect her staff. The test results came back. Patrick Sawyer's Ebola diagnosis was confirmed, and he died in hospital. My aunt became ill ten days later and died a few days after.

Dr. Adadevoh's actions prevented a major spread of the virus across the country. Because she refused to discharge the patient, only a few Ebola cases – traced to this one man - occurred in Nigeria – a country of 170 million people.

Account re Eyam – Plague village (adapted from several contemporary newspaper articles)

Between the Derbyshire villages of Eyam and Stoney Middleton – not far from the Unitarian ‘Nightingale Centre’ in Great Hucklow - sits a gritstone boulder known as the “boundary stone”.

During the bubonic plague outbreak of 1665-6, the inhabitants of Eyam quarantined themselves in a famous act of self-sacrifice, to prevent the spread of the plague - which arrived via infected fleas, trapped in a bale of fabric. The sickness spread fast, killing dozens of villagers and leaving many on the verge of fleeing in panic – but then something extraordinary happened.

The village’s newly arrived priest, William Mompesson (who went on to lose his wife in the outbreak) believing it his duty to spare neighbouring towns from infection, persuaded his parishioners to take the step of sealing themselves off. They would live or they would die, but nobody would leave until the sickness had burned itself out. One mother is said to have buried six of her children, yet by staying surely saved countless other women from the same fate.

In 17th century Eyam, “social distancing” meant not just isolation – but also open-air funeral services to reduce physical proximity, families burying their own dead in fields and gardens rather than the village graveyard. Villagers would place money in six holes drilled into the top of the boundary stone to pay for food and medicine, left by their anxious neighbours from nearby villages.

By the end of the outbreak, more than a quarter of the village’s population of almost 1,000 were dead. The plague, however, was contained. It’s salient to ask how many of us would secretly have more in common with the local squire, who fled after the first few deaths and left his neighbours to their fate? Compared with 17th-century peasants, modern Britons aren’t used to the idea of sacrifice for the collective good.

But for residents of Eyam today, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the lessons of that self-imposed isolation have powerful echoes. Standing by the boundary stone, Ian Smith, who volunteers at the local museum, describes how the village had adopted a process that has become familiar around the world in the last few weeks – “social distancing”. “In some respects,” says Smith, “the villagers were well ahead of their time. They didn’t know what the affliction was but reasoned that close contact with other people was how the illness was passing from one to another.”

Smith applies the lesson to the current crisis. “We should be very aware that mass movement of people from one community to another is not a good thing.”

The stories of two pandemics, one historical and one current, are colliding in Eyam. The green tourist information placards outside homes with names like “Plague Cottage” have been joined by prominent new posters giving information on coronavirus and its symptoms. Eyam’s story remains a powerful example not only of how diseases are transmitted – then as now via trade routes – but also of how successful social immobilisation can contain outbreaks.



Plaques in Eyam in honour of villagers that lost their lives



The boundary stone where Eyam villagers placed money for neighbouring villagers, in exchange for food

In both these stories, we pay homage to those who saved the lives of others, despite the cost to themselves. Just as we pay homage today to front line workers. There are so many stories of the heroism of ordinary men and women ‘just doing their jobs’, but going beyond the call of duty – medics, paramedics, care workers placing themselves day in, day out, at risk of infection; some doctors making the difficult decisions to live apart from their families, and care-workers volunteering

to stay in lock-down with residents in old peoples' homes. And there are stories in this country, of doctors turned out of rented accommodation by over-anxious landlords, and medics being verbally abused simply because they are Asian, yet still getting on with the job of saving lives.

Not forgetting the shopworkers and chemists, teachers and social workers who continue to serve the needs of the community. Or the army of volunteers who have put themselves forward to help their neighbourhood in ways big and small. And factories and businesses rising to the challenge of making ventilators, and restaurateurs making up food parcels and providing hot dinners for those in need.

These last few weeks have shown that modern Britons *are* capable of similar acts of selflessness to the villagers of Eyam. And of course, such selflessness is replicated a thousand times over around the world. So now a time of prayer as we recognise the many sacrifices, large and small, being made by so many.

Prayer – by Cameron Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips remember those that have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market, remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,

Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbours. Amen.

Music by 'Secret Garden' from the album White Stones – 'Poème'

"A song without words – an unspoken story. We listen with ears – we understand with our hearts"

If you have access to a computer or smart phone you might like to listen to this piece of music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdKgdHxYs10>

Or play any peaceful music of your own choosing

At this point in the service those meeting online will be invited to share briefly our joys and concerns.

You may like to spend time in silence thinking of your Meadow friends - as we will think also of you.

Reflection: On Foot washing During Holy week, on Maundy Thursday, some churches – including Unitarian congregations - hold a seder supper, commemorating the Jewish Passover – the last meal Jesus spent with his disciples. This sometimes include a ritual act of washing one another's feet (or hands), based on the story in John's Gospel, in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.

To me it's a poignant, tender moment; a last farewell from a beloved Jewish rabbi to his disciples - taking on the role of the lowliest servant. In the context of 1st century Palestine the washing of feet was no small act - in a hot and dusty clime, with water such a precious commodity. Jesus reminds his followers that what ultimately matters is not power or prestige, but humble service and love.

Whilst there will be no ritual washing of one another's feet or hands in churches this year, rituals of washing continue in new ways that seem poignant and significant. On the news this week I noted the quiet dignity of a cleaner – no doubt on low pay, her arms exposed - disinfecting and washing down ambulances – a life-saving act. This is being replicated in countless places the world over, in hospitals, doctor surgeries and care homes. And for many of us, the simple act of washing of our own hands, has suddenly become a ritual of almost religious significance...



... As captured in this poem sent to me by Edie Campbell:

Poem - Wash Your Hands ~ by Dori Midnight (abridged)

We are humans relearning to wash our hands.
Washing our hands is an act of love....an act of care....
Washing our hands helps us return to ourselves
by washing away what does not serve.

Wash your hands
like you are washing the only teacup left
that your great grandmother carried across the ocean,
like you are washing the hair of a beloved who is dying,
like you are washing the feet ofJesus, your auntie, Audre Lorde, Mary Oliver -
you get the picture.

Like this water is poured from a jug your best friend just carried for three miles from
the spring they had to climb a mountain to reach.
Like water is a precious resource made from time and miracle

Wash your hands and cough into your elbow, they say.
Rest more, stay home, drink water, have some soup, they say.
To which I would add: burn some plants your ancestors burned
when there was fear in the air,
Boil some aromatic leaves in a pot on your stove until your windows steam up.
Open your windows....

My friends, it is always true, these things....
It is always true that we should move with care and intention...
It is always true that people are living with one lung, with immune systems
that don't work so well, or perhaps work too hard, fighting against themselves.
It is already true that people are hoarding the things that the most vulnerable need.

It is already time that we might want to fly on airplanes less
and not go to work when we are sick.

It is already time that we might want to know who in our neighbourhood has cancer,
who has a new baby, who is old, with children in another state...

It is already time that temporarily non-disabled people think about people
living with chronic illness and disabled folks,
that young people think about old people...

It is already time to not take it personally when someone doesn't want to hug you.

It is already time to slow down and feel how scared we are.

We are already afraid, we are already living in the time of fires.

When fear arises, and it will,

let it wash over your whole body instead of staying curled up tight in your shoulders.

If your heart tightens,

contract and expand.....

...In the middle of the night,

when you wake up with terror in your belly,

it is time to think about stardust and geological time,

redwoods and dance parties and mushrooms remediating toxic soil.

It is time to care for one another

to pray over water

to wash away fear

every time we wash our hands.

Reflections on the Donkey!

And returning once more to the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, let's consider the perspective of the donkey – often reviled as a dumb creature, a beast of burden, too often mistreated - yet legend has it that in carrying Jesus and standing in the shadows at his crucifixion, this donkey - and donkeys ever after - bear the sign of the cross on their backs - in honour of the humble King, who gave his life in service to others.



'The Poet Thinks about the Donkey' by Mary Oliver

On the outskirts of Jerusalem

the donkey waited

not especially brave, or filled with understanding,

he stood and waited.

How horses turned out into the meadow

leap with delight!

How doves released from their cages,

clatter away splashed with sunlight!

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual waited.

Then he let himself be led away.

Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!

And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.

Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.

*I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.*

So too, I hope that we will be brave – in facing whatever needs to be faced in the coming days, weeks and months. Whether we feel up to the task or not; let's remember the courage and sacrifice of Jesus as he enters Jerusalem; the courage and sacrifice of the villagers of Eyam who sealed off their village, the courage and sacrifice of Dr. Ameyo Adadevoh who stopped the spread of Ebola in Nigeria, and the courage and sacrifice of all those working on the front line in this pandemic.

Most of the sacrifices we're called to make, will be small in comparison - but even so, it takes courage and resolve to face the reality of these days; for some it will be the lonely hours that drag in self-isolation, for others a barrage of extra work and responsibility, for others the foregoing of pleasures once taken for granted. And for all of us, I think, a heightened sense of uncertainty about the future.

I don't know about you, but right now I feel a bit like that donkey – small, not especially brave or filled with understanding – but I want to be obedient to the tasks at hand. And in the courage of the humble donkey, simply putting one foot in front of the other, carrying on his back the One who carried a greater burden - the weight of the world's suffering in his heart; perhaps we too, through a word of encouragement, a note of appreciation, an errand for a neighbour, or simply by staying at home – are helping to carry some of the weight of heavier burdens borne by others.

The Palm Sunday story encapsulates both celebration and sacrifice, joy and sorrow - the whole drama that is life. The sacrifices we make may not earn us any trophies or accolades – but in these testing times, we can find a quiet contentment in doing our part, discovering that humble service and small acts of kindness and generosity, will bring its own reward - as reflected in this song based on words by John Bunyan (17thc. author of Pilgrims Progress)

The Woodcutter's Song

He that is down, need fear no fall, He this is low, no pride;

He that is humble, ever shall have God to be his Guide.

I am content with what I have, little be it or much;

And Lord, contentment still I crave

Because though savest such.

Fullness to such a burden is

That go on pilgrimage,

Here little, and hereafter bliss

Is best from age to age

If you have access to a computer or smart phone you might like to listen to this piece of music

by Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsK-2UPI11M>

Closing words by Margaret Owen

We give thanks for those who keep their promises.

*We give thanks for those with the courage to face a future which is threatening
and not of their choosing.*

We give thanks for those who leave the shores of plenty to befriend others in hard places.

For those who brave the darkness, transforming it with their love. (this line changed from the original)

For those who feel their youth slipping away while they care for someone suffering:

For those prepared to reshape their whole lives because destiny demands it.

Theirs is the transforming power of the world –

that fusion of faith hope and charity whose name is Commitment.

We give thanks for them.

May they share abundantly in the joy of their own making. Amen

Thank you for sharing this time with me. I invite you to sing or read aloud the following blessing for all in our Meadow Chapel family and all those you care about.

Sung Blessing: (from purple hymn book 'Sing your Faith no. 102)

May the road rise with you,

May the wind be always at your back,

May the sun shine warm upon your face,

May the rain fall soft upon your fields

And until we meet again, may God hold you

In the hollow of His/Her hand.