

Sunday 28 March 2021 – Heather Wilson

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use whilst we are unable to use Methodist Church premises. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Opening Prayer

Lord, we seek to recognise your presence, knowing that you are always with us. When we consider your great sacrifice and the degradation you suffered as the beautiful, incarnate One, we are overwhelmed by your love outpoured. Open our eyes to the extreme cost of your surrender, so that we might hold tight to the hand of promise today. **Amen.**

Hymn: Singing the Faith, 273, here hangs a man discarded

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/hymns/here-hangs-a-man-discarded-stf-273/>

Here hangs a man discarded,
a scarecrow hoisted high,
a nonsense pointing nowhere
to all who hurry by.

Can such a clown of sorrows
still bring a useful word,
when faith and love seem phantoms
and every hope absurd?

Yet here is help and comfort
for lives by comfort bound,
when drums of dazzling progress
give strangely hollow sound:

Life, emptied of all meaning,
drained out in bleak distress,

can share in broken silence
our deepest emptiness:

And love that freely entered
the pit of life's despair,
can name our hidden darkness
and suffer with us there.

Christ, in our darkness risen,
help all who long for light
to hold the hand of promise
till faith receives its sight.

Brian Wren (b. 1936)

Let us pray together

I thank you Jesus for freely entering the pit of life's despair. It is a reminder to me that you suffered and can understand when I am hurting. My darkness was once your darkness so my hope for light is found in you. I hold on in the darkness to your hand of promise and remember that you are with me. **Amen.**

Today's Reading from the Old Testament

Isaiah 53:1-12

53 Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of
the LORD been revealed?

2 For he grew up before him like a young
plant, and like a root out of dry
ground; he had no form or majesty
that we should look at him, nothing in
his appearance that we should desire
him.

3 He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account.

- 4** Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.
- 5** But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.
- 6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- 7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
- 8** By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
- 9** They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.
- 10** Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
- 11** Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Today's Gospel Reading: Mark 15:1- 39

Jesus before Pilate

15 As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" ¹³ They shouted back, "Crucify him!" ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and

after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰ After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus^[d] to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." ²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.^[e] ²⁹ Those who passed by derided^[f] him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!" ³¹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

The Death of Jesus

³³ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Time to Reflect

This passage in Mark's Gospel begins with one Roman Officer asking Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Yet it ends with another Roman officer declaring, "This man truly was the Son of God!" Sandwiched between is Pilate's reluctance to give in to the leading priests' accusations. Pilate still wanting to release this 'King of the Jews' but the leading priests who Mark said 'had arrested Jesus out of envy,' stirred up the crowd so that they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' As we read Mark's account, we are taken with the injustice of it all. In exchange for a good man was the release of a revolutionary murderer who Mark names, Barabbas. It is not lost on us that the meaning of *Barabbas* is *Son of the Father*. As one *Son of the Father* is released, another *Son of the Father* is crucified.

By all accounts, this is not a *fair trade*. I am reminded of the song by Hillsong, "A Beautiful Exchange." In the lyrics are the words, '(Jesus) "you gave your life in a beautiful exchange."' Of course, Mark's Gospel portrays

Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion as anything but beautiful.

We see the same lack of beauty in Chapter 53 of Isaiah. In verse 2, we read "There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him." Yet in the very ugliness and scandal of the cross, Jesus gave us the most beautiful gift of all. He bore our sins so that we might be counted righteous. This is the beautiful exchange. We give him our filthy rags, and he clothes us with beauty and wonder. Do you wonder what Jesus thinks about the cruelty of the cross now?

Holy Week is a time to reflect not only on the cruelty of the cross but the beauty too. I am back to where we started that by all accounts this was not a *fair trade*. Yet, for you and me, it is a beautiful exchange. Perhaps, Jesus believes it to be so! Jesus said to his disciples, "You will weep and mourn over what is going to happen to me, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy" (John 16:20).

What do you think is the beauty of the cross? I think the beauty of the cross is found in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, His Son. I believe the beauty of the cross is Jesus. Are you like the first Roman Officer (Pilate) still asking if Jesus is really the King of the Jews? Or are your exclamations more like the other Roman officer, "This man truly was the Son of God."

Let us pray

Jesus, you undertook unbearable suffering so that we might have our sins forgiven and receive an eternal home in heaven. No matter what we go through in this world, it will never compare to the glory that we have received in knowing you. We thank you for that beautiful exchange where you gave up your life so that we might receive abundant life. You endured the darkness so that we might receive

everlasting light. You took on our sins so that we might take up your righteousness. **Amen.**

Take a time to sit quietly

A time of prayer

We pray for this world. We are conscious it is not our final home. Yet, we know you care for your creation – for all that you have made. For those who suffer and feel abandoned, we recall your words, "My God, My God, Why have you abandoned me?"

We pray for ourselves and the times we have turned our back on the One who loves us. When we have pointed an accusatory finger or looked away. We remember the words from Isaiah, "We turned our backs on him and looked the other way." Wherever there is injustice in the world, we ask for the courage not to turn away but to stand up for the rights of others.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones during this pandemic. We remember friends and family members who are unwell, whether due to covid-19, cancer, or some other debilitating disease. We recall the words of the prophet Isaiah, "He was despised, and we did not care." Forgive us when we do not care.

We thank you God that you hear and answer our prayers. We finish with the **Lord's Prayer**.

Hymn: Listen to Hillsong, "A Beautiful Exchange."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrxUMF7zbuU>

A prayer of blessing

To you who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, may God give you grace and peace (1 Thessalonians 1:1c).

Original Materials by Heather Wilson