

## Lent 6 Palm Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Isaiah 50 vv 4-9a p737 Philippians 2 vv 5-11 p1179
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Mark 14 v1 – 15 v47 p1020

**A** **LMIGHTY** and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

**A** **LMIGHTY** and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Sermons on Palm Sunday tend to be short. There is so much else going on. Where possible, it is good to have a procession waving palm branches. For many years now, we have done this around the inside of the church at Halling and from the hall to the church at Cuxton. I used to remark that processing up the hill to S Michael's whilst wearing robes and singing *All Glory Laud & Honour* was my annual basic fitness test. When you fail your annual basic fitness test in the armed services, they start advising you about your pension entitlements! Thankfully, the Church of England has other priorities than physical fitness.

One year, on Palm Sunday, we processed through the village of Cuxton to S Michael's led by a beautiful white donkey. It was a procession of witness to the wider community as well as an act of worship on the part of those of us who already know Jesus as our Lord & Saviour. This was in the days when we only had one mid-morning service in the parish either at Cuxton or Halling, rather than a service in both places every Sunday as we do now. I have wondered whether it would be a good idea, one year, to hold a Palm Sunday procession led by a donkey from Cuxton to Halling or vice versa, but, unfortunately, the A228 is not very conducive to pedestrian processions or to the orderly movement of farm animals, and the distance might prove a basic fitness test too far for some of our regular congregations. One Palm Sunday at Ramsgate, I remember processing through the estate to the church and picking up some youngsters who then stayed for the service. Something similar happened one Ascension Day at Cuxton when some teenagers joined us as we assembled at the Co-op, accompanied our procession to S Michael's and some of them stayed for the service. It is a good thing to be out and about, for the Church to be visible. At Orpington, nine churches combined to process to an open air service in the Priory Gardens, which was a great success. Interestingly, at the start we would pick on a man to carry the large wooden cross, intending to recruit other volunteers to relieve him on the long hike, but, generally speaking, the person who first took up the cross would be quietly reluctant to lay it down.

Then there is the long Gospel reading, the story of our Lord's Passion. It's sheer length militates against following it with a long sermon. So does its emotional power. In days gone by the Passion Gospel would have been proclaimed by a priest standing on the rood screen, the wooden screen which, in a mediaeval church, fills the chancel arch and supports a great cross or rood.

The Passion story speaks for itself. How much does God love us? Where are Justice and Mercy reconciled? How does Jesus overcome the power of the Devil? Where do we see most clearly the victory of good over evil, of light over darkness? How may we, sinners that we are, enter into the Presence of the thrice holy God? What is the price of our redemption? How can we be reconciled to God? Where do we find eternal life? How ought we to live our lives?

So what do preachers talk about on Palm Sunday? My boss at Orpington used to use the sermon spot on Palm Sunday to tell people not to neglect the keeping of Holy Week. Apart from us remembering what Jesus did for us in this week at home and as we went about our daily business, the Church laid on appropriate services for the whole week, at which the story of what happened on the days between Palm

Sunday and Easter would be set forth in the Bible readings and form the basis of our prayers and devotions. Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday would be as usual Morning & Evening Prayer & Holy Communion but with special readings. The frontals and falls would be red to mark the Passion. On Maundy Thursday, the altar, the pulpit and the lectern would be arrayed in white and the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* would be sung for the first time since Shrove Tuesday, but the service would end after Communion with the singing of Psalm 22, *My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me*, and the stripping of the altars and every other decoration from the church. The lights would be dimmed and we would go home quietly in the darkness, remembering Jesus and His apostles going out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where He would pray that, if it were possible, this cup might pass from Him, the eleven apostles would sleep, though He had asked them to watch, and Judas would betray Him with a kiss into the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities. It's difficult to describe but Orpington Church had been rebuilt in the 1950s having suffered bomb damage during the war. The chancel of the old mediaeval church had been retained for worship and, on Maundy Thursday, it was filled with flowers and the Sacrament reserved from the Maundy Thursday Eucharist was placed there in case anyone needed to receive Communion on the following two days when the Eucharist is not celebrated. A group of mainly young people would keep vigil before the Sacrament, singing chants principally from the Taizé ecumenical community. Good Friday and Holy Saturday saw their own services conducted in the bare Church to mark the Death & Burial of our Saviour.

It has always been difficult to provide the full Holy Week experience with two churches to provide for. Some years we have celebrated a Passover on Maundy Thursday as Jesus would have done with His disciples instead of holding the stripping of the altars. Last year, there was nothing we were allowed to do. This year we are limited to our Wednesday & Thursday morning Communion in Cuxton & Halling respectively and the Ante-Communion (our normal Sunday service up to the Peace) in both churches on Good Friday. We can, however, read the appropriate biblical passages, meditate on them and pray every day in Holy Week. I shall be doing so on behalf of and in fellowship with you all, albeit alone in body, except for those advertised services. You can also find suitable material for daily worship online [Join us in a service of Daily Prayer | The Church of England](#). I expect many of you also have your own prayerbooks or you can take home one of the old ASBs we still have in church, but are not allowed to use for public worship.

The point is not to hurry on to Easter without pausing at the events of Holy Week. Easter is our joyful celebration of Christ's total victory over sin, the world and the devil. But sin and suffering are real. Their reality has to be acknowledged. We can't live our lives based on pretence. We do sin & we do suffer. Jesus knows what it is like because He was tempted as we are tempted. He shares our sufferings. He understands everything that we are going through. He takes all our sin and pain on Himself and bears it for us on the Cross. It is important to understand that - especially in these difficult times. It is only in understanding that Jesus is with us in everything that happens to us - that He hears us in all our prayers, that He shares in all our troubles, that He forgives us all our sins - that we truly comprehend the joy of Easter.