

**St Mary's Church, Tadley
Sunday 29th March, 2020**

**Passion Sunday
"Cross of Compassion and Solidarity"**



Collect

**Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen**

Welcome

Greetings to you all. We meet together in the name of Jesus Christ, albeit in a strange way and amid rising cases of Covid-19 in our country and our world. We are affected by the suffering we see and read of and may feel fearful and uncertain. It's appropriate to express our feelings because as we do we bring our fears into the open, into the arms of our Father, God where we can be enfolded. Richard speaks about this in his sermon today.

Like the Psalmists in the Bible we can and must cry out to God for mercy on behalf of ourselves and others. I was struck by a prayer this week which moves from fear to hope as the Psalms so often do. May it be your prayer too as we worship together.

*Be not far from me, O Lord.
Restless with grief and fear,
the abandoned turn to you:
in every hour of trial.
Good Lord, deliver us,
O God most holy,
God most strong,
whose wisdom is
the cross of Christ.*

The “**Cross of Compassion and Solidarity**” on the front was made by Andrew and Charles and marks our commitment as a church and community to stand together. You’ll find a short video of me speaking about this if you have internet access, and in it I mention the signs of God being with us; the cross and the many rainbows in house windows communicate God’s promised presence *with* us and you may communicate your own prayers to me and I’ll write them on little wooden discs which hang from the cross.

Hymn

Please sing or read the words

1. Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever child-like, no cares can destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.
2. Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
Be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.
3. Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.
4. Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

*Traditional Irish Tune
Lyrics by Jan Struther, 1931*

Reading

The Gospel: Luke 15. 11b-end

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

'Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Sermon - Richard Harlow

Welcome to the first of our Sunday sermons for the whole benefice of Tadley, Pamber heath and Silchester. You are welcome to share this file with others. Over the next weeks, Rob Young, Gill Sakakini and I will share with you reflections based on the bible readings for each Sunday.

We'll also add some questions for reflection and discussion at the end, so you can discuss what we've said with friends or come back at us with your thoughts. During this time of social isolation we're probably all getting more used to using our phones and computers for conversations that we would usually have face to face. So why not create a whatsapp group with a few friends, so you can discuss this, and more importantly, encourage each other?

If you need help with any technology to help you connect with others, then give me or Rob or Gill a ring or an email, and we'll arrange someone to talk you through how to get in touch with more people. It's worth setting up these groups now, because we have quite a few weeks of isolation ahead of us.

Our reading today is one of the best known stories in the bible. I shouldn't be surprised, but I am, that it takes us into areas that are quite topical: like isolation, antagonism, family feuds and reconciliation. I do hope that you aren't experiencing any family feuds, especially so if you can't get out!

Honestly, how is social isolation going? I've seen some hilarious stuff on facebook from parents, who are coming to appreciate just how hard it is to teach their children anything - let alone the masses of school work that is coming in from the school. I guess a whole generation of parents will be giving so much respect to school teachers when this is all over. And I guess we'll be doing the same to NHS staff and delivery drivers and just about everyone who is doing what the Government have asked us all to do. Wouldn't it be great if we can bring some good out of all this loss and anxiety and treat each other with more kindness and respect when it is over?

This story that we have just heard wasn't really intended as a story about how to cope with a pandemic, or even how not to fall out with your family. The original context is that Jesus is trying to help his critics understand why he welcomes the outcast and the sinner: the tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers. When we read these stories of Jesus, we have to ask ourselves what his original hearers were thinking as they heard this story. So what do you think his meaning was?

The story breaks down into 4 acts, a bit like a play. In **Act 1 (v.11-13)**, the young son asks his father for his share of the estate and leaves home with a bundle of cash, which he soon squanders. It seems like the story of every university student! But it's not quite as straight forward as that.

In the time of Jesus, asking for your share of the estate before your parents have died is like saying to them, "I wish you were dead. I want nothing more to do with you." So when Jesus' hearers first heard this story, they would have been scandalised by this young man. None of them would have felt any sympathy for him. In today's terms he would be seen the way we see people who are trying to cash in on coronavirus; he would be seen as beneath contempt, someone who has broken the bonds of society. If we are going to understand this story, you have to empty your heart of any shred of sympathy for this lad.

Generally, of course, I would never encourage you to think in black and white terms. We should always encourage each other to walk in the other person's shoes. But our current fears about this virus are challenging all that. I don't know about you, but I find myself really, really angry at people who won't obey the social distancing rules. The people who bump into you in Sainsbury's and who just popped in to get a couple of things, or the people who won't share the pavement in a way that allows you to keep 2 metres from them. I think of myself as reasonably tolerant, but I find that I am not. So how do we

stay gentle in our judgements, even when we have very, very good reasons to be angry with people?

Act 2 (vv.13-19), begins with the young man having spent his last coins. To make matters worse, the whole country enters a famine. No doubt everyone immediately went out and stocked up on toilet paper! Seriously though, we have been amazingly protected so far in this epidemic. Apart from a few days when we couldn't get potatoes or bread or tissues, we can all get food, heat and fresh water. Of course, the same is not true for some businesses. Many businesses and self employed people are facing a kind of famine: work has dried up or they are not allowed to do it. It doesn't take much imagination to sense the fear and stress they feel. As well as praying for NHS staff, let's remember to pray for those without work or whose work has gone through the roof. Both have a famine of peace, or sleep.

For our young man the famine drives him to do the most menial and disgusting job - feeding pigs. But that is not all. This job is abhorrent to him as a Jew, for pigs are unclean in Jewish faith and nobody in his homeland would keep them. So to him, this job is also dangerous. He feels that he might get ill and that God will judge him. But he has no choice. He begins to hit rock bottom.

I wonder whether you have ever hit that place? Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step programmes tell us that you have to hit rock bottom before you are ready to leave your addiction. My experience is that this applies to just about every major change in life. We keep on doing things that hurt us until we really have no alternative.

For me, rock bottom came about 6 months after my first wife announced that she wanted a divorce. I remember getting to that point where I contemplated suicide. As far as I was concerned, I had lost everything: my marriage, my kids, my home, our shared friends, even my job. The pain seemed too much. It's easy to romanticise rock bottom and think that we get to a point where we suddenly change our life and bounce back, like some v shaped curve. That isn't rock bottom. That is a blip. When you hit rock bottom, you bounce along it for long enough to get really sore!

When I decided not to kill myself, or rather God told me, in a dream, not to kill myself, that wasn't the end of rock bottom. Rock bottom is a period of life- months not days. It is a lonely, cold, hard place, but it is also a place where deep change begins. I want you to remember this, because we are not out of the woods yet with coronavirus. There will be times ahead where many of us hit rock bottom. I want you to know that rock bottom doesn't last forever, and that it is the place of deep change. So hold on and look up. God is still with you, even when you are in the pig pen.

As Act 2 ends, the young man has changed his heart. He has decided to go home but not to ask for forgiveness. He will go back and ask to be treated as a hired hand. We shouldn't underestimate the change of heart here. In our less charitable moments, we might suspect that his repentance is designed for effect, that he really wants his father to take him back, but I think that would be to misjudge him. All Jesus' hearers would expect the father to spit in his face or refuse to see him. So, as the son decides to go

home, he is entering the scene of his greatest failure, and he probably expects that it will go badly. He doesn't expect forgiveness.

Now, of course, as we read this story we tend to immediately think that the father represents God. We know that God is merciful and so we expect the father to be merciful. But that is not the way the world works. Forgiveness is a rare thing.

We have been running the happiness lab in Tadley for about 18 months now. The happiness lab is a 6 session course that takes you through scientifically proven ways of growing happiness and well being. Session 3 looks at forgiveness, and the feedback we get from delegates is that they were really anxious even coming to that session. Forgiveness is a painful area. we don't want to go there. We don't even want to acknowledge that we have people that we haven't forgiven. Our brain quite often simply blanks them out.

Maybe like me you've been going through your phone book and wondering who you should phone to check they are ok, during this time of isolation. Maybe, like me, you've been reminded of people that you have simply blanked, since they hurt you. Wouldn't it be quite something if we all picked up the phone and dialled someone we have blanked for too long? But just before you do, pause a while and pray, for reconciliation is a long road, and it's not for the faint hearted.

In **Act 3 (v.20-24)**, the focus shifts from the son to the father: The father who sees his son far off and runs to meet him; The father who waves aside his son's request to become a hired hand, and orders a fine coat and signet ring put back on his finger. It's a bit of the story that always brings a tear to my eye. I often tell it at baptisms and it chokes me every time. I think it does to some of those who hear it for the first time too. There is something mystifyingly beautiful about grace. It truly is the character of God.

But before we get there, let's spend a moment in the heart of the father who has been rejected by his son. Think of the battle that the father has had to fight in his mind to get to the place where he can welcome his son back with open arms. All those months or even years when the son saw nothing of his father and assumed the worst of him, all that time the father was working with all his strength to keep his heart open. He was patiently waiting, apparently doing nothing, but in fact doing the only thing he could - waiting with his heart open.

And the reason I think we should contemplate the father is because people ask me whether God has sent this virus to teach humanity a lesson. And the answer I gave on my last @StPaulsTadley facebook video is "no". God didn't send this. Just like the father in the story didn't send the famine that brought his son home. God never sends evil. It's not in his nature. And nor is God inactive during evil times, just like the father isn't inactive. Do you see what I mean? God is pouring out love on us and through us in this terrible time. If anyone tells you this is the judgement of God, then, I suggest, they have misunderstood the nature of God.

It's almost time to end, but there is still an Act to go. **Act 4** is a tragic end to a beautiful story. The younger son and his father are reconciled and partying, when the elder

brother comes home. He flies into a rage when he hears that his father has welcomed his prodigal brother back into the family. He doesn't like the way grace works. He likes the broken family, just as it is.

Don't be in a hurry to forget this part of the story. This is, in fact, the climax of the story. It is the part that tells you what Jesus wanted his first hearers to think about. So here are some questions for you to ponder out loud or in a whatsapp group:

1. What do you think Jesus wanted his original hearers to make of this story? (look at Luke 15.1-2 to see who his original hearers were)
2. In Act 1, I told you that, at the moment, I find myself more judgemental than usual. What is the link between fear and judgement? How is the general anxiety affecting you?
3. In Act 2, we looked at forgiveness: is there someone you would like to reconcile with? Does the epidemic make this more or less urgent?
4. Also in Act 2, I spoke about rock bottom: how might we cope when we feel that we are bouncing along the bottom?
5. How would you respond to someone who says: "This virus is part of God's judgement! It is the beginning of the End times"? Can you think of a better sentence describing God's action during this epidemic?

Finally, I'd like to invite you all to join a closed group on Facebook, called **Tadley Pamber and Silchester Benefice**. We have had to create this group so we can share some copyrighted material with you that is suitable for these last few days of Lent. Each day there will be a meditation and art I have posted there around the stations of the cross. **If you would like to join this group, please send Richard, Rob or me an email or facebook request. You will need a facebook account to access this. You may also receive an invitation to join the group from one of us.**

God bless you.

Prayers:

Let us pray to God,
who alone makes us dwell in safety:
For all who are affected by coronavirus,
through illness or isolation or anxiety,
that they may find relief and recovery:
Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,
and shaping national policies,
that they may make wise decisions:
Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers,
that through their skill and insights
many will be restored to health:
Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

For the vulnerable and the fearful,
for the gravely ill and the dying,
that they may know your comfort and peace:
Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.**
Amen.

(Church of England liturgy and prayer resources)

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

May God keep you in all your days.
May Christ shield you in all your ways.
May the Spirit bring you healing and peace.
May God the Holy Trinity drive all darkness from you
and pour upon you blessing and delight.

[Other opportunities to connect with worshipping communities.](#)

8.10am Sunday Worship BBC Radio 4 "Reconciliation in Difficult Times"

10.45 Sunday Worship from Bangor Cathedral, BBC 1.

Daily Reflections from Winchester Cathedral

<https://www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk>