

Sunday service, 3 April 2020, Palm Sunday

Welcome

Peter, Marianne, Colin and I are delighted to welcome you to this Sunday service on Palm Sunday from the Swiss Church in London and we hope that this message finds you all well.

In Psalm 31, verse 8, it says:

“Ich bin glücklich, dass du so gut zu mir bist,
denn du hast mein Elend angesehen,
und erkannt, wie verzweifelt ich war.”

“I will be glad and rejoice in your love,
for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.”

“Je serai par ta grâce dans l'allégresse et dans la joie,
car tu vois ma misère, tu connais les angoisses de mon âme.”

Today is Palm Sunday. We commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Joy was in the air on that day outside the city doors of Jerusalem. People were full of hope.

In the past weeks I have heard stories full of hope, a coming together of neighbourhoods and communities that show how much we can achieve together in times of crisis and how deeply we care for one another. People offer a helping hand and words of encouragement to those who need it most. Food shopping is being dropped on doorsteps, people who live alone receive phone calls from friendly strangers and the cheering for the NHS staff from our balconies and doorsteps brings tears to our eyes. There is a lot of joy in this time of uncertainty, like a small flower that pushes through the tarmac against all the odds. Yet God also knows the anguish of our soul, les angoisses de notre ame, unsere Verzweiflung.

Our fears and our joys have their place in God and in this world.
Gracious God, give us peace.

Prayer, led by Marianne Fisher-Hertig

“Do not be anxious about anything but in any situation by prayer, petition and thanksgiving present your request to God. The peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)

Lord above everything

We praise you and we thank you for who you are, even in the very present situation we find ourselves in.

You, only you, are steadfast, never changing, never leaving us, unique, ever loving, always available, always present.

We ask you come this very moment with the power of your holy spirit and unite us in this way, wherever each one of us is – not in our church building, but maybe in our kitchen, in our living room or in our garden. It can be tricky for some of us and we do miss not being together.

Yet we know and acknowledge that you are omnipresent and you are with each one of us. We pray help us to focus and concentrate on you and hear the words that you have put on Carla's heart today.

Protect us and help us find the space where we can do this. May we feel uplifted, encouraged and peaceful at the end of this service and may we draw on it for the week to come.

Lord you say: Do not be anxious and you will guard our hearts and minds. we draw on this and thank you for it, and with confidence we say:

Amen

Reading Matthew 21:1-9

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

"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 went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Reading from Genesis 7-9

God said to Noah: "Go into the ark, you and all your household. For I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights." The waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The ark floated on the face of the waters. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

In the six hundred first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

Sermon

Our perception of a biblical story changes with our lived experience. Bible stories that didn't speak to us a few years ago perhaps today speak to us in a profound way. That's the fascination of God's word, that it evolves with us and we evolve with it, and it is for the reason that the Bible remains a guiding light for so many people.

Three weeks ago, God's call to Noah to go into the ark with his household and to stay there for forty nights and forty days until the rain was over had little to do with my own life.

How much this has changed in just three weeks!

When I hear these words now: go into the ark, you and all your household, I cannot help but thinking of self-isolation, quarantine and social distancing, words that have become part of our standard vocabulary in just a couple of weeks. We are rapidly getting used to the coronavirus as the biggest threat of our generation. It affects all of humanity, just as the flood in the Book of Genesis in the Bible.

We are now in the ark, waiting for the storm to pass, for a cure to be found, for the peak of the infection rate to slow down, for recovery, waiting for having back our freedom, for life to return to normal, whatever that means.

These are unusual times. We are facing a radical change in lifestyle. What seemed like the most normal thing to do only two weeks ago, going to church on Sunday, meeting friends in a café, looking after the grandchildren or enjoying a holiday abroad, all these things are no longer possible. We are asked to physically distancing ourselves from our friends and to change our daily routine in order to protect the most vulnerable and our health services.

For many people staying at home may be inconvenient, but we will manage with a bit of patience and the occasional tear and encouraging phone calls with our friends. Yet home is not a safe place for everyone. A significant number of people, mainly women and children, experience violence and oppression at home. Some people struggle with the loneliness and isolation, others have chronic pain conditions or are awaiting an operation that they now cannot have. Some homes in the UK are damp and affect people's health. Some families are not in a position to put an extra meal on the table for their children. People living in refugee camps cannot follow the most basic hygiene standards because there are simply no provisions.

Noah's ark is a safe place for some, it is a threat for others, and we should keep this in mind as we reach out to our friends and neighbours and offer our support.

Noah's ark has suddenly a brand new meaning. We are Noah, we are this family stuck indoors. Thank God we have the internet and our phones to at least speak to each other!

God initially said to Noah that the rain will cease after forty days and forty nights, but in reality, the waters swelled for one hundred and fifty days. How they must have longed for the flood to be over!

We are at the beginning of this journey and we don't know when and how this will end. But we know how Noah's story ends. When the waters ceased to swell, Noah opened the window of the ark and sent out a raven and a dove to see if the waters have subsided. Both birds returned. They had not found a place to set foot as the earth was still covered by water. A week later Noah sent out the dove again, and this time it returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak. When he sent out the dove again after another seven days, the dove did not return. Noah now knew that the waters had dried from the surface of the earth, so finally he and his family and all the animals could leave the ark. What a joy they must have felt to set foot on land after all this time in enclosure and isolation!

And then God did something beautiful: he set a bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant between God and the earth. The rainbow is a reminder of God's promise to us that he journeys through life with us, even in the bleakest hour. In my neighbourhood many children now hang a rainbow drawing in their windows as a sign that they are thinking of their friends- the rainbow, a sign of hope.

Why though, if God has promised Noah and all his descendants his protection, why is there still so much heartache in the world, and why are we faced yet again with another threat to humanity today. Does God not have the power to prevent us from this disease? Where is the rainbow now?

Today is Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. People were lining the streets and greeted their saviour with palm leaves and songs of joy. God had done great things to them. They felt liberated and protected, perhaps not dissimilar to what Noah and his family must have felt when God set the rainbow in the clouds. A promising future lay ahead of them and they were filled with anticipation.

Yet we know that Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem is only the beginning of a much more complex story. Jesus, the Son of God, will be tried and he will be crucified. This will be the moment of God's utter powerlessness.

God's powerlessness in the face of human tragedy is what brings the divine so close to us. Moments of triumph and moments of powerlessness are part of our life in equal measures.

God is with us, not above us. That's on the one hand painful, because it's not the powerful God we might wish for, on the other hand also comforting because God understands us and sits with us through the difficult time as much as he rejoices with us in the good times. God is one of us. Of that we can be sure.

May the spirit of hope, patience and charity fill your hearts and minds so we can be God's stewards for each other during our time in the ark.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of all life

The streets and squares in our cities are deserted, the shops, concert halls and restaurants shut down. Where people used to gather, laugh, celebrate and share memories, the chairs are now empty, the voices became silent.

We pray for all the people who work in the hospitality, events, entertainment and tourism industry, for musicians, dancers and actors, especially for those on low wages and in temporary or precarious working conditions who now face a very uncertain future. We pray that these industries will soon recover. We pray that people will soon again flood our theatres, cinemas and concert halls.

In the meantime send your wisdom and your compassion that we find workable solutions to support those who need our all support now.

God, have mercy - Kyrie Eleison

We pray for the members of our congregation, our friends and family in Switzerland and across the world who struggle to cope with the current circumstances. It is difficult to be so far apart and not being able to travel. Lord, be with us when we silently cry and hope for this to be over soon. We pray for those who feel isolated and lonely. We pray for the sick and for those who have recently lost someone. Today we particularly keep in our thoughts Serenella Bertin who has lost her life companion Albert, the longest standing member of our congregation. Keep Serenella safe and hold her in this time of confusion.

God, have mercy - Kyrie Eleison

We pray for people in the poorest countries and in refugee camps with very limited health facilities and little possibility to help those who will fall ill from the Corona Virus. They will suffer huge losses and mourn many loved ones. God of hope, stretch out your healing arm. Bring peace and comfort. We pray for the people whose governments are not in a position to financially support those who lose their jobs over this crisis, or who are not willing to protect their citizens. Let this crisis that affects all of humanity led to a more just world.

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Gott segne und behüte Dich.
Gott lasse sein Angesicht leuchten über Dir und sei Dir gnädig.
Gott erhebe sein Angesicht auf Dich und gebe Dir seinen Frieden.

God bless you and keep you.
God let his face to shine on you and be gracious to you.
God lift his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Que l'Eternel te bénisse et te garde!
Que l'Eternel fasse briller son visage sur toi et t'accorde sa grâce!
Que l'Eternel se tourne vers toi et te donne la paix!

Go in peace and bring peace tot he world.
Gönd im Friede und bringet de Fride i d'Wält.

Amen