

**A worship service for Cashmere Presbyterian
Good Friday - April 10th 2020**

Prepared by Hamish Galloway, Interim Minister.

Welcome to this service for Good Friday. I bring greetings to you at this time of lockdown as we gather by pre-recorded services watched in our own homes and received in hard copy by post!

Good Friday is a day when we remember the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is a day that carries many layers of meaning including the way it shows us God's willingness to suffer with humanity. This is a powerful message currently with so much hardship and suffering engulfing our globe and infiltrating the homes of our nation. We have a God who knows our suffering and our pain.



Opening prayer:

Holy God, our hope and strength,
we give thanks for your Word made flesh in Jesus Christ —
You lived a life of identification with the human condition
You showed life that death cannot destroy,
and light that darkness cannot overcome.
Enlighten our minds and enliven our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit,
so that we may testify to your light
And share the life of Christ with a hurting world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

Good Friday hymn

There are so many great Good Friday hymns. I love the haunting tune and poetic lyrics of My Song Is Love Unknown. And I have such good memories of The Old Rugged Cross, sung to us many years at Hoon Hay Presbyterian by one of the parishioners of fine voice, Tom Morrison. And in my 20's I came across a version of O Sacred Head Sore Wounded by Amy Grant that I have used often in services over the years – it is a hymn moving in both word and sound. And there is the rising anthem that is Lift High The Cross! But for me the favourite has to be When I Survey the Wonderful Cross. I was so taken with it in my early life as a Christian that I learnt the words by heart, and it has stayed close to my heart all those years:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride

Forbid me Lord that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to His blood

See, from His head, His hands, His feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e'er such love and Sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

New Testament Reading: Luke 23: 26-56 (NIV)

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then

"they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!"
and to the hills, "Cover us!""

³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.^[c]"

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Sermon

This morning I want to focus on 2 saying of Jesus on the cross

1. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (v34)
2. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (v46)

Firstly, though let us consider the context of this story. It is one of brutalization and degradation.

Mel Gibson's movie 'The Passion' has been criticised for providing an over exaggerated version of the crucifixion events. That maybe so but I do not think it was so far from

the reality. Let's look at the sequence of events here regarding the way Jesus was treated:

- Already falsely accused and whipped
- Led away by soldiers in a weakened state (hence Simon needed to carry his cross), his liberty and freedom denied
- He was a good and innocent man placed among criminals
- Taken to a place called the Skull
- Stripped of his clothing
- Crucified – an excruciatingly slow and painful death
- Sneered at, mocked and insults hurled at him

How did he respond?

I do know how we tend to respond to things like this. We have a tendency to get up in arms at the least slight against us! And we so easily get angry with God at the least of setbacks (I think of the way the words God and Jesus are used as expletives by people when things go wrong!). Compare that with Jesus' reaction to this terrible treatment against him as demonstrated in the 2 sayings:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (v34)

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (v46)

He neither lashes out at those who wrong him or is angry with God for allowing this to happen to him.

I think his response can be summed up with his core teaching Love God and Love other as you Love yourself. This was a huge test of his ability to live out what he taught. And under enormous pressure, that is exactly what he does. Lets unpack that bit by bit; his love of God, his self-love, and then his love for others so deeply apparent on the cross.

1. His love for God

There are 3 ways that I see Jesus showing his love for God on the cross.

Firstly there is his obedience – Jesus had already made a clear link between love and obedience in John 14:

"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

I think of Jesus being scorned by so many who were saying to him, 'ok then if you are the Messiah then come down off the cross'. If I had the powers of Jesus I would want to do just that, to come down off the cross, just to spite them, just to show them what I could do, let alone to escape the pain. Speaking of the pain, in this Lockdown period I am on a new run/walk routine that requires me to do 2-minute run repetitions. I am such a wimp and find myself wanting to pull out before the 2 minutes is up – pathetic! Yet right through this journey to the cross, we see obedience from Jesus in the face of extreme temptation to find an easy way out. He obeyed the will of his Father, even it meant blood, sweat and tears.

So the first sign of his love for his Father was obedience in times of extreme testing. The second sign was heartfelt, painful and honest anguish expressed from Son to Father. In Matthew's gospel we read that at 'About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").'

Jesus and the Father were such a tight loving unit that the separation between them that was coming with Jesus about to take on him the sin of the world was intensely felt.

I know of at least 3 situations right now where friends of mine have loved ones dying in other part of the country or world and are feeling the separation of lockdown excruciating! Why? Because of the anguish of separation from their love dying one! This is the kind of anguished expression of love we see between Jesus and God on the cross.

And the third sign of love between Father and Son is the presence of extreme trust. Luke relays this to us down through the ages recording Jesus final words "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*"

This is faith. He believes he is the Messiah. He believes that God the Father has a plan for him. There had been so many things happen that had affirmed that this was all true. Yet this is the biggest test – he is heading into the uncertainty of death and afterlife here. He does so knowing trust is all he has – he is powerless to do otherwise. You see Jesus did not raise himself from the grave – the Father did it. Jesus' humanity bound him to death. He needed God to act. Thus, he has to say 'I am in your hands now O God!' I am going to die now, the rest is up to you. This is total trust. Trust is at the heart of loving relationship.

There is a powerful message in this for us in the grip of a deadly virus. One of the things that is very clear is that the human tendency towards self-reliance has been smashed. Mighty nations like the USA have been brought to their knees. No-one is immune – Boris Johnson proudly boasted about shaking hands with everyone as if he was immune, only to be struck down with the virus. In these circumstance in whom shall I put my trust? The psalmist puts it this way:

*Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. (Psalm 20:7)*

For chariots and horses we can substitute our health, our jobs and our economy!

This secure loving relationship with God is also the ground of our ability to know healthy self-love out of which healthy love of other flows.

2. His Self-Love

The people around the cross repeatedly assailed him with derisive put-downs about his so-called messiahship. In the face of this, he displayed a grounded self-belief that he was the messiah, and that all this was part of God's plan. Hence what was happening as not all about him, but he was able to see beyond himself to what was happening for others.

How do we develop that sense of identity that allows us to forget self and love our neighbour as Christ did? The answer in large part lies in accepting the second point I want to make – we need to know at a very deep level that we, just like Jesus, are loved by God. And having that deeply embedded in our psyche allow us to love others – we again see this in Jesus on the cross.

3. His love for others

Jesus' response to those who were doing these terrible things to him was a plea for God to forgive them. Clearly, he could see that to crucify the Messiah, the son of God on trumped up charges was a heinous crime. Knowing the trouble they were in, his heart went out to them in love and a desire to see them forgiven!

I love this because it gives me hope of love and forgiveness! None of us are beyond the pale! We all desperately need to be loved and forgiven in the face of the ways we mess up.

Judas never got that message. He took his own life before the full impact of the cross and resurrection came to bear on his life. If only ...? I read a book a while back called *The Gospel According To Judas*, by Ray S. Anderson. It is a novel that attempts to tell the Jesus story from the perspective of Judas. The first sentence in the prologue to the book made me think. The author is talking about something he saw that inspired the idea of the book. He writes:

"I saw it in the men's restroom in a restaurant in San Francisco, printed in block letters with a blue felt tip pen across the top of the mirror:

JUDAS COME HOME – ALL IS FORGIVEN!"

I am sure that if Judas had lived, the Risen Jesus would have got this very message out to him.

A woman once came to me saying that she could never be forgiven, that she had murdered someone! Taking my cue from what Jesus said on the cross, I was able to assure her that we are loved unconditionally by God and never beyond his forgiveness.

I believe that the darkness, earthquake and the ripping of the curtain in the temple that accompany Jesus death communicate a momentous shift at a cosmic level as the sins of humanity are wiped clean and divine forgiveness is made available to all.

How does this apply today?

The basic and bottom line is that for each of us to know the love and forgiveness of God is deeply healing and empowering as we face all that life throws at us. It is very needed at this time of so much uncertainty and disorientation. It gives us a rock to stand upon when all around seems to be sinking sand.

And I also think on those in some quarters who insist on calling COVID 19 the 'Chinese Virus'. This feels like dangerous scapegoating and setting up of one against the other; and then there have been the scenes where shiploads of masks and equipment are being redirected from Germany to USA and accusations of piracy are being made. I compare this to the defusing power of forgiveness and love demonstrated by Jesus on the cross, His thinking of the others and not just of self. It is the way of Christ we need desperately right now, not the way of greed and self-interest.

Conclusion

CS Lewis wrote a piece in 1949 when the world was filled with anxiety about nuclear holocaust. His basic conclusion went something like this:

We are all headed inextricably towards death – that is our journey, whether pending or if it is a long way off.

We have a choice about how we see the world in respect of this truth. Either that death is the end or that we have a God who created this universe, who loves us and has prepared a place for us beyond the grave. This second choice is the choice Jesus took saying to his Father, 'into thy hands I commit my spirit', trusting God that this death is not the end. And it is the choice that this passage calls us to as we live out lives on this side of the grave not sure of the future but called to trust our eternal destiny into God's hands!

And in the meantime, says Lewis 'love one another with a passion'; a philosophy of living that Jesus demonstrated right to the end of his earthly life with his loving plea to God –

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

That to me is an essential message of Easter that comes to us in the midst of this deadly pandemic – actually death is something we all face, in the face of it we need to know we are loved by God and trust him for what is ahead, and in the meantime, so long as we live on this earth, Jesus instruction to us is simple 'love as I have loved you'.



Jesus our advocate,
In the darkness of Gethsemane,
You wept for us.
Shedding tears of blood,
You shared our pain.
Jesus our redeemer,
On the way to the Cross,
You suffered for us.
Tortured, spat upon and despised,
You carried our burdens.
Jesus our Saviour,
On the hill of Calvary,
You died for us.
Crucified and hung upon a tree,
You released us into freedom.
Son of the living God,
Redeemer, Saviour, Advocate,
Through the journey of suffering,
In the place of darkness,
You overcame death forever,
And brought us into newness of life.

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Closing prayer and benediction

Christ, when we survey the wondrous cross,
strengthen us to face the very worst in our world:

Fear that we are insignificant, unworthy and unforgivable

Anxiety about the future and what that hold for us,
Sickness, economic hardship and unemployment
Tendencies to self-interest, dissention and violence,

Help us to bring your truth, grace, faith, hope, wisdom, and love—
the greatest of these being love.

For your love has the power to destroy all that brought you
to this cross

Amen.