

Palm Sunday Service 2014 Adrian Worsfold

Prelude Music: Tasmin Archer and [say] *Sleeping Satellite*

I blame you for the moonlit sky
And the dream that died
With the eagles' flight.
I blame you for the moonlit nights
When I wonder why
Are the seas still dry?
Don't blame this sleeping satellite.

Chalice Lighting *Light the chalice*

At this hour, in small towns and big cities, in single rooms and ornate churches, many of our sister Unitarian congregations are also lighting a flaming chalice. Also our General Assembly meets until Wednesday.

So, as we light our chalice today, let us remember that we are part of a great community of faith.

Each individual church is undergoing a struggle for survival or building a vision for an expanded future; each church wishes a humble and triumphal entry through the sacred walls to release a new future of service to the crowd.

May the dancing flame inspire us to fill our lives with the Unitarian ideals of aspiring to love, seeking justice and following truth, building on freedom, pursuing reasonable reasoning and actively tolerating difference.

[After Judith L. Quarles *A Community of Faith*]

Introduction

The service today has a double theme. One is Palm Sunday and all that, but the other is some thoughts on building a parish profile - a document that describes and analyses who we are for the purposes of future ministry.

The link I made was in the chalice lighting: "each church wishes a humble and triumphal entry through the sacred walls to release a new future of service to the crowd."

The first [Hymn](#) is one of those welcome ones, being Sing Your Faith 126 Open the Door, Step Right Inside, [SF 126 Open the Door choir](#).

Meditation: *A Palm Sunday Prayer* by David A Johnson

Thou who art the soul and heart of life, save us from fear - the fear of days and nights yet to be, the fear of the known and the unknown, the fear that builds high walls around our spirits and our lives, the fear that closes in and envelops us, the fear that nibbles at the edges of every satisfaction. Free us from fear of failure and success, of shame and pain, of death and fear of life as well. Open our eyes that we may see thy glory in humbleness and simplicity, commonness strewn generously across our path all our days. May we recognise thee riding upon a simple beast of burden, down the crooked streets of Jerusalem. May we not require the palms of victory and praise, the accolades and shouts of the multitude to see thy glory in gentleness, patience, loving kindness and, yes, pain and sometimes death. Thy way of peace - of faith, hope, and love - still is our path, our joy, our way. Amen.

[1997 *UUMA Worship Materials Collection*; altered]

Meditation *Now, in Shared Quietness*, by Anne E. Treadwell

Now, in shared quietness, we shall listen to the wisdom of our inner hearts and minds as we join in meditation.

Let us be mindful of this special time, as again the feast of unleavened bread draws nigh, which is called the Passover.

Let us remember the history of this feast, the celebration of beginning a long and hard journey into freedom and the promised land. We give thanks for our own journeys, our long and hard learnings, our freedom and our glimpses of the promised land.

Let us be mindful of how closely hatred and fear are intertwined, as they were for the priests and scribes as they reacted to Jesus. May we never, through our fears, seek to kill that which is good and true. Let us seek forgiveness for times when our fears have outweighed our love.

Let us remember how easily evil may enter our hearts, as it entered the heart of Judas. We pray that we may have the wisdom to recognize evil, and the strength to keep it away.

Let us be mindful of the greed which so often rules us, as it ruled Judas who covenanted with murderers for money. May we never betray anything good, or anyone loved, for the promise of selfish gain.

Let us remember the night of the feast, the night of betrayal, the night of love, the night of hate. Let us remember, in silence and wonder.

[Source: 1997 *UUMA Worship Materials Collection*]

Meditation: *Waving the Palms* by David O. Rankin

Palm Sunday is found: whenever we are serving a noble and unpopular cause with selfless devotion, holding to the ideals of truth and justice;

Palm Sunday is found: whenever we are seeking to uplift the fallen, to comfort the broken-hearted, to strengthen and encourage the weak and hopeless;

Palm Sunday is found: whenever we are working bravely and persistently in the face of abuse and criticism to establish more equitable relations in the world;

Palm Sunday is found: whenever we are sacrificing our lives in behalf of what we believe to be the service of love for all humanity.

This is Palm Sunday!

Meditation: by Charles F. Flagg

Every endeavour begins with a first step, and encounters darkness and difficulty along the way.

We know the darkness of ignorance, of fear, and of tyranny.

Yet we know the dawning of the light, the beginnings of hope, and the renewal of life.

Blessed be the eternal power which inspires us to kindle these lights. Blessed be the source of light and of life. Amen.

In our final prayer, let us think in silence for those attending our General Assembly Meetings, and also this is a space for your own concerns and thought for the sufferings of others and for giving thanks. Silence

Readings

A series of Hebrew Bible readings (*NRSV*) are appropriate to this day.

Isaiah 50: 4-9a *The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication*

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

7 The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Secondly, Zechariah 9:9: *The Coming Ruler of God's People*

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Finally here, Psalm 118 19-27:

19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. 25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. 27 The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

Pause At this point I want to inject a moment of contrast, even sanity, to what we are dealing with, and include this in the span of what we have in the church. We're about to read appropriate gospel readings for the day but, if walking up to Jesus, I'd say, to him, like this following hymn, "Actually, It's not real."

[Atheist Hymn](#) [on CD]

Readings

Mark 11:1-11

1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Luke 19:37-44

37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying,

'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!' 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' 40 He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

41 As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. 44 They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognise the time of your visitation from God.'

John 12:12-19

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel!'

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. 17 So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. 18 It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. 19 The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

Appropriate I think at this point is [Interlude Music](#) using [Joan Osborne's One of Us](#), a studio version with extra guitar treatment. "What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on a bus, just trying to make his way home, like a holy rolling stone, get back to heaven all alone, nobody calling on the phone...".

[Commentary](#)

Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem appears in all four of the gospels. However, while all four gospel writers made a contribution to the story, they did not all contribute the same information.

Mark is the only gospel that leaves the parade at the city gates and Jesus goes into the city alone. Mark, Matthew and John has the crowds singing "Hosanna!", but, unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no praise at the end of Mark's and John's stories. Matthew's gospel is the only one featuring children. Matthew and John are the only two that mention the prophecy from Zechariah. Matthew refers to two animals. Matthew and Luke does not include the palms. Luke is the only gospel writer who says, "The stones will cry out" and who tells us that Jesus looks over the city and weeps. John doesn't tell us Jesus sent two disciples for the donkey. John starts with the parade instead of the preparation.

Two important symbols told ancient readers what this day is all about. Donkeys symbolise peace whereas riding on a horse would have meant an aggressive messianic figure. The second important symbol is the palm branch. In the ancient world, palm branches were symbols of victory. The people laid palm branches in front of Jesus, leading early Christian readers to understand that Jesus represents the victory of peace over war and conflict. Unfortunately, of course, Palm leaves do not develop fully at passover - the leaves would disintegrate if you tried to wave them - and the Jewish tradition is to wave palm leaves for Sukkot, which happens in the autumn when the leaves are mature.

It opens the question whether the texts of Palm Sunday and the procession is from Jesus reading the Hebrew scriptures himself and using the Isaiah suffering servant tradition, riding in on a donkey, or whether it is yet again the early Christian authors constructing their messianic king backwards in time creating those Old Testament prophecies. The Palm leaves used by John and implied by Mark must be constructions after the event, because they cannot have been there; perhaps this is why Matthew and Luke skip the mention of leaves altogether.

At this point, I'll round off palm Sunday into Easter by having the biblical scholar give his opinion on Easter now that he is an agnostic. [Bart Ehrman on Crucifixion and Resurrection](#). [NPR *Fresh Air*, 4 minutes 52 seconds]

That the historical Jesus took his own last-days mission to Jerusalem there is no doubt, and he probably did it within the year of his healing ministry removing demons from people in his actions of faith healing ahead of the expected new Kingdom of God on earth.

Our second [hymn](#) is Sing Your Faith The April Fool Has Chosen: [SF 153 Passion Chorale](#).

Sermon *Making a Parish Profile*

Let's be honest. Most of us do not want to go to our Jerusalem, to grasp the nettle, to do what is necessary to bring the matter to a head. We'd rather continue on as we are, doing reasonably good things; for to go on to Jerusalem is to introduce the real risk of failure or, as, an interpretation of the Christian story, to find a failure yes but also an unexpected success, something well worth having but was never foreseen.

Jesus was doing a pastoral and a reasonable job, surely, as a faith healer and an idealist, ministering to crowds and building human worth through the fellowship of the meal. He was debating and adding to the spirit of the Law. John's gospel gives the clue that he did this for some three years before going to Jerusalem; arguably, it was a lot quicker than that. He prepared some people, he criticised, he advised, gave a sense of what the new reality would be - *but he had to prompt God to bring in the Kingdom by going to Jerusalem*. He drew a crowd on the way in, upset people going about their business in the temple, and either he arranged to be picked up by the Romans using Judas or he just was arrested by claiming some sort of kingship of Israel. Afterwards, Paul was able to flip the movement across to those Gentiles who were seeking a movement with one God, able to jump on the cause with a figure of salvation.

If Jesus had not demonstrated to God his own suffering-servant-messianic intent and put his neck on the line, he'd have gone stale, and of course those people whom he'd healed would have sinned again, got those demons back and become unwell again. As you do when you don't see a proper doctor.

So the question is whether we, here, are going to go to our Jerusalem, or just carry on with what we are doing. There's a big risk in going to Jerusalem. On the other hand we might, with the late Richard Briers' character Martin Bryce, act as though we are going around in *Ever Decreasing Circles*.

To carry on as before is to have all sorts of folks take services, to provide a coffee morning on a Friday, and hope we don't lose too many people and attract some more to eventually build up other activities like liberal religious discussion and activity groups.

Let me give you an example of now and one problem of many taking services. So today I have given a fairly in-depth and critical account of Palm Sunday in a commentary on the readings. It is a significant date in the Christian calendar, and I'd observe dates in other faith calendars. But to make sense, it needs next week to observe the crucifixion and resurrection story, and examine it equally. But next week we have a different preacher, and I know in advance that David has decided not to tackle the issue of the appearances but to do a Pagan Easter instead. So, in having me preach, and then him, we end up arguably with a lack of direction and a lack of co-ordination. We have variety, yes, and we can have something different from him and me, but we are not getting any long-term depth from this multiple-voice variety. I guess that most will find his Easter far more relevant to their lives than mine; others will differ, however.

So today, to make up the gap, I have used parts of Bart Ehrman discussing his book *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* [2014] during the programme *Fresh Air* on National Public Radio in the United States.

But there is the risk in going for more co-ordination. Suppose we have a development minister - would then his or her depth be your or my depth? Because some of us can start to lose out. It's like a going to Jerusalem, inevitably upsetting some of the things we do now, but hoping to achieve a direction towards something vital or even unexpected, that is to build a future life of this congregation so that it can be of service to others.

If Jesus had gone into Jerusalem and was able to say, "read my document: my handout and guide" it might, after all, have been a quicker way of being arrested than tossing over money tables and having Judas go off with the biblical thirty pieces of silver.

I'm advocating that we produce a document. The Church of England requires that before it recruits a priest or deacon, a person in charge or a curate, it produces a document called a parish profile that the candidate can read to describe the church. Some of them are on paper only; a great many are also on a website. If you enter 'parish profile' in to a search engine, there are many that can be read.

Essentially, then, the profile is descriptive, and it describes the area and it describes the church itself. But it should also be analytical, regarding the directions of the church in the past, the present and the future. It

should face up to the challenges as well as what is wanted, and especially what is wanted from a minister. It also becomes the background - the explanation - of a job description.

However, it is more than this because it is a useful exercise in itself. Very often a parish profile is produced by an existing minister or dedicated person to get the thing written. It is far better, however, if the analysis of what the church was, is and could become is done as a set of exercises by the congregation. The resulting document would show clearly that input has come from the congregation - it would be seen as a strength of the congregation.

Some description, like the human geography of the area, might be acquired from the likes of *Wikipedia*. This, though, would be a mistake. What is the human geography *as it impacts upon the church?*

We could write about the changes to Park Street, that once a suburb of Hull for a steeped middle class-run church is now a through road on the edge of a city centre with nearby huge retail development - and a gathered church that has little impact on the local housing that is present on and off this main road.

The description of this church would be theological and social, but clearly as it relates to the wider movement. What does it do with the Yorkshire Unitarian Union, and how is it like or unlike other Unitarian churches - the evidence known here set alongside some speculation and assumptions about others.

But there must be an analysis and the typical analysis one would see is the SWOT approach - to identify Strengths (including preparing the document), Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses are commonly interpreted as internal, with opportunities and threats seen as external.

The second useful analysis may be PEST, that is Political, Economic, Social and Technological. This usually is an external analysis of pressures on a business, but if made internal it has an interesting effect. Political is how we have struggled with governance - the committees, the congregational meetings, the trusts; the economic is the money side; the social is how we get together; the Technological becomes the means by how we Tell the liberal religious story. So PEST means Politics, Economics, Socialising (or community) and Telling the story.

These elements are very important for a good parish profile. They tell a prospective minister what we subjectively analyse as our condition. They become the pick-up point for the minister's first actions.

Furthermore, there can follow an initial Job description within the Parish Profile, which is the congregation having a view on the types of activities expected of the minister. For example, it might require the minister to take only a maximum of half of services available but to otherwise educate and train congregation members in service taking. We may say, also, go and build a second congregation from scratch, and bring back what you learn into this place.

There you have it. A Parish Profile (and remember that our Presbyterian forebears believed in *parishes!*) is a geographically based description of the area as relevant to the church and an historically based description of the church itself as relevant to the present and hopes for the future; it contains SWOT and possibly internalised PEST analyses, and ends with a hoped-for job description in general terms. As Jews say: next year - or even this year - in Jerusalem.

[Collection](#) and [Notices](#)

The final appropriate [hymn](#) now is in *Sing Your Faith* Hymn 68 'I Dream of a Church' [SF 068 Streets of Laredo choir](#).

Benediction

The Jews in Babylon said. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither." At the end of the Seder meal at Passover Jews will say, "Next year in Jerusalem!" And at every Shabbat some give the hope that the Messiah should come "speedily in our day."

But they also say: "For it was not our forefathers alone whom the Holy One redeemed; He redeemed us, too, with them," and, "In every generation, every individual must feel as if he or she personally had come out of Egypt."

The [Postlude Music](#) to finish is being used as a hymn at the General Assembly tomorrow [Monday 14 April] . It is [Blue Boat Home](#) sung here by its author, the Unitarian Universalist singer songwriter Peter Mayer.