

Prelude: Prelude on the hymn tune “London” by W.T. Best, played by John Crombie

Words of welcome:

The Psalmist says, “Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” When we come to worship God the first thing we should do is to remember who we are coming to, and how we belong to him, and all that we owe him and give thanks. And so our first hymn today is Praise my soul the king of heaven. I know that you probably know it. I also know that you may feel silly singing at home. But do sing or hum along – remembering that you are offering praise to God.

Hymn: Praise my soul the King of heaven

Prayer:

Lord God we bow before you to give you thanks and praise.

We thank and praise you for all the timeless and eternal things you do and have done which show your love for us: for your creation in which we live and of which we are part; for your sending of Jesus to bring you close to us, in all your creative glory and love; for your presence with us each moment of life.

And we thank you for the way that as a Father you are leading us through these difficult days in which we live.

We thank you for people who have been vaccinated, and for those who developed the vaccines and for those who administer them. We thank you that we can see a small hope for life to open up again. We thank you for each other, our brothers and sisters who have helped us through these days in different ways.

As day follows day, teach us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our hope grounded in our knowledge of your loving presence. And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom. The power and the glory forever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 8:34-9:1

Jesus has been having a private conversation with his disciples, in which he has begun to tell them what his idea of how to be the expected Messiah looks like. He has told them how it involves falling out with the religious and legal powers that be and being killed – and then rising again. And Peter has reacted against this because it is so far from how human imagination would expect a glorious victory to be won.

Now Jesus calls the crowd to come and hear what he wants to say; and so it is to those who may not think of him as the Messiah, and those who have not heard him talk about his coming death that he says that his followers must deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him.

And when he said that it would be just as shocking to the crowd as what he had been telling his disciples. Who would want to follow someone if it involved taking up your cross? Because that was no metaphor. People didn’t talk about taking up their cross when they simply meant doing something a bit difficult or not to their taste. Taking up your cross was what you did when you were going to be put to death. If you took up your cross there was no going back: you would die.

And if following Jesus means taking up a cross, then the implication is clear that he will also be taking up his cross, with all that will follow on from that. He is telling the crowd that they should expect him to be put to death, and that he is calling them still to follow him. Jesus wants followers who understand that. He doesn't want followers who are waiting, waiting, waiting for him to show his power and might by worldly battle and a seizure of authority from those who already rule the land. He doesn't want followers who have an agenda that they are waiting for him to fulfil. He doesn't want followers who are in it for what they can get – those who want, as he puts it, to save their lives.

Asking “What’s in it for me?” is a very human response to any new idea. Or to any idea that asks for our allegiance in one way or another. We see it as political parties gear up for elections and try to assure us that our interests will be best served by voting for them – no matter what we think our interests are. And of course in doing that, our politicians seek to show that they can be all things to all people and most often end up coming across as either deceitful or disappointing. No one can be all things to all people. One definition of good leadership that I often think about is “disappointing your people at a rate they can accept.”

Jesus is doing the very opposite to our vote-seeking politicians. He will not tell his would-be followers what is in it for them – not on this occasion anyway. Instead he demands of them – of us – that we be willing to lay everything down for the sake of his cause: even up to and including our lives. He asks this of us because if what he is doing is true, if the kingdom of God really has come to earth with him, then not to be part of it is like forfeiting life itself.

This season of Lent, are you trying to give something up or take something on to show your devotion to Jesus and to deepen your awareness of his presence? If you are, good for you. But whatever you are doing is only a token: and Jesus asks for everything. That's what being a disciple means: not being ashamed of him and his words, even when they are condemning him to death and when to acknowledge him might be to invite the same response. Peter failed on that one, and we all fail. But it is when we have our moments of success, when we really are able to get beyond our own interests and desires and put ourselves unreservedly into God's hands that we see that the kingdom of God has come with power.

Hymn: Take up your cross the Saviour said

Reading: Colossians 3:1-11 (Ron)

Jesus was talking before the events of Easter. He was talking of his death and resurrection to his disciples, he was talking of following him in carrying their crosses to those who wanted to come where he was going, in an effort to make them understand that it wouldn't be all glory and hallelujahs. The events which we read of in the Gospel between this conversation up to and including the crucifixion show how right he was. As we read on through Mark's gospel we will see that almost without exception, the account tells of increasing tensions with the power that be, of challenges and questions about who he was and what he was doing. The cross, which seemed so ridiculous an end for the one who healed and fed and walked on water, and was sought out and acclaimed for doing so, becomes much more plausible a destiny.

The letters of St. Paul were, of course, written on the other side of the crucifixion and resurrection. The possibility that following Jesus would mean a literal cross or other means of execution had not gone away. The early church had seen James and Stephen executed, and the rank and file of disciples persecuted, and Paul and Peter had their own runs-in with imprisonment and the real threat of death. Everyone knew that in the volatile world of the

Roman Empire being a Christian could be personally dangerous. But because everyone knew that, because people knew that taking up the cross was more than a metaphor, Paul could also talk about it in other ways.

And so here we have him reminding the Colossian church that in fact on one level they have already been crucified. By accepting the death and resurrection of Jesus as being for them, they have on one level gone through it with him, the death, the cross, but also the resurrection. *You have died*, he reminds them, *and your life is hidden with Christ in God*. And it is because they have died, because we have died, because our previous life with all the bad traits that Paul iterates for our benefit has been hung on the cross with Christ, that we can see the kingdom of God come in power.

What else but the kingdom of God could get rid of anger and malice and wrath and slander and evil desire and greed and all the rest of it? What else but having such things crucified with Christ? What but the kingdom of God – God being in charge – could change people from the old self to the new self, renewed in the image of our creator? And how else will the world be truly changed than by changing people? The people who in Jesus' day were expecting God to send someone to rout the Romans in battle had not thought that doing this would not be to change the world at all, not really. It would be to change their current circumstances, for a while, but nothing more. And those people who today want to see God come to zap those who do wrong, and to force the world to change have not thought about how this would show only worldly, but not heavenly power.

In the human experience, power and force seem to be two sides of the same coin. If you have power then you can make people do what you want. But in the kingdom of God power and love go together. God has all power, but he will not use it to force his will, but he will use it in love to show over and over how it is better to live in his love than without it. The power of love took Jesus to the cross and brought him back again from death. The power of God's love enables us to be forgiven and so to change. The power of love is what will change the world, maybe not suddenly, but over time, dramatically.

So this Lent, as we follow Jesus on the way to the cross, remember that we are called to follow him in truth, never seeking what we can gain from our discipleship; never thinking our own desires are of any account compared to the desire to follow him. We are called to be prepared to give up everything – hopes, plans, possessions, loves, even life itself. We are called to follow in love. For then, and only then will we see God's kingdom come with his kind of power. And then, as Paul says, Christ will be all and in all!

Whenever we need to remind ourselves of the traits which are prized by God in his kingdom, his rule and reign on earth and in his children, we can do no better than return to the beatitudes: the list of people who God loves to bless. And so we sing of them now in the hymn:

Hymn: Blest are they, the poor in spirit

Prayer:

Lord God, who lives and rules and reigns over all that you have made, who asks of us everything and then repays us with even more, we pray to you and with Jesus for your kingdom to come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray for people and places we know where your powerful love is needed. We pray for this troubled world, with people living in fear of illness, or in despair at the loss of loved ones or of the things that made life meaningful. We pray for those who are being vaccinated, and for those who live in countries where there is no vaccine as yet, and where healthcare can be a lottery, and where there is no safety net if they cannot work. We pray for

your love to be shown by neighbour and friend and family and by governments near and far, that together we may live in solidarity with one another. May your kingdom come.

We pray with wonder and appreciative thanks for the wonderful world that you made and allow us to call home. May we never take for granted any part of the work of your hands, from the most majestic landscape to the smallest working cell. And may we spread the love of your kingdom by caring for your handwork as we care for the world around us and for the people who live beside us. May your kingdom come.

We pray for your church called to be heralds and enactors of your kingdom, that you would keep her – us – pure and true, looking always to you, seeking your kingdom and your righteousness above all else. We pray for those who are, even today, called on to suffer the possibility of death because of their love for you, and ask that they know your care and your strengthening presence. And we pray for our churches here, and for our partner churches in Libis and Kostalec as we wait to discover what a gradually unlocking world will mean for the way you call us to go forward. May your kingdom come.

Hear all our prayers and honour our desire to follow your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Hymn: Will you come and follow me if I but call your name

Benediction

As followers of Christ, live the life of God's kingdom.

And the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Be with you now and always. Amen.

Postlude Setting of Psalm 113 “Ye children who do serve the Lord” harmonized for the 1635 Scottish Psalter. Played by Alan Buchan on the Laggan organ.