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**Sunday 2 April 2023 to Sunday 9 April 2023**

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Sunday 2 April 2023

**Crucify him**

by Neil Bergmann

***‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ Pilate asked. They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’ (Matthew 27:22)***

Read Matthew 27:11–26

On this Palm Sunday, our reading is not about Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah, but it looks ahead a few days later to his crucifixion. The cries of ‘Hosanna’ (‘save us’) are replaced by cries of ‘Crucify him!’

This is a very appropriate way to start this week because the events of Jesus’ time in Jerusalem are best understood in the shadow of the cross of Good Friday. This week, all of Jesus’ teaching points to the looming cross and the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. This ministry has two key purposes. Firstly, Jesus’ death and resurrection provide all believers with the free gift of salvation from sin and eternal life. Secondly, through his teaching, Jesus explains his new kingdom – that topsy-turvy heavenly kingdom where the first are last, and the last are first.

As redeemed and sanctified children of the light, we are invited to live in that kingdom, here and now, on this earth. Throughout the gospels, Jesus speaks about his new kingdom and invites us to make the conscious choice, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to live in that kingdom with him.

This new kingdom is not a place free from pain and suffering. Indeed, this kingdom is defined by the pain and suffering of the cross. As we journey through this week, Jesus reveals more about what his kingdom is like. It is a kingdom of humility, meekness, grief, servant leadership and compassion. But most of all, it is a kingdom where the crucified Jesus suffers with the suffering, grieves with the grieving, and comforts the fallen. We are most authentically Christian when we dwell in that kingdom and suffer with each other, grieve with each other, and comfort each other. It is in the faces of those who suffer, those who grieve, and those who need comfort that we most clearly see the face of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, the One who saves.

***‘Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ Save us from the vain temptations of this world and set our hearts on your heavenly kingdom. Amen.***

*Neil Bergmann is currently the chair of Lutheran Earth Care, Australia and New Zealand. After retiring, he recently completed a research Master of Theology at Flinders University, Adelaide, on eco-theology. He worships at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Rochedale, Queensland.*

Monday 3 April 2023

**Mary anoints Jesus**

by Neil Bergmann

***‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial’ (John 12:7).***

Read [John 12:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A+1-11&version=NRSVUE)

Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with the perfume she had been saving for his burial. Did Mary know that Jesus was on an inevitable path to arrest, trial and execution in the next few days? Did she believe this would be the last time she would see him before he was arrested? Why did she use the perfume to anoint Jesus now rather than wait for his burial?

In the stories leading up to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, many of his friends and disciples don’t know how to react. What should they do? Can they stop what seems inevitable? Can they change Jesus’ mind? I believe Mary is also at a loss about what to do. So she seeks to comfort Jesus and acknowledge his kingship.

However, in anointing Jesus with perfume, she also acknowledges that Jesus is the king of a very different kingdom. Rather than stand above Jesus and anoint his head as one would for an earthly king, she kneels and anoints Jesus’ feet. She emphasises the servant nature of the heavenly kingdom.

We also are continually faced with the question of what we should do as children of the light now that Jesus has done everything needed for our salvation. We can do nothing more to secure eternal life. Jesus has done it all.

So instead, we can wonder what to do now to live most fully in Jesus’ new kingdom. Mary gives us some guidance. We can acknowledge Jesus as Lord and King, but not like any other king. This is not the king of glory – it is a king crucified and suffering. This is a humble king, the king of the poor, the king of the lowly, the servant king.

We are asked to model ourselves, our actions, and our priorities on Jesus. By doing so, we join him in his heavenly kingdom, here and now, wherever we are.

***Hosanna! Blessed is the king of Israel! Guide us to live as servants of each other in your counter-cultural, upside-down kingdom of heaven. Amen.***

Tuesday 4 April 2023

**Life through death**

by Neil Bergmann

***Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25).***

Read [John 12:20–36](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A20-36&version=NRSVUE)

When Jesus predicts his death, he doesn’t see it as an end but rather as a new beginning. As Christians who confess that their faith gives them the sure and certain promise of eternal life with Jesus, it seems strange that we cling so very tightly to this earthly life.

We worry so much about our earthly lives and fear so much about our earthly death. It seems very important to make the most of the little time we have here and try to make our lives as successful (by worldly standards) as possible. If we believed that we live in a world without a God and Saviour, earthly life is all there is. In such a world, we would understandably want to live as comfortably, as luxuriously and as long a life as we can afford, perhaps even when such a lifestyle denies the basic necessities to the world’s poorest.

Sometimes we justify our pursuit of worldly wealth by thinking that even if we don’t want luxuries for ourselves, we must provide our families with a good house, suburb, and school, with reliable transport, and ensure that everybody has the right gadgets. The way we spend our time and resources tells our family what we value.

Of course, we do not live in a godless world; we have a God and Saviour. Jesus gives us a very different view of what our lives are like when we choose to dwell in the kingdom of heaven. An important step to living in Jesus’ kingdom is choosing a different lifestyle from worldly wealth and pleasure. Jesus points to this better way.

We need to lose our love for this earthly life. In fact, Jesus tells us to hate a ‘me-first’ worldly lifestyle. Instead, we are asked to follow Jesus, even follow him to the cross, to see what a satisfying life really is like – a life of justice, humility and servanthood.

***Lord of the meek and the humble, help us to hate a life of earthly wealth and pleasure and train our eyes on our servant God on the cross. Amen.***

Wednesday 5 April 2023

**Betrayal**

by Neil Bergmann

***After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, ‘Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me’ (John 13:21).***

Read [John 13:21–32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13%3A21-32&version=NRSVUE)

We can never know exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus. Perhaps Judas was greedy, and the betrayal was simply for the 30 pieces of silver. Maybe it was because Jesus wasn’t the type of political saviour who would overthrow the Roman occupiers as Judas expected. Perhaps he believed that Jesus, when confronted with arrest, would use his miraculous powers to demonstrate that he truly is the Son of God. Perhaps Judas was frightened for his own life and didn’t want to be arrested as one of Jesus’ disciples.

Whatever the reason, Jesus was aware that Judas would soon betray him. Having ensured that his disciples were as prepared as they could be for what was to come, Jesus was ready to face his accusers and see how those in power would react to an innocent man who challenged their ideas about how the world should be.

The events around Jesus’ arrest, trial and execution confirm what Jesus no doubt knew to be true – that the world is not fair, just or benign. While many public officials try to serve with honesty and fairness, our human systems of government and commerce are far from perfect. The many recent royal commissions in Australia and New Zealand have shown how self-interest, power and corruption are present in government as well as faith-based organisations.

The poor, vulnerable and marginalised continue to be mistreated and are often denied justice. It is much more comfortable to walk by on the other side of the road than it is to look at their wounds. However, where there is suffering, injustice and hurt, Jesus of the cross is there to share that suffering, to share those wounds. Jesus also asks us to go there as individuals and, particularly, together as a church. Where the world creates darkness, Christians are asked to bring the light of hope, healing and compassion.

***Jesus, we don’t like to look at the wounds of a suffering world. Give us the courage to bring your light to the dark corners of our society. Amen.***

Thursday 6 April 2023

**Wash one another’s feet**

by Neil Bergmann

***‘Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet’ (John 13:14).***

Read [John 13:1–17,31–35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+13%3A1-17%2C+31-35&version=NRSVUE)

Throughout time, human societies have had hierarchies of importance and standing, as do many animal communities. Chickens have a pecking order, with the strongest at the top that has first rights to food, water and roosting spots. Our human social structures are more complex and more dependent on the social situation and vary greatly between societies.

When Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, he confounds them with his breaking of social convention. Usually, foot washing is the job of the lowliest servant. But Jesus is not claiming to be the lowliest servant. In fact, he calls himself ‘your Lord and Teacher’. Jesus is rightfully claiming to be the leader of the group and the one most worthy of respect. Jesus doesn’t just turn the hierarchy upside-down – he eliminates it. The disciples are asked to wash each other’s feet, indicating nobody is first or last; nobody is more or less important.

Jesus isn’t saying that our individual roles aren’t important. Our social structures, including our churches, give many different positions to many people. While our worldly experience suggests some roles and some people are more prestigious than others, Jesus’ message here is that those in positions of authority also require meekness, humility and servant-style leadership.

Jesus doesn’t teach this with a sermon. Instead, he does it with an action that upsets the usual societal conventions. He asks us to do the same. Rather than us just saying that everybody is important and valued, Jesus suggests we should show this by how we treat others, especially those the rest of society looks down on.

By nature, we tend to be vain, proud and self-important. The kingdom of heaven is different. Serving others, especially those that society sees as broken or failures, encourages us to spend more time in the kingdom of heaven and less time chasing the empty promises of social prestige.

***Lord, wash away my ideas of pride, prestige and self-importance. Help me to recognise you in everybody I meet and serve. Amen.***

Friday 7 April 2023

**It is finished**

by Neil Bergmann

***When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished’. With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).***

Read [John 18:1 – 19:42](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+18%3A1+%E2%80%93+19%3A42&version=NRSVUE)

Good Friday is a confronting time. We can feel especially guilty that our sin caused the death of Jesus, God incarnate, God with us. We see ourselves in the mocking crowd yelling, ‘Crucify him!’  We see ourselves in those disciples who ran away in the garden, Peter who denied Jesus, or Judas who betrayed Jesus. But Jesus’ death was not in vain; it was not a defeat. It is the climax and completion of Jesus’ earthly mission when he says, ‘It is finished’.

‘It is finished’ is the English translation of the Greek word *tetélestai* (perfect passive indicative third person singular of the verb *teléō* for grammar lovers). This can simply mean that something has been brought to an end. It can also refer to the completion of a command, so something like ‘everything that has been commanded has been completed and accomplished, exactly as ordered’ – in this case, ordered of Jesus by the Father.

Earlier, John 19:28 reads, ‘Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty”’. The same word, *tetélestai*, is used here for ‘had been finished’. So, the ‘It is finished’ in John 19:30 also means that Scripture has been fulfilled – Jesus has completed all the prophecies of Scripture about the Messiah, including that the Messiah would die for our sins (see Isaiah 53:5–9).

Even in his death, Jesus teaches us how to live. We should not live as if this life is all there is. Death is not to be feared (easy to say but hard to embrace). Death for us is not the end, just as Good Friday is not the end of the Easter story. Jesus’ suffering and death not only grant us eternal life but also means that Jesus is here with us on earth, sharing in the world’s pain and suffering and calling us to treat everyone we meet with care and compassion.

***Jesus, help us to remember your pain and suffering, your physical and mental anguish on the cross. Help us to wait with you at the cross and not rush ahead to the joy of Sunday’s empty tomb. Comfort all who still suffer in our broken world. Amen.***

Saturday 8 April 2023

**My rock and my fortress**

by Neil Bergmann

***Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me (Psalm 31:3).***

Read [Psalm 31:1–4,15–16](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+31%3A+1-4%2C15-16&version=NRSVUE)

Holy Saturday stands after the pain of Good Friday and in anticipation of the joy of Easter Sunday. We affirm in the Apostle’s Creed that after his death and burial, Jesus descended into hell before rising again on the third day.

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so do we not like to leave a mystery unexplored, and we imagine what Jesus might be doing in hell. Was there a great cosmic battle between good and evil? Did Jesus lie passively in Satan’s realm, where Satan found that he could not hold this blameless victim? Is this where Satan found out that, through Jesus’ death, all had been declared blameless and all granted release from death? As a final act of obedience to Jewish law, was Jesus waiting through the Sabbath before his resurrection? Was Jesus separated from the Father and the Spirit for this day as the final anguish of his sacrificial death? So did Jesus face hell alone?

We are never alone, never separated from God, never separated from Father, Son and Spirit. Today’s verse from Psalm 31 makes this clear. God is our rock and fortress, a place of shelter and protection where we are safe and secure. We are defined as residents of the fortress, called Christians after the king of this fortress, Jesus Christ.

Because we bear the name of Christ, we are called to act on behalf of our Lord, as the psalm puts it, ‘for the sake of your name’. We do not act for our own sake, and we do not depend on our own strength and wisdom, but we act on behalf of our servant king. We continually need guidance and leadership from the source of all real power and strength. We are guided by the story of Easter. Victory over death comes not from military or political power but from Jesus’ obedience to the will of the Father. The cross turns from a symbol of death into one of life.

***Jesus, guide me. Jesus, lead me – not where I want to go, but where you have called me. Guide me to find the lost, feed the hungry, and comfort the grieving. Amen.***

Sunday 9 April 2023

**He is risen!**

by Faye Schmidt

***Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him’ (Matthew 28:7).***

Read [Matthew 28:1–10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+28%3A1%E2%80%9310&version=NRSVUE)

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary visited the tomb of Jesus that morning, they would not have expected to experience a violent earthquake, encounter an angel or find the tomb empty.

This would have been a lot to take in, and it is no wonder the angel told them not to be afraid – they would have been feeling fear from a number of different angles and for various reasons. We read that the guards, too, most likely strong and hardened men, ‘shook and became like dead men’. Who can blame anyone for being afraid in such circumstances?

But the biggest fear they would have experienced was the unknown – where was Jesus? What has happened to him?

The words of the angel, ‘He is risen’, filled them with joy as they hurried away to carry out the task the angel had given them. They hurried. This news could not wait. The news of an earthquake and an angel faded away in the light of this momentous message, and it was imperative that it be shared as a matter of urgency.

We, too, face the empty tomb of Jesus with fear and awe as we recognise what his resurrection means for us. Our sorrow at his death on the cross is overcome with the joy of his victory over death – for us, each one of us. On hearing this news, who do I now hurry to tell just as the women did that morning?

***Dear Lord, send your Holy Spirit to equip me to be ready to share the joy of Jesus’ resurrection with those who have not heard or do not believe so that they, too, may share in the joy of the gift of salvation and eternal life through him. Amen.***

*Faye Schmidt continues her diaconal calling through governance, having served on the Victoria–Tasmania District Church Board, the General Church Board and currently as chair of the Standing Committee on Constitutions and her congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide. Having lived and worked in many locations within Australia and overseas, Faye has a heart for the stranger and the newcomer. She has a heart for being open to new ideas, learning from others and responding to needs.*