

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The 2nd Sunday in Lent
28 February 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: O Lord, you are kind and forgiving, full of love to all who call upon you.

P: Listen to my prayer, O Lord; hear the cries of my pleading.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Living God, holy and true, give us grace to worship you in spirit and in truth. Enliven our souls with the beauty of your holiness and nourish our minds with the splendour of your truth. Open our hearts to your love and our wills to your purpose. And let all this be gathered up in adoration for you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Merciful One, you are more ready to forgive than our timid faith can believe. We confess with sorrow the many times when we have forgotten you, harmed one another, and betrayed ourselves. When our trust in your goodness wavers, and despair makes its home in our hearts, take us once again into your forgiving hands; work your will on our hardened hearts, and join us to each other in the bonds of your peace.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and who entered not into glory before he suffered death upon a cross; mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it to be the true path of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Christ, God is reconciling all things to himself." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Holy One, let the breath of your Spirit inspire us to hear and receive your Word, that we may be rooted in your truth and enlivened by your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 22: 23-31 (*Praise for the God who saves*)

You that fear the Lord, praise him!
 All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
 stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
 For he did not despise or abhor
 the affliction of the afflicted;
 he did not hide his face from me,
 but heard when I cried to him.
 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
 May your hearts live for ever!
 All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the Lord;
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before him.
 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
 and he rules over the nations.
 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
 and I shall live for him.
 Posterity will serve him;
 future generations will be told about the Lord,
 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
 saying that he has done it.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. *Amen***

A Reading for the Day

St Mark 8: 31-38 (*Jesus foretells his death and resurrection*)

Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

'For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

'Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 8:34 *"...let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

A burden comes with knowing Jesus Christ. There's a cheery kind of Christianity that would hide this from us. It won't *let* us be despondent or doubtful. It has no room for life's troubling mysteries, for loss and failure, cross-bearing, and the call to suffering. It hides these away in the 'fine print', like the nasty side effects of a new drug.

Yet Jesus said his followers would experience these side effects too. They're an integral aspect of a life lived according to love, animated by 'the paradox of faith': we save our lives by letting go of them for his sake, and the salvation we're given for free nonetheless costs us 'everything'.

The hard and awkward truth hits Peter like a blow to the head when Jesus announces his destiny. "The Son of Man must suffer, be rejected and killed, and after three days rise." Set smack in the middle of St Mark's Gospel, this scene reveals the heart of the matter.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus had asked. They’ve seen the healings, the power of his presence, the teaching that draws crowds hungry to hear ‘good news’.

“What do people say?”

Peter grins. “You’re a new Elijah,” he says, “you’re John the Baptist all over again. You’re the new spirit of a new age, the new kingdom’s new king.”

“And *you*?” asks Jesus, “Who do *you* say I am?” With a happy heart, Peter goes one step further: “You’re the *Christ*,” he says.

Then comes the dizzying blow to Peter’s head. Jesus says the defining work of the one who would be ‘Christ’ is anything but happy and heroic. It’s suffering, rejection, death, and rising.

Like all of us, Peter has a fuzzy picture of a better world, and a rough idea of how to get there. Like us, he was raised to believe we’re *good* people when we’re nice to each other; and nice means ‘not offensive’. Nice means tame and kind and moderately helpful, always doing our best to ‘fit in’. That way, we’ll never be rejected but always accepted, *and* accepting of each other (if only at shallow level). This is how ‘cheeriness and goodness’ spreads. Isn’t *that* ‘the kingdom of God’?

So, what Jesus’ plan sounds like madness in Peter’s ears, a plan to fail on purpose. Things had been going so well. Now this?

What happens next is painful, but it exposes the heart of the matter. For Peter – large-hearted Peter – takes Jesus aside to rebuke him for talking such nonsense. But Jesus turns his back on Peter, to say with his body what he also says with words: “Get behind me, Satan, you *adversary*.”

It’s not Peter’s job to tell Jesus his job, to dictate what the word ‘Christ’ ought to mean. His mission won’t be ruled by consumer polls and crowd desire. It won’t even be constrained by the noble legacy of Elijah and John the Baptist.

Christianity, it turns out, has nothing to do with ‘insipid, cheery goodness’. It goes straight to the heart, to matters of life and death. In the *way* he’ll be the Christ, Jesus will reveal a ‘salvation’ that comes, not by having the biggest sword, but by an almighty love that suffers for the sake of the beloved.

This is what love looks like when it’s drained of all selfishness. Only Jesus has it. That’s what makes him ‘Lord’. And this, he insists, is something he *must* do: “The Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and on the third day rise.” He must. It’s an urgent imperative, beyond negotiation and compromise. It’s the heart of the matter.

What happens next? The question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ shifts to the question, ‘Who are *we* in relation to this Jesus?’ “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Who could possibly do this? What sort of self must we put down and replace with a cross on our shoulders? And why? What’s wrong with the self we already have?

And yet, there *is* a kind of self-knowledge that can only be had through loss and failure, sin and its forgiveness. People who *only* win and succeed, who never lose nor struggle, never discover the deep truth about themselves. “Those who lose their life for my sake will save it,” says Jesus.

No one *chooses* suffering, but suffering comes to us. No one chooses failure, but we all fail at things, more than we dare to acknowledge. And when we fail at faithfulness, or earn the rebuke Peter got that day, it’s not because we have a ‘self’ that God cares nothing about. It’s because we have an ‘ego’ that refuses to ‘die’. It grasps for its own protection and gain. We can’t seem to help it. Our fear and greed would kill our vulnerable love. *This can happen to any of us.*

“But what does it profit to grasp at the world and lose your own soul in the grasping?” asks Jesus. We grasp because, like a trapped animal, wild and shivering, we’re too afraid to trust and love. Our fearful self can’t yield itself in love, so it grasps for dominance (‘Lordship’) out of fear, fighting to be in charge. It would be its own Lord, even to the point of instructing the Lord Jesus Christ, as Peter did.

But ‘to deny ourselves’, as Jesus tells us we must do, is not to make ourselves into a ‘nothing’. It’s to deny the grasping power of the *grasping* self, to say ‘no’ to it by saying ‘yes’ to him, who (it turns out) has already said a resounding ‘yes’ to us. How? By being the kind of ‘Christ’ he *must* be.

It’s as though Jesus says this to us: “You must deny yourself; that is, you must rearrange your relationship with your ‘self’, so that your *self* does not lord you but lets *me* to be your Lord.”

But that’s frightening too. It feels like a loss of control, which it is, or a kind of death, which it also is. But it’s through this loss that we’re finally found; and it’s by this death that we finally come alive.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving Sovereign, you call us to offer ourselves for the fulfilment of your will. We place before you now the desires of our hearts and the prayers called forth by your Spirit, speaking within us.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the whole Church of Jesus Christ. Because the pandemic drags on and on, we commend to your holy love and care the hidden hurts and needs of Elmwood Avenue Church. You promise light and salvation in the midst of darkness and despair. Keep us gathered under your wings. Make us sure of your Word, that we may trust in the fulfilment of your promise, and never lose heart.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace throughout the world, for victims of terrorism, for those wounded by racism, displaced by war, and for those in our own city enduring hunger and homelessness today. Let your kingdom come among us as a commonwealth of peace and freedom and justice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who find their work difficult and dull, for those who bear heavy responsibility for the work of others, and for those whose wages are too meagre to sustain them with food and shelter. We pray for those made unemployed during the pandemic, who will never work again.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God our Creator, you made us in your image so that we should find meaning in our labour and reward in the work we do. Help us to order our public life so that all may have the opportunity to use their gifts in useful work, to be justly rewarded, and to feel your joy in their labour.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

With gratitude for the whole communion of saints, we remember before you those who have died, who were especially dear to us. Be near those who grieve today...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you bore the whole of God's truth and love for us as your body was nailed to the hard wood of the cross. Give us courage to face what must die in us, and to shed the things that are false within us. Let them be as smoke vanishing in the breeze, in the wind of your Spirit, that we may be changed more and more into your likeness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, holy and beloved.

As our Saviour has taught, so we pray:

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, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**