

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

*The 5th Sunday in Lent
21 March 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: Whoever serves me must follow me, says the Lord.

P: Where I am, there will my servant be also.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Everlasting God, in the strength of your infinite love, you hold all things in being: space, time, and all creation. You revealed this love through your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who came to restore all things to you. We cannot fully fathom a love that would suffer so fully for us. By your Holy Spirit, call forth our worship and receive our praise.

Merciful God, we are frail creatures of a passing day. We confess our fear, our doubt, and our confusion. Cleanse our hearts and renew a right spirit within us. Take away the burden we can no longer bear, and our overwhelming sorrow for mistakes we cannot change. Open the path to a future in which we shall be changed, more and more, into your image and likeness.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, raise us up with Christ, the grain that falls and dies in the earth, yielding the harvest of everlasting life. Show us the true path, break our hard hearts open, and restore us to the joy of your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "Anyone who is in Christ is new creation." 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 God of Wisdom, sow your Word in our hearts, 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 51: 1-12 (*A Prayer for Pardon*)

Have mercy on me, O God, in your great goodness;
according to the abundance of your compassion
blot out my offences.

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my faults
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,

So that you are justified in your sentence
and righteous in your judgement.

I have been wicked even from my birth,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

Behold, you desire truth deep within me
and shall make me understand wisdom
in the depths of my heart.

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean;
wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear of joy and gladness,
that the bones you have broken may rejoice.

Turn your face from my sins
and blot out all my misdeeds.

Make me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your holy spirit from me.

(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 John 12: 20-33 (*Jesus announces that his hour has come*)

Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'

Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.'

Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 12:23 *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

Imagine a painter plagued by perfectionism, obsessively retouching someone's portrait. But the clock is ticking. A deadline is looming.

"If you ask me, that portrait is *finished* already. Let me take it for framing and delivery," says an impatient assistant.

"Who asked *you*?" the artist barks back. "It doesn't yet show what I had in mind. I'll say when it's ready for framing."

Similar scenes played out in Jesus' life. When the wine ran out at the wedding in Cana, Jesus's mother broadly hinted – as mothers sometimes will – that it was time for her son to make a splash and earn a bit of glory in the bargain. "My hour has not yet come. I'll say when I'm ready," he said. Later still, he put off his journey to Jerusalem,

saying, "My time has not yet *fully* come." And when Jesus sidestepped his arrest, twice, St John says it was because "his hour had not yet come."

But now his hour *has* come. For what? "For the Son of Man to be glorified." And yet, though it brought Jesus within glory's grasp, the coming of this hour disturbed him. "*Now* is my soul troubled," he said. "*Now* is the judgment of this world. *Now* the ruler of this world will be driven out." Each '*now...now...now*' resounds like the blow of the hammer that will soon nail him to the cross.

Jesus' glory will reveal itself *there*, "when I am lifted up from the earth," he said. To which St John adds: "He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." For his 'lifting up' from the earth, before it can be a 'lifting up' to heaven and new life, must first of all be a 'lifting up' to the cross and death. This death *is* his glory.

Jesus' life led to this hour. He pursued this path on purpose. Is it any wonder, then, that it should *trouble* Jesus' soul? But facing trouble is often worth it. Imagine trekking all the way to the Grand Canyon to peer over edge, but because a fear of heights makes you queasy, you balk and bail when the moment comes, forsaking the very purpose that propelled your journey in the first place.

"Now is my soul troubled – and what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" Jesus asked himself. "No, I came to this hour for this very reason," he said. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Death yields new life. Nature bears this out. The plant grows on the decay of dead things. Then the deer browses on the plant. Then the wolf kills the deer and feeds on it. Then the wolf dies and its body decays, becoming food for the plant.

Even a flame must consume the candle's wax to make light. Every gain entails a loss. Every loving deed is its own kind of sacrifice. Every re-birth arises from some kind of death. No one gets a 'pass' on this, least of all the followers of Jesus.

True, Jesus has no 'A-team', just troublesome disciples. He's no superhero with special powers. His glory isn't fireworks and magic tricks. His glory is this ghastly death, a good man tortured, 'lifted up', and nailed to a Roman cross. But in that 'hour' and on that cross, God's truth and beauty come into their sharpest focus.

"It's when he's lifted up on the cross that Jesus drags the world to himself," writes David Bentley Hart, a penetrating thinker of international renown. He says more: "Even in Christ's dereliction – perhaps especially in his dereliction – God's infinity is made manifest...And the resurrection shows that his death was always already the victory of that love over everything that disfigures the beauty of God residing in all things."

God makes the horror of Jesus' death an expression of divine glory. That's the point. Like the twin moments of 'launching' and 'landing' a difficult jump in figure skating, Jesus' abasement and exaltation, his crucifixion and resurrection, are all of-a-piece. They're moments in one action. They enact the one love of God.

The Japanese art of *kintsugi* is the art of beautiful repair. It treats the cracks and fissures of broken pottery, not as something to disguise, but as unique features of each vessel's history, a record of its trials and catastrophes. *Kintsugi* saves the broken vessel and incorporates its damage into a deeper, greater beauty. Sometimes, it uses gold inlay to adorn and 'honour' those disfiguring seams and breaks.

Could golden rays of Christ's beauty shine through *our* physical fissures and spiritual cracks, not just mending our broken souls, but (dare we hope?) "fashioning them to a truer beauty of his hand?"

We see hints of this, rarely but truly, in people who know they're dying, and they accept it. The seed is only just falling into the earth, yes, but already it bears much fruit. They're beginning to relax that 'white-knuckled grip' we all have on life.

"I can truly let go of my life," they say. "My hour will soon come. I may not have chosen this hour, but there's so much in my life that I never chose at all. Yet *all* of it is a gift. Even the cracks and fissures. Let death come when it comes. I'm ready. '*Into thy hands I commit my spirit.*'"

Such people, though clearly dying, can also seem, in another way, spiritually vital. They're not *afraid* anymore. They're a drop in the ocean of time, but already partaking of eternity. They've reconciled themselves to the lives they've lived. They've forgiven others. They've even forgiven themselves. For they've come alive to the mercy of God. They are, you might say, finally ready to live *because* they're so ready to die.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," said Jesus, as he faced the death which would gather up his life's very reason for being.

Our hour will come too. Then we will die. But not before God puts a final, perfectionist touch on our portraits, making them ready for framing in eternity, revealing the beauty God had in mind for us all along.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, in the days before his Passion, your Son offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. We offer our prayer for those who suffer, those who are in need, and those who seek your peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the whole Church of Jesus Christ, and for everyone who looks to Elmwood Avenue Church as their spiritual home. As we journey with our Lord to the cross, show us what we must put down and what we must take up, what we must finish and what we must begin. Lift the burdens we can no longer carry, that your Church may be free to suffer and serve you, and then rejoice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who govern this nation, and for those who make its laws. Give to those who hold public office in our land a spirit of wisdom, a desire for justice, and honest hearts, that they may serve and promote the well-being of all.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray those near to us who are ill or dying, especially today for those whose health care has been compromised by the pandemic. Be with those who are in grief or any kind of trouble. And since the suffering of others grieves, be near to guide and comfort us also.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God our Father, whose Son Jesus Christ took children into his arms and blessed them, bless on children everywhere. In all things protect and guide their lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Living God, we remember with thanks those who have died, for all they were by nature and your grace, for joy they gave us, and for their rest with you in the communion of saints.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, you were with us at our life's beginning; be so again at our life's ending. You were beside us at our soul's shaping; be so again at our departing...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Christ the Master Carpenter, who at the last, through wood and nails, purchased our whole salvation; wield well your tools in the workshop of your world, that we who come rough hewn to your bench may be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand.

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**