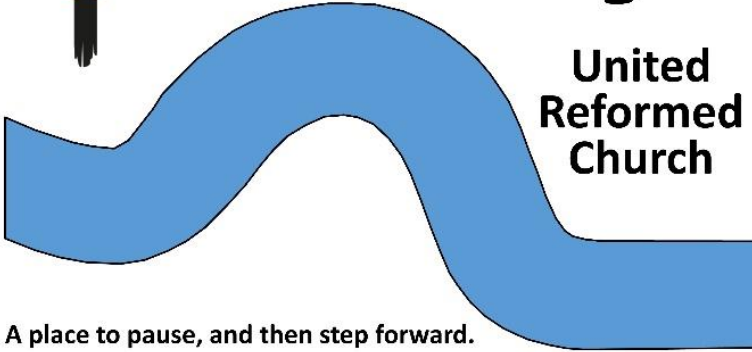




Grays

United
Reformed
Church



A place to pause, and then step forward.

Silent Visitor



Holy Week 2020

Special Edition

We do find ourselves in uncharted territory. The pattern of our lives has dramatically changed and maybe we've realised some of the things that we have taken for granted?

Of course, we are all desperate for things to get back to normal. We want to be able to go out and visit friends and family, browse the shops and not just buy foodstuffs, go on a trip and see the sights, and all of the other things we'd normally be doing at this time of year.

One of those normal things is gathering together as Church and, particularly at this time of year, completing our journey through Lent and on into the events of Holy Week to celebrate Resurrection. We can't gather together to do this, but enclosed are some devotions for us to reflect upon at home.

Some of the items in the news, squeezed in around Covid19, do however raise questions about how beneficial 'normal' actually is. There are reports of wildlife returning to the canals of Venice, and elsewhere smog clearing and pollution levels reducing. We've also seen highly individualistic and materialistic figures around the world enacting some very communal and spiritual policies. Our culture has had our 'key workers' redefined with some demoted and those that work in our supermarkets, make deliveries, clean and care for others, dramatically promoted.

So, do we really want to return to normal? Or could we return to something better?

I put that question to you in its most general sense, but also specifically to our life together as Grays United Reformed Church. How could we make our normal better?

With every blessing, Rev'd David R. Coaker



URCGrays

www.graysurc.org.uk

Minister: Rev'd David Coaker

07378 348191

drcoaker@gmail.com

First Sunday Back

There will be one! We don't know when, but there will come a time when our being physically apart will come to an end.

So, what should we do?

The basic a plan is that we will gather for refreshments, conversation, and then sing whatever hymns Richard would like to play. So, a relaxed and informal gathering together which we'll play by ear when we get to it.

So, at the point that the government advice changes and gatherings become permitted, watch out for the email, Facebook post, or phone call letting you know to come along!

Keeping in Touch

Our approach to this whole situation has been made up as we've gone along! We've encouraged everyone to get in touch if anything was needed and been encouraged to keep in touch with each other. Emails have been sent, phone calls made, doors knocked upon and deliveries made. We've pointed out devotional and other resources. The elders have tried to pool together news, concerns and ideas and respond to them.

We've done our best, but if there are other things you'd like or want to offer, please get in touch?

Prayers

We are of course holding each other, our community and world in our personal prayers and we have adapted our regular Friday prayer meeting to receive requests via email densplayden@gmail.com or Facebook message.

Annual Church Meeting

We were to gather following worship and lunch on 5th April to reflect upon our last year and look to the next. This will be rearranged and a new date for it, and a date for reports and nominations for eldership to be submitted, will be shared in due course. Our thanks to Alf and Denise for continuing as serving elders for the time being.

Café Worship

We were also going to enjoy our second attempt at café-style worship on Sunday 29th March – this will be rearranged.

Dementia Friends

On Wednesday 1st April we were going to enjoy tea and coffee and undertake training to be Dementia Friends – this will be rearranged.

Broken

The final session of our study of the TV series Broken was also supposed to be on the 1st April – it will also be rearranged.

Financial Update

Please be assured that our principal aim here is that the membership is informed, but if you can respond please do.

Following government advice, and that of our wider denomination, we suspended all acts of worship, physical meetings, and other church activities based in our building. All of our lettings have also responded in kind.

Therefore, our income has dramatically decreased, but we still have some outgoings.

We have submitted a request for our contribution to support the URC via the M&M fund to be halved for the foreseeable future and we have written to our insurers to notify them of a possible future claim for loss of income.

All of us contribute to the life of Grays URC as we are able, financially and in other ways. Many of us probably have a growing pile of gift aid envelopes ready to put in the offertory bag when we next gather on a Sunday.

It would make the task of banking the offertory, and ease our current situation, if you would consider setting up a standing order for your regular giving?

(Like how you already pay your gas, electric or council tax bill but it would not be a direct debit, you are in control of a standing order and how much you decide to contribute.)

If you would, please get in touch with Alan who will provide you with the necessary information to set this up:

01375 391108 DenBeckley@hotmail.com

Again, please be assured that our principal aim here is that the membership is informed, but if you can respond please do.

Holy Week Devotions

The following are reflections and questions grounded in Matthew's telling of the events of Holy Week. Read them before, after, or with the Bible passages for each day.

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21: 1 - 11

We begin with some practicalities, then prophecy, and finally the parade. Jesus has arranged for a donkey to ride into Jerusalem so as to live out the words of Zechariah 9:9.

This is an exciting moment, and can you spot how excited Matthew got writing it down? (Clue: how many donkeys did Jesus ride on?) (the original text says 'them' i.e. both.)

This passage is another contrast between types of Messiah. What the people wanted was a great and powerful king to defeat the Romans. This kind of messiah would have been like Pilate, who may well have arrived earlier in the day from the opposite side of the city, riding a war horse at the head of a column of soldiers to reinforce the garrison ahead of Passover.

Instead of a show of force and the bowed heads of a defeated people, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to cheers and waved palm leaves. Rather than a military parade this is a religious procession. The shouts are "Hosanna" – praise be, save or God saves. Praise be to the messiah or Son of David. Then the words of Psalm 118:26 and finally, praise God in heaven for saving us.

With the echoes of the cheering crowd ringing in his ears, Jesus enters Jerusalem. A city in turmoil. The seat of power, of collaboration with the Romans. The holy city, home of the Temple with the very presence of God at its centre. A city already torn between keeping the peace, and being God's

peace. Between maintaining security and reliance on God's power. Between obeying orders and listening to God's Word. A city preparing to be filled with visitors, pilgrims coming to celebrate the most iconic festival and event in their history. Their liberation event – their freedom from an ancient world power, from slavery, done through the power of God. The event that established them as God's chosen people. Which defined who they are.

A city already in turmoil. A city filling up with people. A city with a newly reinforced garrison, full of soldiers with little or no interest or awareness of local customs or history, with the casual prejudice of power and success and the authority and ability to silence any dissent.

Into this rides Jesus, on a donkey to a cheering crowd. The crowd understand the symbolism and the words, and ask the fundamental question, "Who is this?"

The crowd has declared their answer on the journey into the city. They have declared Jesus as saviour, messiah, prophet and messenger of God, God's liberator. In the relative safety beyond the city walls their dreams and hopes are given voice. Within the walls of God's city, but where their conqueror's power is absolute, they are more circumspect, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

"Who is this?" What is your answer to this question?

Or, more importantly, as one way for other people to encounter Jesus is through us, what do they see?

What impression does our life together as Church give to others of Jesus' priorities?

What do you, what do we, need to change to better reflect Jesus?

Maundy Thursday

Matthew 26: 17 - 75

Just as with the donkeys on Sunday, Jesus has made preparations to celebrate Passover with his closest followers.

In this passage those followers are described as both 'disciples' and 'the twelve'. Jesus having twelve disciples is at its heart symbolic. There are twelve tribes of Israel, therefore Jesus had twelve disciples. That is the crucial bit, not who they were (especially as none of the lists completely agree: Mark 3:13-19, Matthew 10:1-4, and Luke 6:12-16). Luke also includes the 70 who were sent off to prepare his way, we also have a whole list of women who travelled with them, and in Acts 9:36 we have Tabitha/Dorcas who is also named a disciple. The twelve were there to celebrate Passover, but it is highly likely there were more. Even if the women didn't prepare the meal and the male disciples were enlightened enough to do it themselves, surely they'd have invited the women and children along too then? If the room was crowded, it also makes some of the conversations more private.

I've always struggled with Judas' part in the story. A villain makes a more thrilling tale, but why does Jesus let him stay for the rest of the meal? Why, after Jesus prays to be released while in the garden, didn't he see Judas' arrival as a sign from God to flee? And above all, why on earth did Jesus call him to be a disciple in the first place? In Judas we can see again the dilemma between types of messiah, servant or warrior, but maybe there is also an influence from the time when the gospels were written?

The gospels were written at least 40 years later when Christianity (still a sect within Judaism) was in conflict with Rabbinic Judaism to be a tolerated religion within the Roman Empire. At this time Christians were keen to make friends with the Roman authorities, but one thing they couldn't airbrush out was that Jesus had been crucified, and crucifixion was a

Roman punishment. So even though the Romans held all the power in Jesus' time, we have some very complementary stories about centurions and the brutal governor Pilate is helpless in the face of the Jewish establishment. So maybe Judas' role is to build up the Jewish involvement in Jesus' death to downplay the clear Roman part?

Jesus then leads the disciples to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. This passage is all the more powerful if you place yourself firmly within it. Pretend you don't know the rest of the story and sit with a man desperate for the conflict he faces to dissipate, for his closest friends to keep watch with him, for God, who he has devoted himself to completely, to 'let this cup pass'. The cup he described as his 'blood of the covenant' during the Passover meal, drunk to remember the Exodus story and God's liberation.

Judas then arrives with a militia, the disciples flee, Jesus is led away to the High Priest's house, and Peter follows at a discreet distance.

Understandings of communion fall into three basic categories. That the bread and wine is Jesus body and blood, is symbolically so, or we do it to remember.

How central is communion to your faith?

How does it being grounded in the Jewish celebration of Passover affect your understanding?

If you had been gathered at that table, where would you have been at the end of the night? (Hiding away, denying at a distance, ashamed in the darkness, by Jesus' side or ...?)

Good Friday ①

Matthew 26: 57 – 75

At the dead of night, when no Jewish or any trials should occur, Caiaphas has managed to get all of the chief priests, the whole council, as well as the scribes and the elders together. The whole of the Jewish establishment is there, with no dissent, with the sole purpose of finding a way to put Jesus, a popular backwater prophet and healer, to death. A mean feat, I can't see any group gathering in the middle of the night, for any reason, without some grumblings?

Many false witnesses come forward, we have one selectively quoting Jesus' words out of context, and through all of this Jesus remains silent. But when the direct question about whether he is the messiah comes, Jesus agrees with the high priest and quotes Daniel 7:14.

For some reason the High Priest completely loses it. Jesus has acknowledged he is the messiah and quoted scripture. Caiaphas tears his clothes and says Jesus has blasphemed and deserves death. The relevant law is Leviticus 24:16:

'One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death.'

The quote from Daniel speaks of the Son of Man sat at the right hand of God, but how is that insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence to God? Also the means of execution is stoning, not crucifixion which was the method favoured by the Romans for killing rebels.

Now, as Jesus receives his first beating, we move outside, and Peter is asked three direct questions and lies in reply to each.

Is silence the best way to respond to gossip and slander?

Is telling the truth the best way to deal with direct questions?

Good Friday ②

Matthew 27: 1 – 31

As dawn breaks Jesus is bound and taken to Pilate, the person who's really in-charge. The action then moves to the villain Judas. He is beside himself with guilt, returns the proverbial 30 pieces of silver, and hangs himself. The money is used by the chief priests to buy a piece of land called the Field of Blood, or as Acts 1:18-19 has it, Judas bought the land, his bowels gushed out, and that is how it got its name.

The trial before Pilate is even more unusual than the one overnight. Roman justice could be swift and brutal, but would have at least the appearance of process. Pilate asks Jesus a similar question as the High Priest, but it is now more political than religious. Jesus replies in the same way, "You say so", but without adding the quotation from Scripture.

Now we have poor Pilate confounded by the Jewish leadership, hen-pecked by his wife, swayed by the crowd, and washes his hands of it all as he sentences Jesus to death by crucifixion. Other sources tell of a military man who held on to this post for about ten years (one of the longest), of brutal methods, who held the Jewish people in disdain and had a series of conflicts as he sought to promote the imperial cult and desecrate the Temple. Matthew is the only gospel that mentions the hand washing, which is a Jewish not a Roman custom, and there is no mention of the tradition of freeing a prisoner at Passover outside of the gospels.

Again Roman responsibility is diluted and that of the Jewish establishment increased. The crowd scene is another contrast between types of Messiah – the terrorist / freedom fighter Barabbas or the suffering servant Jesus. We also have the crowd taking responsibility for Pilate's decision with the unjustified anti-Semitic history that haunts us still. Jesus is again beaten in a mockery of royal garb, re-clothed, and then led out to the place of crucifixion.

Have you ever wondered about the roles Judas and Pilate played?

Jesus was crucified, that is affirmed by other accounts, a Roman punishment for the worst offenders. This was part of the good news the early Church declared. Good news they were sharing within the Roman Empire. Later, through Paul it became a strength, 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' but to Christians the power and wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

If you could sit between the event and Paul's interpretation of it, what would you feel? A man who led an exemplary life executed in the most brutal way for declaring God's love. Where is the good news? (You have to wait for Sunday!)

Good Friday ③

Matthew 27: 32 – 61

The charge is placed above his head, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" and the crowds, the Jewish establishment and the two men being executed with him, taunt him. He is completely rejected by his people, disciples, Roman authority, and he cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But he is aided by a stranger, Simon of Cyrene, a friend gifts him a place to be buried, Joseph of Arimathea, and his most devoted followers keep watch, Mary Magdalene and Mary.

He breathes his last, is wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid in a rock-hewn tomb, with a great stone across the entrance.

This passage is full of Old Testament references. Compare it to Psalm 22, 69, Isaiah 53, and Ezekiel 37?

Holy Saturday

Matthew 27: 62 - 66

Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions a guard on the tomb. Matthew makes it abundantly clear that both the Jewish and Roman authorities attest that the tomb was secure and the stone was sealed in place. (This may well have been in response to contemporary arguments with Jewish critics claiming the disciples stole away Jesus' body.)

On our journey through Holy Week too often we leap from Palm Sunday to Easter Day. We go from cheering crowds to the miracle of Resurrection. We can miss the intimacy and intensity of Maundy Thursday. The brutality and humility of Good Friday. All too often we completely skip the spirit-numbing silence of Holy Saturday.

Today we sit between death and Resurrection. If we hold ourselves in this space, forgetting what comes next, when it does come we may feel the earthquake and see the angel more acutely.

The tomb stands before us, sealed and guarded, keeping us from Jesus.

Have you ever attended a service on this day, what did it involve? If not, what do you imagine it would be like?

Absence can be a most painful experience, especially at this time, who could you connect or reconnect with today?

Sometimes we need to put to one side knowing the story and just feel it? Does this refresh or offer new insights to you?

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1 - 20

At the break of dawn Mary Magdalene and Mary, grieving, weeping, bent over with sadness, go to see the tomb. They just go to see it, no detail about missed anointing, they just go to see the tomb. Matthew then gives us the most dramatic Resurrection event, an earthquake, and all of those raised with the previous earthquake as Jesus breathed his last, breaking out of their tombs. An angel, the purest white, like lightning, descending from heaven and rolling the stone aside to sit upon. The message, “Do not be afraid”, “he has been raised”, “tell his disciples”, “he is going ahead of you to Galilee”.

Just as they start sprinting away, we have the first Resurrection appearance, and they hear the words of Jesus, “Greetings! Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” The story has gone full circle; they are to return to where it all began in Galilee.

We then have Matthew refuting his Jewish critics by detailing a bribe that started the rumour of a stolen body.

Matthew’s telling of the good news then ends with the remaining disciples commissioned to share Jesus’ message with the world, and reassured that he will be with them always.

Amidst the earthquakes and angels are two consoling phrases. The women are told by both the angel and the Risen Christ, “Do not be afraid”. When the disciples encounter the Risen Christ on the Galilean mountain, ‘they worshiped him; but some doubted.’ Do not be afraid, and do not be afraid of your doubts.

Compare Matthew’s telling of the Resurrection with Mark 16:1–8, Luke 24:1–12, and John 20:1–10. What’s the same? What’s different?

Reflecting on Psalm 130

In my bleakest moments, my spirit claws and screams out to the ground of my being.

All the metaphors and theories fall away, feelings come to the fore and I speak to the divine face to face. I know I can't, but I feel that I can. The spirit within me, communes with the Spirit that is within, around and beyond all that is.

Hear me. Amidst the hum of Creation tune in to my plea.

I fall to my knees, begging for mercy, but before I touch the ground you embrace me in love, acceptance, and mercy. My heart is warmed, my spirit lifted, and my fears calmed. Words fail, concepts dissolve, and love overwhelms my very being.

Others have felt this way. I have glimpsed and grasped it. So I hold my vigil. I open my heart. I endeavour to trust in all that has gone before, in the possibilities that are ahead, and the hope that has been promised.

In my bleakest moments, I embrace my fear trusting that the dawn will break.

In my bleakest moments, I remember all the brightness I have felt before.

In my bleakest moments, hope, love, and the possibility of liberation, crack open my defences.

In my bleakest moments, my spirit claws and screams out to the ground of my being.

Rev'd David R. Coaker

Wash your hands of coronavirus scams!

Friends Against Scams aims to protect and prevent people from becoming victims of scams.

Be **aware** of people offering or selling:

- Virus testing kits - these are only offered by NHS.
- Vaccines or miracle cures - there is currently no vaccine or cure.
- Overpriced or fake goods to protect yourself from coronavirus such as anti-bacterial products.
- Shopping or medication collection services.
- Home cleaning services.

Protect yourself and others:

- Don't be rushed into making a decision. If it sounds too good to be true it probably is.
- Only purchase goods from legitimate retailers and take a moment to think before parting with money or personal information.
- Don't assume everyone is genuine. It's okay to reject, refuse or ignore any requests. Only criminals will try to rush or panic you.
- If someone claims to represent a charity, ask them for ID. Be suspicious of requests for money up front. If someone attempts to pressurise you into accepting a service they are unlikely to be genuine. Check with family and friends before accepting offers of help if you are unsure.

Be a good friend,
help to protect
your family, friends
and neighbours
from scams.

**Read it.
Share it.
Prevent it.**

#Coronavirus
#ScamAware



Contact

For advice on scams call the
Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on **0808 223 11 33**
To report a scam call Action Fraud on **0300 123 2040**
Contact your bank if you think you have been scammed.

NATIONAL TRADING STANDARDS

Scams Team

To learn more about the different types of scams visit www.FriendsAgainstScams.org.uk