

# Passiontide Daily Prayer

Christian churches have been in the Billericay area for over 1000 years. There people have gathered together to meet with God.

They have come  
troubled and sad  
anxious and worried  
perplexed and frightened  
puzzled, angry and without answers  
And they have found the God of peace together.

So at this time of worldwide crisis, though unable to meet in the same place, may we too come together and find him and his peace.

## *Prayer:*

**Lord God, our forefathers and foremothers hoped in you  
They hoped and you delivered them  
When they called out to you, you provided a way of escape  
They never looked to you in vain  
Come to us, come to me  
Give light to my eyes, peace in my heart  
Lead me, too, by the path they walked  
The path that leads to your deliverance  
Amen**

Often they came  
feeling ashamed or guilty  
too small and insignificant for God to be interested in them

But together they found themselves welcomed and tucked up in his arms. With them we join in a prayer that they might well have said.

## *Prayer:*

**Lord God, we know that we have often closed our minds  
so as not to think about you  
We have often preferred to take our own pathway  
rather than to take your hand in ours  
We have wanted to 'do it our way'  
rather than acknowledge you as our loving king**

**We are sorry  
Forgive us  
Renew our minds  
Invade our hearts  
And hold us tight  
As you promise you will  
For Jesus' sake  
Amen.**

Those who lived before us` also came to hear the stories about Je-sus and have found them to be stories for them.

Christians call this week Passiontide because it tells the story of Je-sus's love for us; a love that was shown in the fact that he died for us. Here is part of that story:

***Reading and reflections for the day:*** See below

***Daily prayer continued:-***

On the cross, Jesus stretched out his arms to welcome us and he wants to hear from us. Let us then:

tell him what troubles us and, perhaps, has made us sad: re-mem-bering too others we know who may feel as we do. Remember those who have lost loved ones, those who are on the 'front line', doctors, nurses and others, who will see patients die whom they have sought to save and will be worried about their own exposure to danger

You might want to use these words:

**Lord Jesus, you said 'do not let your hearts be troubled'  
And you comforted the distressed  
Help us, too!  
Touch the sick  
Support the healers  
Give courage to those in darkness  
Lift their eyes and ours  
To him who is the source of all  
Comfort and joy. Amen.**

Remind him of the things that make you anxious or afraid. Remember, too, those who are worried about their jobs, their homes and those who, today, are displaced by war from their homes, who find themselves facing the daily threat of famine and death

You might like to use these words:

**Lord Jesus, when your disciples were caught in a storm  
You came to them and brought them peace  
When we are in danger of being  
overwhelmed by the waves  
When the breakers seem like those of a perfect storm  
Come to us and say, 'It is me, don't be afraid.  
I am with you'  
Help us, help me, for we have no other hope  
Amen.**

Let him know that we do not understand what is happening and that we are fearful for ourselves and others; remember-ing those who are trying to understand and find answers for us

You might like to use these words:

**Lord Jesus, you knew the anguish  
Of facing a future too painful to imagine  
You, too, once cried out  
'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'  
You are no stranger to fear, helplessness  
And feeling abandoned, even by God  
Help us, then, to find a way to peace  
In the path of suffering  
And to find you there in my deepest darkness  
Amen.**

Remind him that many of us are puzzled, angry and without answers; tell him yours, he is broad-shouldered enough to take your 'hits'.

**Lord Jesus, there were those who  
cried out against you  
'Crucify him!'  
I might have done the same.  
I am puzzled  
If you are God, where are you  
If you are God  
Why such suffering  
If you are God**

**Why are you silent  
If you are God  
Get off your backside  
And help us  
At least help us understand**

***A Final Prayer***

**If we have never sought, we seek Thee now; Thine eyes burn through the dark,  
our only stars; We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,  
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.**

**The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;  
In all the universe we have no place. Our wounds are hurting us;  
where is the balm? Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.**

**If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,  
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine; We know to-day what wounds are,  
have no fear, Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.**

**The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.**

*(written by Edward Shillito in the midst of the First World War)*

***Blessing***

**May God's grace go with me,  
May I enjoy the forgiveness and peace that Christ brings  
Know his reassurance, comfort and the hope he brings  
And may his peace be with me and all I love now, and al-ways  
Amen**

## **Sunday: Matthew 21:1-11 - Jesus Enters Jerusalem**

Jesus would have been well known to many of those in the crowd who were going up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. However, not for the first time (compare 8:27), they begin to recognise there is something mysterious about Jesus. This leads them to ask afresh the question, 'Who is this?'

This question is seized upon by Matthew who sees the events he describes here as an acted parable in which the answer to the crowds enquiry is to be found.

The response of those who replied in the words of verse 11 was inadequate as a complete answer but it was not incorrect. Possibly Deuteronomy 18:14ff. was in their minds as they answered; a passage that predicted the coming of a very special prophet, the prophet. Of that prophet it had been said that his hearers were to 'listen to him' for his words would be the very words of God.

Matthew clearly intends his readers (and that includes us) to listen to Jesus' words. If we are to hear the words of God they will be supremely heard on his lips.

But Jesus was more than a prophet. Throughout this passage are references that hint at something else; that Jesus was and is also a king. 'Son of David' was a title understood by the Jews to refer to the messianic king (20:29-34). Those same expectations included the belief that the Messiah was to be a peaceful ruler like Solomon (see verse 5). Traditionally palms were strewn before or near royal persons and clothes are recorded to have been cast before Jehu at his coronation (2 Kings 9:13). Zechariah 9:9 (quoted in verse 5) also predicted the accession of a king who would have worldwide rule. All these hopes, emphasised by Matthew, show that he understood Jesus to have been the Messianic king. Interestingly, too, the Mount of Olives (verse 1) was important to Jewish expectations of their Messiah. On the basis of Zechariah 14:4,9 they expected him to come from there and execute vengeance.

How significant this all is! Jesus comes as the Messiah king but not (now) to execute vengeance but to bring peace.

It is interesting to note that Zechariah 9:9 (and Isaiah 62:11) refers to God's universal act of salvation by speaking in terms of 'redemption'; a payment having been made for the release of those in debt. It is difficult to believe that this was not in the mind of Matthew as he wrote this passage. If so, it points to another great truth about Jesus. He is not only prophet and king but also a priest, the one who came to make payment for the release of those in bondage to sin and under God's wrath.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. If Jesus is the supreme mouthpiece of God, how carefully ought I listen to his words and study the words of Scripture which he endorsed?
2. If Jesus is king, whose opinion is decisive in all the activities of our churches?
3. If Jesus is God made flesh in order to save lost sinners, what implications does this have for the church's mission?

## **Monday: Matthew 26:1-16 - Jesus is Anointed in Bethany**

With a deep breath, Matthew now begins to describe the events which formed the climax of Jesus' ministry. The time for words is now effectively passed: the final and great act of Jesus to secure the redemption of his people is now at hand (verse 2). Matthew tells the story with great skill. He recounts several incidents, not apparently in chronological order, to bring out some important and instructive contrasts. Jesus' own sovereign and voluntary act is set side by side with the place of human beings (verse 1-5); the response of the religious leaders is contrasted with that of Mary of Bethany (verses 6-13); and she is then contrasted with Judas (verses 14-16).

The climax of Jesus' ministry was his voluntary offering of himself for sin. Earlier he had predicted his death (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-20). But now he predicts both the time and means of death (verse 2). In this way he emphasises that he is in total control; his death would be no accident of history. It was his deliberate plan and purpose to die. But Jesus also re-veals the nature of his death: he will be the 'Paschal Lamb by God appointed', the supreme sacrifice offered to save his people from the wrath of God. Jesus' passion (suffering) is the supreme example of his teaching. He here demonstrates his love for his people.

In the rest of this passage two inadequate responses to Jesus (verse 3-5 and 14-16) flank the example of Mary (verses 6-11). Caiaphas is an example of those inconvenienced by Jesus' ministry. History reveals he was obsessed with the pursuit of power. No surprise, then, that he and his colleagues are anxious to eliminate a threat to their ambitions by one who claimed to be their lord.

Then there are the disillusioned. We cannot know for sure why Judas acted as he did but it seems that he was disappointed that Jesus had failed to deliver on what he thought discipleship would bring. For that he was prepared to turn his back on Jesus and 'dob him in.'

But the centre of this section provides us with the lovely example of Mary. She seems to have been one of Jesus' most attentive listeners (see Luke 10:38-42). She also seems to have acted with the full understanding that Jesus was going to die. John and Mark tell us she brought spikenard

which was specially used in anointing the dead. However much or little she understood, her extravagant love is the focus of the story: 300 denarii was the equivalent of a year's wages. And that example is one that is set before us as the response to which we are all called.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. To what extent are you a 'Mary' kind of person? How do you think we can demonstrate our devotion to Jesus publicly?
2. If we re-enacted Mary's devotion today, in church, what would be lacking? Spontaneity? Reality? Love? How can we show the reality of our love for Jesus in our fellowship with one another?
3. Traitors are described as Judases. What were Judas'

## **Tuesday: Matthew 26:17-30 - The Last Supper**

In the passage we looked at yesterday, Jesus' sovereignty was contrasted with the tragic response of some to him. This theme is continued in the present passage. Jesus reveals that he knows one of his disciples will be-tray him and that he knows who it is (verse 25). Then the focus moves to a fuller explanation of his death.

We cannot escape the threefold repetition of the word 'passover' in verses 17-19. Matthew is insistent that Jesus hosted a Passover meal. Jesus clearly wanted us to understand that his death was to be seen as the ultimate Passover. This being so, we can note that:

His death was 'vicarious', that is, he died on behalf of others. That was true of the Passover lamb which was originally slain to secure the life of every first-born Israelite from the Lord's avenging angel. The allusion in verse 28 to Isaiah 52:13-53:12 makes the same point.

Verse 28 goes further, however. Jesus' death was an offering for sin. When Jesus died, he died for others because of their sin.

As such, he died as a substitute and a 'penal' offering. This means that he bore the avenging wrath of God against sin in place of others. These last three aspects of his work as achieved by his 'blood'. This was the significance of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament. It is the same idea here.

But how can this actually bring men and women (us!) forgiveness from God? The answer is that God can and does forgive sin because the full penalty for sin has been paid, the death penalty born by the substitute. In addition to this, God forgets sin. The first part of verse 28 alludes to Jeremiah 31:31-34 where God says, 'I will remember their sins no more.'

But it is not simply that Jesus' death brings the hostility between himself and humankind to an end. Rather he died to make us his friends, even

family. This is the point of verse 29. Jesus describes a messianic banquet. In the ancient world such was only open to friends or family. And that Jesus is speaking of a family relationship here is emphasized by his use of the 'blood of the covenant'; words which look back to Exodus 24:8 where God made Israel 'his family'.

Yet the benefits of Jesus' death must we received (verse 26). We do not automatically become the beneficiaries of his death. We must 'eat and drink'; figurative language which emphasizes our complete identification with his death through our total abandonment to him as the only way to God.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. How do you answer the person who says, 'if God is God of love, how can he leave anyone out of heaven?'
2. When we meet around the Lord's Table, what are the truths about Jesus that you have in mind?
3. If Jesus died for the world, why is the world not saved?

## Wednesday: Matthew 26:31-56 - Peter's Denial

As we follow Jesus and his disciples to Gethsemane, we cannot escape feeling that we are walking on holy ground. Something awesome and beyond words take place in our story. If Monday's reading emphasized the fact that Jesus was to die and yesterday's passage explained the reason for his death, these verses stress the necessity and cost of that death.

Nowhere else in the passion narrative are we brought so face to face with the agonies through which Jesus went because of the cross. We are told that Jesus was 'sorrowful and troubled' but this hardly does justice to the expression of utter wretchedness which is implied here. This is brought out by the NIV by the words, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow' (verse 38) and Jesus' words 'to the point of death' bring out the utter turmoil in his mind and heart. It was surely for this reason that he sought the company of his friends; he just wanted them there to watch and pray with him.

Jesus thus experienced the depth of agony and despair which is common to men and women in extremity, especially when faced with death. But it was much more than that! Perhaps we are inclined to think that because Jesus was God as well as a human being that he did not or could not feel the agony that is sometimes ours. In fact, as this passage shows, the reverse is true, since Jesus' agony was greater because of his foreknowledge (verse 39). It is a mark of God's grace to us that we do not know the future. If we did, the agony of impending difficulty and disaster might be more than we could bear. But Jesus knew all that lay ahead and his agony was made greater because he was to be handed over to 'sinners' (verse 45). He was the holy God who could not bear to even look at sin. Now, he was to be manhandled to the point of death by those he had created!

In addition, he knew beforehand he would be betrayed (verses 21-25 and 46-50) and abandoned by even his dearest friends (verses 31ff and 56). Finally, there was the added agony of knowing that, though a pathway for escape existed (verse 53 – a legion was 6,000 men), he must follow the path that would lead to his death.

And this passage emphasizes why Jesus' death was a necessity. Jesus longed to gain the crown without pain (verse 39). Yet the Father's 'helplessness' shows that there was no other way to bring us into God's family. The New Testament writers knew this (see Acts 4:12). Nothing in the Bible so emphasizes the fact that only through Jesus' death can we have peace with God.

This is further emphasized by the way that even the 'best of men' fail (verses 40-41, 43, 45, 56). Jesus knew human weakness better than we ever can (verse 31)! Only he, and he alone, could face the fiery trial.

Finally, we note the tenderness of Jesus on the way to the cross. Jesus accompanied his prediction of the disciples' failure with that of a welcome after failure (verse 32). Though they failed, they (and we) would always be welcome!

### Questions for Reflection

1. If Jesus has forgiven you, can it be truly said that you have forgiven yourself for your failures? If not, how can you do so?
2. How do you respond to those who say that Jesus cannot be the Son of God because he experienced such agony in the face of death?
3. How can one death save others from death?

## Thursday: Matthew 27:1-26 - Jesus before Pilate

Some people are implacably opposed to Jesus. The Jewish leaders did not stop short of crucifying Jesus even though both the governor and his wife were aware of Jesus' innocence (verse 19,24). Pride and envy drove Jesus' opponents forward (verse 18).

For others, the cost of recognizing Jesus for who he is, is simply too high. Pilate illustrates this. He could see through the religious leaders (verse 18) although, probably, he could see no further. Nevertheless, his own selfish ambitions stopped him from seeing the truth about Jesus. We know from the history books that he was proud, cruel and hard. Eventually, he turned the entire Jewish people against himself, the province became unmanage-able, and he was recalled to Rome. Here, despite his hatred of them, he bowed to blackmail (compare John 19:12).

Still others are fickle. This was true of the crowd (verses 20-25). A few days previously they had welcomed Jesus like a returning hero (21:1-11). But here they have turned against him. Why? It seems that so long as Je-sus held out to them the prospect of meeting their needs or wants they would stand by him. When he 'failed', he would experience the 'whiplash' of their emotions.

Then there are those who have a sort of superstitious reverence for Jesus. This was the case with Pilate's wife (verse 9). Her dream had been unset-tling. Under its influence she tried to get Jesus freed. She failed and we do not know what happened next. Perhaps as the dream became a distant memory so did her anxiety.

Finally, there are those who are sad and sorrowful for sin but this comes short of genuine repentance; rather like Judas. Filled with remorse he was unrepentant. He regretted what he had done, he was smitten in his con-science and tears may have followed. But, in his heart, he was un-changed. He was sorry that he had let himself down, not sorry for what he had done to Jesus.

### Questions for reflection

1. To what extent is your faith one that trusts Jesus more than for simply meeting your needs? What more should be involved?
2. Do you know people who are 'fair weather Christians'? What can be done to nurture them to true faith in Jesus? Can this develop gradually or do they need to be confronted with the inadequacy of their faith?
3. Corruption is found everywhere. What does Jesus' experience teach us about how we should respond?

## Friday: Matthew 27:27-56 - Jesus' Death

Matthew's account of Jesus' death highlights the mockery he received from the Roman soldiers, the Jewish passers-by, the religious leaders and even criminals. Jesus was 'despised and rejected.'

Jesus was mocked for both his claims and his actions (especially, verse 43). Granted, the claims he made had been extraordinary: he claimed to be Israel's king (verses 29,37), the builder of the new temple (verse 40) and the Son of God (verse 43). But his miracles ought to have alerted people to the need to examine those claims more fully. However, this was not true then and neither is it true now.

One phrase here ascribes to Jesus the highest possible dignity. It is 'the Son of God' (verses 43, 54). Though the centurion may not have understood the full meaning of his words, it is clear that Matthew and the other New Testament writers intended us to grasp that Jesus shared fully in the same divine nature as the Father. He was 'very God of very God', God who

had become a man, 'Immanuel, God with us'. Thus Christianity builds its foundations on the highest ground: the revelation of God to human beings in his incarnate Son. This makes Christianity altogether unique and exclusive.

Four great truths about Jesus' work are taught here:

1. Jesus refused to save himself so that he could save others (verse 42). There was real truth in the mockery addressed to Jesus. He had made himself powerless to do anything to alleviate his suffering in order that he might avert the sufferings of others.
2. Jesus suffered for sin (Verses 45-46). These two verses emphasize that it was the penalty for sin which Jesus bore. Darkness in the Bible is the usual symbol for sin, so here the darkness indicates, in a visible and symbolic way, the fact that Jesus was being 'made sin for us'. But this is not all, since verse 46 teaches an inexplicable truth, that the temporarily the threefold unity of God was broken. We cannot understand this mystery, but we can understand the lesson it teaches. Surely, it declares both the seriousness of sin and the love of God for sinners which could bring such hurt to Father and Son that we might go free.
3. Jesus has purchased forgiveness and access to God for all his followers (verse 51). The veil of the temple symbolized the fact that sinful human beings cannot approach God. Only a preceding sacrifice for sin could enable the high priest to enter behind the curtain; and then only once a year (see Leviticus 16). But the veil being torn (and from the top to the bottom!) tells us that we now have free access to God after this one, unrepeatable self-sacrifice of Jesus.
4. Jesus' death has brought the curse on humankind to an end (verses 52,53). In this strange story we are reminded that death is the penalty for sin but, where sin has been finally dealt with, death is brought to an end. Jesus is the 'firstfruits' (1 Corinthians 15:20) of the dead. His death guarantees our final resurrection and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Imagine yourself standing where the centurion did? What do you see? What conclusions do you reach?
2. The crucifixion has been painted many times and in different ways over the centuries. In what way can these pictures be helpful (or unhelpful) in understanding the cross for ourselves?
3. Reflection on this passage, what truths do you believe are central to the Christian message and why?

## **Saturday: Matthew 27-66 - Jesus' Burial**

In these verses the scene is set for Easter Sunday and they anticipate what will be described in 28:1-15.

In a sort of 'backhanded' way, we are being prepared by Matthew so that when the resurrection does take place, we can have no doubts about its reality!

So we note that the people who actually witnessed the burial of Jesus in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb (27:61) were the first witnesses of the empty tomb (28:6). They could, therefore, have no doubts as to the death of Je-sus, nor would they have gone to the wrong tomb and found it empty. They knew which one it was!

The religious authorities of the day could not deny the fact of the empty tomb, despite all their attempts to ensure the event Jesus had predicted would not happen (see 28:11-15). The very people who had been set to guard the tomb by the religious authorities were among the first to witness it was empty!

Indeed, the presence of the guards at the tomb and the fact that the religious authorities thought up the excuse of grave-stealing is witness to the fact that the tomb was not robbed. Moreover, it is absurd. Would all the guards have fallen asleep? And if they all slept, how did they know the disciples stole the body?

It is simply not possible to argue that Jesus was not really dead and that, in the cool of the tomb, he revived and came out. Such an apparition might have explained the soldiers' senselessness, but how could Jesus move the stone and break the seal (verse 60,66).

So Matthew is preparing his readers for the story he is about to narrate. It is unbelievable; but, as he has prepared the ground for us, he shows us it is the only realistic explanation for what was about to take place.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What reasons could you give to a friend for the truth of the resurrection?
2. Why do some people today say belief in the resurrection of Jesus is not necessary? What is left of Christianity if the resurrection has not happened?
3. Myths and fairy stories are full of gods who die and rise. What is the difference between them and Jesus' resurrection?