

The Truth That Sets Us Free: IOPT Lent Resources



'This educational visit...was an immersive pilgrimage with much time immersed in the lives of people who are among the world's most maligned, treated as strangers in their own land'

In September 2019, 21 members of the United Reformed Church (URC) accompanied Derek Estill, Moderator of the URC General Assembly, on a visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (IOPT). This educational visit was not a tour or a holiday, but for those who attended, it was an immersive pilgrimage with much time immersed in the lives of people who are among the world's most maligned, treated as strangers in their own land.

In these materials for Lent, we use the Psalms, to open up some of the stories and experiences we witnessed during our visit. For each week of Lent, and also for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, we offer a Psalm, a short reflection followed by a few worship suggestions. For Easter Sunday, we direct you to some of the videos made during our visit, which we hope will offer hope and inspiration.

We hope you enjoy using these materials. Please [contact us](#) to let us know what you think and how you've engaged with them.

Ash Wednesday



'Every corner guarded by checkpoints, we stumbled on piles and piles of rubbish which Israeli residents are able to dump into Palestinian areas with impunity'

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,

and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Psalm 51 has five sections: verses 1-6 is a call for God to take control, verses 7-12 are petitions for forgiveness and restoration, verses 13-15 look expectantly toward reconciliation and in verses 16-17 the psalmist, David, offers himself to be sacrificed to love's service. In doing so, the last two verses (18-19) draw the psalmist from the personal to the public. The desire is for God to "Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar."

It is obvious from the Psalm that, in order to truly be in the service of love, one must make the personal, public. However, an immersive experience such as we had in IOPT reveals how the personal becomes public in ways we simply cannot grasp as tourists, or even pilgrims.

Months after our visit, the main images of the Holy Land that come flooding back to us are not of the majesty of holy sites, but the rubbish tips of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. On Israeli territory, you marvel at pristine, well-paved streets, guarded housing and fortress-like architecture. In Hebron, walking through the Palestinian market, every corner guarded by checkpoints, we stumbled on piles and piles of rubbish which Israeli residents are able to dump into Palestinian areas with impunity. For centuries, the market in Hebron was the largest in the region. Tourists rarely come today. The reach of Palestinian businesses is cut short by the checkpoints and guards on roofs watching your every move, and that of the Palestinians.

Our own taste of the oppression came when we were detained at one checkpoint for twenty minutes, behind a Palestinian woman in front of us who had been stopped. What seemed outrageous to us is that this is a daily occurrence for hundreds of thousands of residents in Hebron and along the West Bank, just to get to the market or a friend's home, or work. For them, in their whole life, in the faith they hold, in the service they offer, the personal is political.

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

We enter this season and this space

Bringing our brokenness

We enter this season and this space

Bringing our learned faithlessness

We enter this season and this space

Intrigued by mystery, longing for healing from misery

We enter this season and this space

Because resurrection begins with lament.

Collect for Ash Wednesday (Inspired by CoE 1979 BCC)

Lord, you love every one of us as if there were only one of us.
You liberate us from brokenness and sin when we make ourselves aware:

Of ourselves, of our neighbours, of you.

Raise our awareness this season. Give us the discipline of unlearning.

As we realise what needs repairing in our own lives, may we see your mercy working within us and without. Through our elder brother, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, the love source who holds us all up, now and always, Amen.

Intercessions

We bring to God someone whom we have met or remembered ...(silence)

We bring to God someone who is hurting and needs our prayer...(silence)

We bring to God a troubled situation in our world tonight...(silence)

We bring to God someone whom we find hard to forgive or trust...(silence)

We bring ourselves to God that the answers to the prayers we make begin within us...(silence)

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer. Amen.**

Lent 1



'Between IOPT, there is a long and very high concrete wall. On one side, in Israel, they call it the 'security wall'. On the other, in Palestine, it's known as the 'apartheid wall'. There is very little freedom on either side of the Wall'

Psalm 32:1-5

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Here are the first five verses of one of the seven Penitential Psalms. These were probably sung in the temple as part of the rites surrounding the making of a 'sin offering' by the penitential pilgrim.

In the first two verses we find three different terms for sin, matched by three ways that God will deal with it when one confesses. First, 'transgression', which we can think of as rebellion, acting against the divine authority. This, God will forgive, lifting the burden from us. Then there is sin, faulty action, often deliberate. God will cover this, removing the mark of the destruction from sight, dealing with the offence. Finally, there is 'iniquity', crookedness or going astray. For this, God will not leave the burden of blame in place. God will release us from guilt. In each case, we must repent if we are to know God's forgiveness.

Between IOPT, there is a long and very high concrete wall. On one side, in Israel, they call it the 'security wall'. On the other, in Palestine, it's known as the 'apartheid wall'. There is very little freedom on either side of the Wall.

The Palestinians we met were deeply aware of their lack of freedom. Every part of their lives is subject to the restrictions of being occupied in their own land by a powerful, militarised state. They struggle to live with dignity

within the tight and unpredictable boundaries imposed upon them. Meanwhile, it is clear that the power of the state is implemented at its so-called 'security wall' by young soldiers, many just 18-years-old, who, with a gun in their hands, are deeply afraid as they carry out their duties on the frontline.

While for the Palestinians, the weight of this sin is evident, it quickly becomes apparent that the wall and all it represents is a sin that ensnares those who impose it too.

The guilt of being an oppressor denying freedom to others is heavy. It cramps and distorts the spirit, stifles the full and free gift of life not only in those you hurt, but in yourself as well. To recognise your fault and release your enemy is part of your journey towards forgiveness and freedom.

One person we met at the YMCA/YWCA in Bethlehem said: "We are the best enemy to have ... because we are very polite! We want to make peace with those who persecute us. We believe in non-violence. Our work to change this situation for our people is about bringing liberation for the Israelis too ... to free them to meet their Palestinian neighbour ... to free them from their sins. They are humans like us and we must love them ... which is hard. 'Loving your enemy' is so that we can resist evil. This person, this community, need help to see Palestinians as equals."

We heard how a farmer was travelling home in the evening with his children when soldiers stopped them and demanded that they all have their papers checked. He deliberately spoke to his children in English so that the soldier would understand him too. He said to them: "Wake up, there is nothing to be afraid of. This young man is a human being just like us." As the soldier was reminded of his humanity by the gentle words of a father to his children, he was released from the consequences that the gun in his hand might have dictated to him. A space for release and repentance was created and the family was allowed to travel on safely.

Confession is good, not only for the soul, but for changing situations too. The challenge and relief of admitting the chaos you have created, the mess of human making, and finding the release of being forgiven and enabled toward a new way, being given another chance, rings throughout Psalm 32.

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

From the towns and streets and homes where we live
we bring our daily life in this place,
to the God who gives us life.

With the tasks and challenges and opportunities in how we live
we bring our strength and our weakness
to the God who loves us.

Together, neighbours and strangers, sinners and saints, as we live
we bring our heads and hearts and hands
to the God who forgives and renews us.

(Silence)

Let us worship God.

Prayer of Approach

Spirit led Christ,
who has shown us the way, the truth, the life of God on earth,
as we bring you our hearts and minds and lives in worship,
walk alongside us we pray
in the wilderness places of our time and experience
so that we might hear and recognise your invitation again
and find faith to follow you

by the way of the cross,
into God's kingdom of justice and peace.
Amen.

Intercessions (Reflecting on the words and way of Jesus in the Temptation story.)

One does not live by bread alone – but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

God you give us words of forgiveness, steadfast love, eternal wisdom and peace. Hear us as we pray for the people and places where justice is denied, bread is scarce, and peace is a fragile, distant hope.

Hear our prayers for people in places of tension and conflict, particularly our sisters and brothers in IOPT. As they seek and trust your words in their wilderness, keep hope in your wisdom and justice alive in them. As they find their dignity in your steadfast covenant love – give them strength each day to speak and live your words in hope of release from occupation and freedom for reconciliation with their neighbours.

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

God, whose creation is beautiful and embrace is wide, nonviolent, inclusive, and whose passion for justice is sure. When we test your wisdom with our ideas, aspirations, inventions and politics, or challenge your love with our boundaries, barriers, prejudices, or our silence, bring us again to the way of Jesus, walking the way of the Cross.

Our brothers and sisters in churches from our visit share their stories. "Come and see – then go and tell" they say.

Too often we are silent. Show us how to tell the truth.

Too often we are afraid. Show us how to challenge injustice.

Too often we think nothing can change. Lead us to trust, rather than test, your ways of transformative love.

Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

God, when we turn our hope to lesser treasures, seeking wealth, power, influence, security and possession, we hurt ourselves and our neighbour, distort humanity and compromise dignity and justice. As we love, trust and worship you, you show us the way, turned outwards towards the neighbour. Our health is in community; Our hope is a journey taken together.

In worship, we hear the call to love even an enemy that we might leave hatred behind, find healing and grow in peace with justice.

Among your 'people of the book' in Israel and Palestine we pray for confession and change, forgiveness and healing, peace and release, as faithful people, along their different paths, reach out to you in worship. Show them your ways of wisdom and truth, we pray.

Hymn – The truth that sets us free. © John Bell: Iona Community. WGRG 2012

When the wheel of fate is turning
and the mills of God grind slow;
when the past seems more attractive
than the future we don't know;
when our confidence is waning
and we lack security,
comes the timeless word of Jesus
that the truth will set us free.

Is it war or economics,
is it danger or deceit,
is it unforeseen depression,
fear of failure to compete?

Have the times that once were changing
led where no one wants to be?
Shall we live by lies on offer
or the truth that sets us free?

With real faith there will be doubting,
and with loss there will be grief;
no one knows the contradictions
which will exercise belief.
Against conflicts life might bring us
God provides no guarantee,
just the word of hope and healing:
know that truth will set you free.

So, dear Jesus, make us willing
to unmask convenient lies,
to protest wherever power
closes conscience, ears and eyes;
and release our expectations
of your kingdom, yet to be,
born in courage, joy and justice
and the truth that sets us free.

Tune: Eske by John Bell (Alternatively, tunes of an 87, 87 D metre)

Lent 2



'We had to pass a huge concrete bollard that had arbitrarily arrived, placed just recently, by the authorities'

Psalm 121: 1-2

I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

The psalmist writing this is on a journey, and they know that the odds are against them. On the road which they tread, the stony paths are treacherous and the surrounding hills are very probably harbouring bandits and thieves. Yet still, they put their trust, not in earthly powers or strictures, but in God, the source of all that ever was and is.

On our journey through the Holy Land, not only was the terrain unforgiving and the heat powerful but, to make our way to one particular village, we had to pass a huge concrete bollard that had arbitrarily arrived, placed just recently, by the authorities. It told us that entrance to the 'firing area' was forbidden and featured a prominent skull and cross bones. The Bedouin villagers we visited had been forcibly displaced in 1951 and had settled to the east of Jerusalem on barren land that has now become increasingly sought after. Following their occupation of east Jerusalem, the authorities now seek to create a ring of settlements around the city, so the village was issued with demolition orders in 2018. This means that, every day, families wake up not knowing if their home will exist by sunset. Just as ancient travellers knew they personally had little control over their own safety in the desert, the Bedouin villagers today, are at the mercy of others.

We heard how the Bedouin needed just three things to live: access to water, grazing land and markets. Since the occupation and building of the wall, as well as nearby illegal settlements, access to all three has been made virtually impossible. These self-sufficient people are now dependent on outside aid and supporters who pay court fees running into millions in order to counter the state's illegal actions against them.

If we had written a psalm of our own journey through the desert, it would likely have been one, by contrast to this one, of anger and lament. However, despite experiencing urgent threat, oppression and uncertainty, it was clear when listening to the villagers that they were able to recognise light in the darkness, seeing beyond the struggles and fear of now to find hope in eternal truths. It stunned us and moved us. Could we do the same?

As we journey to Jerusalem in our hearts this Lent, can we trust enough in the way of the cross to see past death and into life? Perhaps living in such dangerous and challenging circumstances makes it easier to do, but the words of the villagers exhibited for us a rootedness, an assuredness that echoed the psalmist's. Through a people living in a desperately harsh environment under extreme human coercion, we were given an opportunity to glimpse something life-giving and eternal, a sense of God, present and at work.

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

Through darkness and light, our mighty God walks with us.
Wherever we are in our journeys today, let us come before God in praise and worship,
with eyes that see beyond this world and glimpse the divine,
with feet that are willing to step into unknown territory,
with hearts that are open to surrender. Amen.

Prayers of Approach

God who is on the move,
Give us the courage to follow you:
When it makes no worldly sense.
When it means letting go of certain things to gain uncertain things.
When you stop us in our tracks with your urgent call.
When you speak so quietly we are not sure if we hear you at all.

Help us to hold onto the truth that you are more powerful than all the things we face.
This Lent, in a society where dying to ourselves for new life is so counter-cultural,
Give us the confidence to trust in you and surprise this world with the beauty, hope and peace that you bring.

Console our troubled hearts and disturb our comfortable souls as we move towards you,
Building the world you want to see by the power of the Holy Spirit,
Co-creators of a new realm where violence has no place,
Where peacemakers are blessed, not ridiculed,
Where walls fall down and scales fall from our eyes as we recognise you in each other.

We give thanks for Jesus, who showed the Way,
For the Holy Spirit who guides our feet and restores us,
For our God who calls us home.

Holy Trinity, equip us for the journey ahead,
For your glory.
Amen.

Intercessions

Lord as we journey towards Easter, we give thanks for Jesus, who walked this earth, fully human.
Help us not to be distracted by this world's fleeting success or popularity, or times of fear, but keep our eyes on your will. We give thanks for Jesus' example, which draws us forward to join in with the building of the new Kingdom he began.

We are sorry for the times when we allow his witness and sacrifice to be reduced to a distant, historical event and fail to respond with hope-filled lives.

Lord, when the world tells us that 'surrender' leads to loss, help us to see instead the abundant life you promise for all people and creation. When building a new world seems too heroic or dangerous for people like us, help us see that through you, ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things.

Holy Spirit lead us confidently in Jesus' life-giving way of love and justice. Give us the strength to take up the cross as we challenge corruption, exploitation and oppression. Protect those who challenge the status quo which keeps people in poverty and sees creation plundered for short-term gain.

Lord, in a divided nation, where so much focus is placed on difference, we pray that your Church will recognise common humanity in others and build bridges to bring healing. Thank you for those whom you send who show us that your Kingdom is at hand, and that there are people who are willing to bear the cost.

Give us the voice to speak out for those who feel abandoned, trapped by the fear of others and the reluctance of the world to build real peace. Be with those who know fear on the journey, for whom the days and nights are long, and those who are tired, lost or overwhelmed. Lord, draw close to them.

This Lent, walk in our hearts, dear God, in our community, in our world, so more people will know your hope and be called to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We ask this in his precious name. Amen.

Lent 3



'Outside the area of the camp and in the alleyways behind it, are murals of people (mostly young Palestinian males) who were killed or died in prison. They stand as visible memorials to young people who otherwise would be well forgotten'

Psalm 95: 1-11

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
Therefore, in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."

During Lent, there is a tradition of 'no Alleluias' in worship. It's a time of waiting, in preparation for celebration. It's not time to party just yet. However, this psalm gives us an opportunity to sneak one in, with a stern warning towards the end. It is a call to praise God with our minds and bodies and not merely our formalities. The language of praise in this, and indeed every psalm, carries with it an implied moral challenge: if God is worthy of our praise, then the onus is on us to submit to God's presence in our lives.

One of our guides in Bethlehem led us around the Ibdaa refugee camp, supported by the international community, which has seen around seven million Palestinian refugees over 71 years. Outside the area of the camp and in the alleyways behind it, are murals of people (mostly young Palestinian males) who were killed or died in prison. They stand as visible memorials to young people who otherwise would be well forgotten. Those bodies become the property of the state in a policy known to Palestinians as 'collective punishment'. Bodies are kept on Israeli territory with the families unable to recover them for proper burial. There are some cases where someone, who has been sentenced to several decades in prison, has died and generations later families have been notified to come and retrieve their loved one, by which time all those who knew the person immediately are dead themselves. Hence, remains are claimed by people who have never met the deceased.

Working in the refugee camp, our guide sees a lot. It is easy for him to lose hope. Consequently, he has lost faith. In a conversation during a break, he spoke about coming from a multi religious context, being born into a Muslim family and going to a Christian school. Today, he doesn't ascribe to any religion and the reasons are obvious. How does one maintain faith when there are so few opportunities and little support? This is a serious issue facing young people in the region, many of whom spend their young years planning how to leave the land of their birth and their ancestors, and move to a nation, any nation, where they will be, even marginally, accepted.

St Oscar Romero preached a sermon shortly before his assassination on the silence of God on Good Friday: "God is not failing us when we don't feel his presence. Let's not say: God doesn't do what I pray for so much, and therefore I don't pray any more. God exists, and he exists even more, the farther you feel from him. God is closer to you when you think he is farther away and doesn't hear you. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish." The challenge then is not to "harden our hearts, as at Meribah", testing God with our anger and demands, but rather trust that God is always guiding us, ever to be worshipped, ever to be praised, no matter how difficult or dark things get. Can we do it?

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

We are created in love to worship God.

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

We are covered by grace to serve God.

Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving!

We are cultivated in community to be the Good News to the world.

Let us approach God with unhardened hearts. Amen.

Prayer of Approach

A call to praise your name isn't a call to paradise, to one-track mind.

Praise is a responsibility. It exists to ready us for the fight ahead:

The fight against inequality and injustice.

The fight against Lording over things and hoarding wealth.

The fight to save our souls.

And so, as we praise you, we ask, 'save us'. Amen.

Intercessions

By Your grace, Loving God, may we receive a vision of your universe, as established by your love:

a world where the weak are protected, and the hungry are fed;

a world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;

a world where different races and cultures live in community and mutuality;

a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.

Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



'We saw beautiful places of worship in Jerusalem, especially mosques, surrounded by airport-style security cabins with watchtowers tacked crudely on the sides'

Psalm 85: 1-12

Lord, you were favourable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.
You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us.
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Will you not revive us again
so that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation.

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Psalm 85 is a heartfelt plea from the Israelites to the God they trusted as their Lord and Saviour. Returning from exile, they were struggling to live out their day to day lives in the shadows of a ruined city, a fallen temple, and a mourning land, where they continued to be surrounded by jealous and powerful adversaries. Hence, they cry out to their God, the one in whom they trust to bring about ways of mercy, truth, righteousness and peace.

Thinking of the context in which this psalm was written, it is all too easy to see parallels with the experiences of Christians in the Holy Land today. On our visit, we saw places across the West Bank falling into disrepair due to a lack of funding or infrastructure, and high levels of unemployment. We saw beautiful places of worship in Jerusalem, especially mosques, surrounded by airport-style security cabins with watchtowers tacked crudely on the sides. We experienced some of the everyday challenges faced by people in Hebron trying to get from their homes to work, to their schools, to their places of worship, barred by checkpoints and militia. We saw Bethlehem, and many other cities like it, surrounded by illegal settlements, built on Palestinian land by seemingly jealous and powerful adversaries.

For the Israelites who wrote this psalm, and equally those who feel it resonates with their situation today, salvation is not defined by condemnation or revenge. Again and again, the people we met on our visit asked us to share their stories and to speak their truths. Whilst these stories can raise passions in us that tempt us to unproductive anger, our Saviour shows us another way. In God's kingdom, truth is not used to condemn, but to set free, and in this psalm, truth meets with mercy.

The psalmist does not rest only on what God will do, but what we, as God's people, need to do. Righteousness is not to be used as an excuse for violence or boastful revenge, but rather to embrace peace. We are called to join with those Palestinians, Israelis and peoples around the world who cry out to God for mercy, truth, righteousness and peace. Like the psalmist, may we seek and recognise God's footsteps in our world, and be brave and humble enough to Walk the Way of Jesus today.

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

Among the poor, among the proud,
among the persecuted, among the privileged,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

In the private house, in the public place,
in the wedding feast, in the judgement hall,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

With a gentle touch, with an angry word,
with a clear conscience, with burning love,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

That the kingdom might come, that the world might believe,
that the powerful might stumble, that the hidden might be seen,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

Within us, without us, behind us, before us,
in this place, in every place, for this time, for all time,
Christ is coming to make all things new.

Prayer of Approach

Gracious God,
You have promised to hear us,
and we believe you are able to change us.
Make our hearts your home.
Confront, control, forgive and encourage us,
as you know best.
(Pause)
Lord, hear our prayer, and change our lives
until we illustrate the grace of the God who makes all things new. Amen

Lent 5



'Agricultural livelihoods are at risk because of...restrictions'

Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.
On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
for great is the glory of the Lord.
For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.
The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

On this penultimate Sunday of Lent we read from the beginning of the final section of the Psalms, what Walter Brueggeman calls a song of 'reorientation' that asks the hearers to remember and experience again the love and faithfulness of God.

What does reorientation look like? In the Holy Land, we saw projects which are working to reorient the livelihoods of Palestinians, against the odds, including a remarkable Palestinian agricultural project in Azzoun run in part with funds from Christian Aid UK. We learned of the challenges Palestinians face in finding opportunities to develop their own businesses due to the restrictions placed upon them, as well as the extra crises of climate change and general lack of action by the state. There are agricultural restrictions throughout the West Bank. Dairy, meat and agricultural products are not allowed to be taken through the checkpoints out of the West Bank, which means that farmers are

not able to sell their goods in markets on the other side of the separation barrier. This also prevents them from selling in Jerusalem. Agricultural livelihoods are at risk because of these restrictions.

At the hill town of Bal'a, we experienced a cooperative project run by the women of the town. A great example of women being empowered to participate in economic development on their own terms. They served us an incredible lunch and we were met by local folks, children and the mayor of the town. The town was just happy we were taking such an interest in their work. We were local celebrities there for two hours! Even more of a poignant example of this was found in the Galilean desert, where we visited another cooperative called Syndiana, which brings Israeli and Palestinian women together to learn each other's languages, weave baskets and lamp shades, make olive oils, soap, honey, etc. We can always rely on God's grace and goodness, as the psalmist reminds us, but how will we respond to that which God has started in and through us? Projects like this are helpful, but without the ability to trade beyond borders without extreme taxation, it is not enough for sustainable living and development. Our guide that day referred to a familiar American dictum, "No taxation without representation". From the international community, he said: "We're not looking for technology or even money, just opportunity, especially for young people who want to emigrate because opportunities are so scarce for them. We're just looking for justice."

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

Everything in us says 'Thank You Lord!'

We worship with our voices and with our feet!

When we call, God steps in.

God's name and God's Word is holy.

In the thick of turmoil, God is present.

Finish what you started in us, O God. Amen.

Prayer of Approach

As you restore our futures with the promise of new life,

We pour out our praise to you.

Fill this space with your Spirit, we pray.

We are not monarchs, but we long to sing.

Fill our hearts with your compassion,

Not just in this moment,

But in all times, places, and spaces.

Stir your dream in our hearts, O God,

So that as we celebrate the great things you have done for us,

We may also express the love you give to all. Amen.

Intercessions

We wait for the rulers of the earth to sing your praise.

In the meantime, we pray for those who rule that righteousness and reconciliation is the order of the day.

We wait for the boundaries between people to fall, so that enemies become neighbours.

In the meantime, we pray for the oppressed and the oppressor, each in their own weakness.

We wait for a global community where healing is readily available.

In the meantime, we pray for those who use their gifts and expertise to offer care for the most marginalised.

We wait for new lifestyles that will stop climate change.

In the meantime, we give gratitude to those who work to educate, legislate, and protest.

We wait for resurrection to order our life.

In the meantime, keep us living in hope and never in fear. Amen.

Palm Sunday



'Palestinians must apply for permits to enter Israel'

Psalms 118: 19-29

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Bethany is very close to Jerusalem. It used to take ten minutes to make the journey by car or thirty minutes by foot. Since the separation barrier was built, it is not possible to walk between the two places and it now takes at least forty minutes by car. It can take much longer if there are issues at the checkpoint, and it is impossible if the checkpoint is closed for any reason. Palestinians must apply for permits to enter Israel.

In 2019, many Christians from Gaza were denied permits to visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem to celebrate Christmas. There are approximately a thousand Christians living in Gaza. In 2018, Israel granted around 700 single-use travel permits for Gazan Christians to visit the Holy Sites, but in the Christmas period of 2019, around 600 applications were made but only 55 permits were granted.

In addition, IOPT have segregated roads. Some may only be driven upon by vehicles with an Israeli number plate, and others are only for vehicles with a Palestinian number plate. Route 437, a road towards Jerusalem, is dubbed 'Apartheid Road' due to the wall that runs down the middle. Israelis must drive on one side of the road, and Palestinians on the other.

Psalm 118 has strong Zionist themes throughout in its references to entering Jerusalem. It has become a popular passage to recite on Israeli Independence Day and Yom Yerushalayim (which commemorates Israel's gain of control over the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War in 1967). This can make it challenging to understand in light of stories of Palestinian suffering and a desire for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. What must be remembered, however, is that at its core Psalm 118 is a song of praise to God. Jerusalem is a place of worship, whether that worship is at the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Chanted prayers, church bells and the Islamic call to prayer fill the city with the sound of worship, just as the shouts of "Hosanna!" filled the streets when Jesus rode past.

Psalm 118 is first and foremost a psalm of thanksgiving and praise and our focus should always be first and foremost on God. As Christians, we believe that the Messiah did enter Jerusalem, but he rode on a donkey, not a war horse. In this act and throughout his life and death he showed that God's love is seen in humility and sacrifice, not conquest or violence.

The love to which this psalm refers is not merely the love that can exist between humans, but the love of God, which surpasses all our understanding, reaching deeper than we could ever imagine, uniting God and people in bonds which no power can break. For this, we can offer eternal praise.

Worship Suggestions

Call to Worship

Let us enter our worship as Jesus entered Jerusalem:

Humbly, graciously, with our eyes to God.

Let us prepare for worship as the people prepared for Jesus:

Joyfully, actively, expectantly.

Let us praise God together and say:

Hosanna in the highest heaven.

Prayer of Approach

Jesus, lead us into Jerusalem.

The people rejoiced at your coming and lifted up their voices in song and celebration to praise you.

They laid down their coats beneath your feet and lifted up palm branches as banners to welcome you.

And then you entered through the gates and you went into the temple,

The place of worship,

A place to be close to God,

And there you looked around.

Jesus, lead us into Jerusalem.

Lead us with rejoicing and celebrations, with songs and praises and shouts of 'Hosanna!'

Teach us to give thanks with what we have available to us,

To offer even the coat from our back in worship of you.

Lead us into worship, Jesus, as we strive to be close to God.

And make us look around.

Jesus, open our eyes to Jerusalem today.

Let us remember those who are not allowed to enter the Holy City without a permit,
The families who have been displaced from their homes there,
The people who are no longer allowed to work there.
Let your passion for justice and peace and healing fill us as we remember the Passion story
And we act in the knowledge that your steadfast love endures for ever,
For all people and all nations.

Amen.

Intercessions

In Bethany and Bethphage, Jesus prepared for his journey.
We pray for the people of these places today,
Divided from Jerusalem by the separation barrier.
We pray for those who strive to enact Jesus' message and ministry today
And prepare for a new way
Through the promotion of peace, education and healing.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus rode humbly on a donkey.
We pray for those who travel in the Holy Land today.
For Palestinians who are segregated on the roads and must face checkpoints when they travel,
And for Israelis who are restricted from entering Palestinian towns and villages.
We pray that pilgrims and visitors might travel freely and experience the hospitality that both Israelis and
Palestinians offer
And that they might delight in the culture and history that both heritages celebrate.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

At the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus was greeted with palm branches and shouts of joy.
We pray for those who worship in Jerusalem today.
For our fellow Christians, diverse in liturgy and tradition but one in the body of Jesus Christ,
For our Jewish friends who worship the LORD in the land of the Bible,
For our Muslim friends who praise Allah in the Holy City,
Bring us together in unity, respect, and love of the divine.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

In the temple, Jesus stopped and looked around.
We pray that we might all pause and look around.
In the presence of God, let us see through the eyes of others
And unite us in peace.
Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Amen.

Easter Sunday



'Together, we can struggle towards peace, justice and equality for all'

Psalm 125

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people,
from this time on and forevermore.

For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest
on the land allotted to the righteous,
so that the righteous might not stretch out
their hands to do wrong.

Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.

But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.

Peace be upon Israel!

Watch [this](#) short reflection by William Young, who represented the National Synod of Scotland on the visit. In this, William sums up well the call which the risen Jesus gives us to join him in the continuing struggle for peace and justice, trusting that God will always strengthen and guide us.

Watch [this](#) short summary from Brian Jolly, a key organiser of the visit, and [this](#) from Clare Nutbrown-Hughes, representing on what this important and insightful visit revealed.

Kevin Snyman, URC Programme Officer (Global Justice & Partnerships) and Coordinator for [Commitment for Life](#), the URC's global justice programme, also has a number of similar videos on his YouTube page, which you can view [here](#).

If you would like someone to visit your church or community to share more stories and experiences from the visit, please [contact us](#) to arrange it.

Thank you for using these Lent materials and helping to share the stories of people in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Together, we can struggle towards peace, justice and equality for all.