

## Lent 5 (Passion Sunday) 2021 – 21<sup>st</sup> March

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Jeremiah 31 vv 31-34 p793 Hebrews 5 vv 4-10 p1204
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	John 12 vv 20-33 p1080

**W**E beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

**A**LMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Last year, we weren't able to hold services on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, because of COVID. This year we held Ash Wednesday services, but we were not able to be ashed. The ashes are normally made from last year's Palm Crosses and we didn't hold Palm Sunday services either in 2020. Even if we had had a supply of ash, I couldn't have ashed you because we must avoid touching one another. I was especially interested, therefore, to read an article on the subject in the current edition of *Faith & Worship*. The author, Samuel Bray, reminds us that the Church of England ceased the practice of ashing when we declared our independence from Rome in the reign of King Edward VI 470 years ago. It was only in the last few decades of the C20 that ashing was revived in Anglican Churches. There were good reasons for giving up the practice and good reasons for reinstating it, but there isn't time or space to go into them here.

What did the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer provide for Ash Wednesday? What it offers, in addition to Mattins, Evensong & Holy Communion, is *A Commination, or Denouncing of God's Anger and Judgements against Sinners*. This sounds unappealing. There are not many churches which hold the Commination service today. The language strikes us as out of date and we don't like to think of God as a God of anger and judgment. Neither do we much like to think of ourselves as sinners. But bear with the Prayer Book for a moment. There is, at the beginning, a short exhortation concluding with these words: *it is thought good, that at this time (in the presence of you all) should be read the general sentences of God's cursing against impenitent sinners, gathered out of the seven and twentieth Chapter of Deuteronomy, and other places of Scripture; and that ye should answer to every Sentence, Amen: To the intent that, being admonished of the great indignation of God against sinners, ye may the rather be moved to earnest and true repentance; and may walk more warily in these dangerous days; fleeing from such vices, for which ye affirm with your own mouths the curse of God to be due.* There then follow these cursings of impenitent sinners from the pages of Scripture. To each one of them, the people are expected to say, *Amen*, to affirm the truth of what is said and their acceptance of the justness of God's judgment on our sins. ***CURSED*** *is the man that maketh any carved or molten image, to worship it. Cursed is he that curseth his father or mother. Cursed is he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. Cursed is he that maketh the blind to go out of his way. Cursed is he that perverteth the judgement of the stranger, the fatherless, and widow. Cursed is he that smiteth his neighbour secretly. Cursed is he that lieth with his neighbour's wife. Cursed is he that taketh reward to slay the innocent. Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, and taketh man for his defence, and in his heart goeth from the Lord. Cursed are the unmerciful, fornicators, and adulterers, covetous persons, idolaters, slanderers, drunkards, and extortioners.*

Strong stuff and not agreeable to listen to. Surely nobody deserves the curse of God. But let's think about it the other way round. How do we feel about people who curse their parents? Or steal a neighbour's land? Or deceive the blind? What do we think about people who cheat the vulnerable or exercise violence against other people or commit adultery? What do you think should be done to hit men? And all those other sins against God and man, should we just get away with them? Don't you and I feel at least indignation, if not anger, at the terrible things we hear about every day? Shouldn't there be justice when a young boy is knifed by a rival gang member or an old lady is conned out of her savings or a despot meets peaceful protest with tear gas and bullets, or a wealthy businessman steals his employees' pension funds? If we're honest, aren't there things in our lives of which we should be ashamed – things which would provoke the indignation and even the wrath of decent people? Shouldn't our sins provoke the wrath and indignation of God. The article I read quotes the great Frederick Denison Maurice. *The service draws no distinctions, enters into no*

*refinements; it pronounces, in the words of God's law, that he who takes any one of these courses, whatever his motives be for taking it, whatever the pleas to his conscience may be for it, whatever contrivances he may use not to bring his doings exactly within the letter of the prohibition, does yet, assuredly, put himself at a distance from God, and choose another service than His. He may fancy the molten image may promote his devotion; he may have much provocation to curse his father or mother; he may find it highly convenient to his own interest, and he thinks, to the public interest, to remove his neighbours landmarks; he may smite his neighbour secretly with the tongue or the pen, and not with the sword; he may propose to himself most religious ends in all these acts; every one of them may be done for the sake of advancing some principle which he believes to be necessary, or denouncing some error which he believes to be fatal. The result is the same: he is at war with the righteousness of the universe, he is out of fellowship with the living and true God. There can be no compromise with injustice. The thrice holy God cannot countenance sin in any form.*

So far, so hopeless, but we are not without hope. The Christian Gospel is God's Word to us of hope. There is hope in the certainty of God's justice for the victims of our sin. There is hope in the certainty of God's mercy for us sinners. God's takes sin very seriously and pays a huge price for its expiation. God deals with sin by means of the Crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is how seriously He demands justice. It is how far He is prepared to go in the interests of mercy. Sin is not swept under the carpet as if it doesn't really matter and as if God is too nice to punish us. It matters very much that people are the victims of violence, infidelity, dishonesty, the perversion of the course of justice, and slander. There is nothing trivial about the fact that millions go without the basic necessities of life because those who could help them choose not to do so. Other people suffer when we leave undone those things which we ought to do and that we do those things which we ought not to do. Justice implies judgment and judgment has the potential to punish. The Book of Common Prayer is steeped in the truth of the Gospel. We must take sin seriously. We must sincerely repent of our every failure to love God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves. And God is gracious. He does not desire the death of a sinner. He forgives all those who turn to Him. When we come to God in faith, our sins are washed away in the Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. When we accept our guilt, God graciously forgives us and restores us as His children. Eternal life is His gracious gift to us when we come to Him in faith, hope and love. Samuel Bray remarks on this repeated triad in the Communion Service – guilt, grace, gratitude. Guilt, grace, gratitude. Our hearts are thankful for God's justice and mercy, for His victory over sin, the world and devil. I cannot find words to express what it means to us as individuals to know that He loves you and me that much – to call us to account for our failures to live up to the standards He sets us, to forgive us for all our failures, and to bless us with eternal life at one with Him perpetually blessed.

Priest and people say together Psalm 51 (which also happens to be the psalm set for today). Psalm 51 starts with abject penitence for our sinful selves, invokes God's promise of mercy and finally celebrates what it means to be restored by His grace to His favour. *HAVE mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified in thy saying, and clear when thou art judged. Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me. But lo, thou requirest truth in the inward parts: and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly. Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Turn thy face away from my sins: and put out all my misdeeds. Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence: and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. O give me the comfort of thy help again: and stablish me with thy free Spirit. Then shall I teach thy ways unto the wicked: and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, thou that art the God of my health: and my tongue shall sing of thy righteousness. Thou shalt open my lips, O Lord: and my mouth shall shew thy praise. For thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee: but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise. O be favourable and gracious unto Sion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifice of righteousness, with the burnt-offerings and oblations: then shall they offer young bullocks upon thine altar. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.* The services finishes with the Aaronic Blessing: *THE Lord bless us, and keep us; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon us, and give us peace, now and for evermore. Amen.*