

HIDDEN RIVER CIRCUIT DEVOTIONAL ARTICLES

Edition 19: March 2026

Welcome to this bumper , diverse edition of Circuit reflections, to inspire you walk through Lent with Jesus, and to follow him through the many days and stories and symbols in Holy Week. Take your Bible and ponder on these stories. Take your hymn book and meditate on all that Jesus did for us by sacrificing himself to show us how much God loves us. Take your time and wait for God to speak to you and bless you.

Thank you to all who have contributed to this March edition, especially our first contributions from Rev Dr Gary Hall our superintendent minister, and Rev Mike Claridge, Supernumerary minister, as well as Local Preachers John Worth and Peter Box.

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Week 1: March 1st : Reading Matthew in Lent (part one) : A Reflection by Rev Dr Gary Hall, Superintendent Minister, Hidden River Circuit

Lent, this season of lengthening days and awakening nature can, despite the Springtime, seem a little barren and inhospitable when we think of Lenten wilderness and disciplines of fasting. The comfort and warmth of Christmas feasting and festivity are not long past, and now someone is asking, 'What are you giving up for Lent?'

Perhaps a better way of putting the question might be, 'how are we making room during Lent for the gift of Easter?' How do we limit some of our usual appetites and distractions enough to recognize that our deeper desire is for the transforming grace of God, for life in all its fullness? For peace, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation...?

Our Gospel focus this year is Matthew's version of the Jesus story. Matthew portrays Jesus in the tradition of Moses the liberator, prophet and receiver of God's rules for good society. Jesus is like a new Moses, and in him the traditions of the prophets and God's law (or rule of life) are fulfilled as never before.

The Gospel is built around five collections of teaching, as though Matthew is reminding us that Moses traditionally gave us five books of teaching, Genesis to Deuteronomy, the Torah. On the Sunday before Lent we are taken to the place of transfiguration, where Matthew in chapter 17 vividly portrays Jesus with Moses and Elijah, Jesus as embodiment, fulfilment and radicalisation of the traditions of Hebrew prophets and of God's commanding guidance. Appointed readings for previous Sundays are from the first collection

of teaching in Matthew, sometimes described as ‘the sermon on the mount’. How might these particular readings help us live Lent in the way of Jesus?

One place we might begin is with Jesus’ invocation to let our light shine. ‘No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand,’ says Jesus. Which reminds us of those times we have been told (or heard others being told) not to hide our light under a bushel. At home we were laughing. *What’s a bushel? Who has one?* The only time we hear the word is when someone is telling us to stop being shy. ‘Don’t hide your light... Step up! Show us what you can do. Come and sing, play a tune, tell us your great exam results, show us your medal... As though Jesus’ words mean *come and show off*. As if.

Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel tells of a world in which mourners and the meek, peacemakers and the merciful, those who are pure in heart or hungry for justice, these are blessed by God. These are the inhabitants of God’s society, God’s kingdom. These are the behaviours which characterize the kingdom of God. It would be strange then if Jesus were to follow on by suggesting we show off; so ‘letting our light shine’ must mean something else.

That something else brings glory to the God whose kingdom tastes like the beatitudes, whose world is shaped by the blessedness of the meek and merciful, the peacemakers and the pure of heart. These characteristics and behaviours are the kind of enlightenment which needs to be uncovered so that the world might see a little more clearly where God’s blessing lies and how God’s ways are made known through our life together. If that divine spark is kindled, don’t let it be hidden away.

What is it that masks the divine spark, and prevents the way of the beatitudes being lived and noticed? What gets in the way? Lent can be a season when we discover answers to those questions, and dare to uncover some of the layers which have overgrown the divine light which is still smouldering within us – and within each and every person made in the image of God. When the divine light guides how we relate to one another, then we are living the way of the beatitudes. We are being the little parable of communion we call church. So next time we are asked what we are giving up for Lent, we might just answer that we are giving up hiding our truest selves, that we are setting aside some of our usual appetites and habits and anxieties in order to allow the embers of faith to be kindled enough to glow more constantly, so that others might be drawn closer to the grace and glory of God. Our prayer might just be a couple of lines from an old Wesleyan hymn: ‘kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart. There let it for thy glory burn....’ That’s the light we need to stop hiding under a bushel! Let it shine.

Week 2: March 8th 2026: Hidden Treasure A Reflection by Peter Box

Scripture: Proverbs ch 2 v 1 to 7 and St. Matthew ch 13 v 44 plus v 45 -46

Most Christians use 40 days in the springtime each year to give focus to their spiritual life. Exact dates can’t be quoted as, like Easter, it is a movable feast. We call it “Lent” and arises from what we see in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ time of testing in the desert (wilderness). Praying, fasting and meditating are the things that many practise more intently during this period immediately prior to Easter. It is interesting to note in passing that quite a significant number of more people do this than those that regularly attend Christian worship. For example charities such as Cancer Research or other none aligned organisations will report increased giving in parallel with this time of fasting.

From the Christian perspective might we be seeking deeper understanding, both of ourselves as well as God? Let us consider what we might learn here from scripture. Matthew alone reports Jesus telling us these two parables that need some careful thought. One of the first things to notice is that we are challenged to make a comparison. What might be under our feet or in front of our eyes seems to be of

immense value, “pearl of great price” and in worldly terms that is quite right. That’s what Jesus wants us to think but we are being taught about “Heaven”! Despite those things that we value highly there is nothing that succeeds the value of The Kingdom. Any person that truly desires to be part of God’s Kingdom will give up all to attain heavenly status. That person that stumbled on the treasure realised that the gain was worth all that he owned. The passage in Proverbs points out that God’s word gives immeasurable wisdom, richer than any amount of silver and gold. “He is a shield to those that walk in integrity”. Clearly spiritual gain is priceless.

Although we have these parables nowhere else in the Gospels there are quite a number of New Testament themes that clearly pick up on this teaching. The expression “keep the words of The Lord Jesus richly in your hearts” (Col ch v16) for instance. And again Phil chapter 3 v 7 onwards where St. Paul talks about ALL that he has put aside to gain Christ, he counts his entire human status as “refuse” (or rubbish in some translations). Yes we are asked to compare but further we are asked to act. Acquiring the buried treasure surpasses all else that we could imagine. St. Paul saw this and humbled himself, enduring many hardships for the sake of the Gospel.

There is still another way that we might think about this teaching. Referring back to Philippians and chapter 2 in particular. Christ, we are shown has emptied Himself of all divinity. He is humbled unto death so that we may gain salvation through His resurrection. Consider that the attainment of the treasure is paid for through the crucifixion!! See Stuart Townend’s words below. As was said above, there is always the matter of our response, understanding without action is sterile. The whole Gospel message is all about savouring the “new wine” in the person of Jesus. Are we ready to give up all and follow our Saviour even unto death?

King of Kings we come to you with our prayer.

Take hold of our hearts and minds

That we may take every opportunity

Offered to us at this time of Lent

To gain greater understanding of your teaching

Giving us confidence and courage

To act in faith, hope and trust in you.

Amen.

Week 3: March 15th: A (fictitious) letter from Peter: A Reflection by John Worth

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God’s elect, scattered throughout Hidden River.

Grace and peace be yours.

I write this letter, brothers and sisters in Christ, not to excuse my behaviour in the past, but to give a warning, and the good news of the blessing of redemption. I write of that week leading up to Passover.

The week began gloriously. On that first day of the week, as we approached Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives, they brought a donkey and put cloaks on it for Jesus to ride. As we went down the Mount, more people joined in, waving branches and shouting their praise to God: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord”. It looked as though the people had accepted that Jesus was indeed Messiah, come to

claim his throne. We were so excited to see how Jesus would react, and what he would do next. So we entered Jerusalem in triumph.

This air of authority continued as we went into the Temple and Jesus complained about the use that they were putting to the court of the Gentiles – the money changing, the selling, the cheating of ordinary people. “A den of robbers” Jesus called it.

Throughout the next days, Jesus faced challenges to his authority and questions designed to put him at fault – no change there! Jesus, of course, had answers to all of them. One thing bothered me. It was when Jesus started prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of the age, with signs and portents.

But it was when we came to that meal on the fifth day that things started to seem different. I know Jesus had spoken of serving others before, but, as the meal was being brought to the table, he suddenly got up, got a towel and a basin of water, and began washing our feet. Well, my pride kicked in: “You’ll never wash MY feet, Lord”. He quickly put me right! If I didn’t allow him to serve me, I could never belong to him – I could never have what it takes to serve others.

It was after the meal that he began to say some very disturbing things. Someone was going to betray him; he even said that I would deny knowing him! Again, in my pride, I said I would rather die! Jesus sent Judas off to do something. Then he talked about going away. I was rather lost in my thoughts about what he had said, and let the others get on with asking questions about what he meant. I remember him talking about the Holy Spirit, but it didn’t mean anything to me – then.

Afterwards we went out and, as we often did, went up to an olive grove – a garden. Jesus went by himself to pray, as he often did, and told us to keep watch. Well, it had been an exciting week, and, I’m ashamed to say, we fell asleep! After a while, Judas appeared with a band of soldiers and some of the chief priests’ officials. Jesus seemed to have expected something to happen, and simply offered himself to them. Well. I wasn’t going to stand by; I took my sword and lashed out. By chance I caught someone’s ear – I thought that was a start to protecting Jesus. But he told me to put up my sword, and meekly went off with the crowd. We were completely lost – what should we do?

John and I followed back to Jerusalem, and into the courtyard of the high priest. John had contacts somewhere and I was left alone. It was then that my courage (bravado?) deserted me. So, when I was challenged about being one of Jesus’s men, I denied it – three times! And the third time with an oath! It was then that I heard the cock crow, and I remembered – remembered Jesus’s words: “Before the cock crows, you with deny me three times”. I ran outside, crying for shame. I went and hid in a quiet corner.

In the morning, I did go and join the others back in that room. They didn’t know what I’d done – but I did! They must have wondered why I was so quiet. You know the events of that Friday. Most of us stayed away. John did go to support Jesus’s mother, Mary, and came back and told us what happened.

That was the week that was!

I said at the start I’m not trying to excuse what I did. I simply tell honestly of my failings. They are nobody else’s; no-one forced me into them. I failed Jesus. It’s that simple. The others had thought me strong; Jesus had called me the Rock. But the rock had crumbled. So yes, this letter is a warning. No matter how strong you are, no matter how strong your faith, Satan can still get at you. I know!

BUT

Of course that’s not the end of my story. Jesus WAS raised from death and restored to us for a time. And in that time, he really did change my life. It was on the shore of the lake – a familiar place. He singled me out. Three times he asked if I loved him – yes, three times. By the third time, after I had put aside my annoyance at his persistence, I realised what he was doing. “Lord, you know everything”. I didn’t just mean about loving him. No, Jesus really did know everything about me. I couldn’t hide anything from him. And, in that moment I knew he had forgiven me -even me.

So that’s the good news of the blessing of redemption. You’d better believe it!

Prayer.

Lord Jesus, we confess that in our weakness we deny you by word and action. We have no excuse. We fail to rely on your strength and the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Forgive us, as you forgave Peter. Amen.

**Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.**

Week 4: March 22nd : SYMBOLS OF THE PASSION

A Series of Reflections by Rev Mike Claridge

The Meal

Just an ordinary meal. In an ordinary room. With ordinary friends.

You did what Jewish tradition required that night – and that night in every year.

With family or with friends.

With actions and words as old as faith itself.

With lamb and herbs.

With bread and wine.

You celebrated the Passover feast.

It's meaning clear despite the mists of time.

Its message always new despite the passing years.

In bread and wine the freedom of your people, though still oppressed, is brought alive again.

From slavery to freedom, in ancient times, you people journeyed over water and desert.

Once slaves, then free, now oppressed again.

You needed the meal. A meal of freedom, thanksgiving and hope.

But this time your words were different, your actions changed.

Taking bread and wine you said,

“This is my body, and this is my blood

This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many”.

An extraordinary claim.

An extraordinary promise.

Plain bread and cheap wine given such meaning and shared with your friends.

Your eyes met theirs, and in them they saw such love, deep love, an all giving love.

To set them free, somehow, someday.

You were giving yourself to set us free from all that is wrong.

How you must grieve.

Your simple act with bread and wine has become so complicated.

A meal of freedom, an act of giving,

now bound in rules by the people who claim your name.

You made us free, but we so often restrict who can come to your table.

You called us to be one, but we have made bread and wine a source of division.

You accepted the outcast, but we only accept those who play by our rules.

When will we see that you, in bread and wine can set us free.

The Whip

The humiliation.

Bound helpless to the stone cold pillar of the guardhouse.

Naked before your torturers.

A whip does its cruellest work.

A whip used for dogs detested by Romans.

Now used to humiliate a detested man, but a man they hardly know.

How the night had changed.

Arrested as night fell by the hired thugs of the regime.

Betrayed by a friend. Abandoned by others. Taken to the torturers.

Alone - but in the midst of those who persecuted you.

The foul language of the torturers couldn't hurt you, you'd heard it all before.

But the blows were hard to take.

Fists and sticks beating against your body.

And the whip tearing flesh and biting to the bone.

A cruel instrument of lead tipped cords.

Wielded by someone who knows his trade – his brutal trade.

Passed from man to man throughout the long dark night.

Those who you had challenged now wreaked their revenge.

Rulers and religious leaders.

Each not knowing what to do with you, but fearing.

Deeply fearing.

Fearing your people who might riot in your cause if you were freed.

Fearing your people who might riot in your cause if you were condemned.

What to do? Who to do it?

They washed their hands and passed you on.

To find a way out, the people must condemn, your people, maybe compelled by force of arms.

Everyone fears the threat of violence.

Threats to their family by those who come with clubs and swords.

The people came, they had no choice if those at home are to be spared.

They did as the thugs demanded.

Crucify you?

If that is what they want.

With tears in their eyes their voices signed your death warrant.

You saw them, you loved them.

Hard as it was you knew you must die for them.

Their freedom could be won at a price.

And you were that price.

The Crown

Who had called you King?

The expectation of a nation had focussed on you. Not of your choice. At least not at first.

Everyone expected a leader, expected their leader.

Someone to push their agenda.

Someone to support their ideals.

Someone to underwrite their greed.

They had looked for a King – you would do, you would do.

Politicians wanted a figurehead.

A symbol of the nation.

A rallying point to provoke nationalistic fervour against a foreign power,

fervour they could harness for their own aims.

Priests wanted a man who would tow the line.

God's line – but invented by them, not God.

A man of ritual - but not a man close to God in prayer.

A man of sound teaching – but not of compassion.

A man like them with a heart of stone – whereas God is a spring of life.

You - a focus of so much expectation.

You - a Jewish carpenter and part time teacher of Israel.

You – who the already powerful wanted to call a King.

But what of those who could not voice their hopes?

The Jew trod underfoot by occupying powers and ripped off by some religious leaders.

The foreigner looked down on by authority

and looked on with suspicion by those they lived among.

For them – for ordinary Jew and outsider – for them you would be King.

You claimed your throne as you entered Jerusalem.

Scripture had promised that the king would ride on a donkey – who are you to disappoint.

You the agitator, revolutionary, heretic - even blasphemous some said.

The people to whom you wanted to be king greeted you with Hosannas.

But your coronation was in other hands, and already they were crafting the crown.

The Cross

Stark wood. Stripped of foliage. Twisted and gnarled.

Useless for a carpenter's trade.

Useful for a carpenter's death.

Harvests of olives had been taken from its boughs.

The fruit of new life, the oil of gladness, the black gold of its day.

Now its fruitful days had gone.

It's bough cut back to rootstock where, in time, new life would spring.

But this old wood can be cast away. Useful just for the fire – except perhaps....

The Roman guard had taken it from the firewood stock before the dawn was breaking.

They knew where it could be found. They had used it often enough.

A piece to take a man's weight was all they needed.

The olive bough would do.

Strapped to the back of the prisoner.

The rough bark rubbing the bloodied wounds.

His arms strapped to the boughs length.

You struggled under its weight.

You a man of strength, a hard working man,
but weakened by a night of torture.

You fell.

You fell again.

For a while another took your burden – a Simon.

Not your Simon though, he was long gone weeping into the night.

Now the end was in sight.

Through the gates out of the city you glimpsed your destiny.

A bare mound in the midst of the city's rubbish dump.

Not a Green Hill as some would one day sing,
but a stinking foetid place where dogs and flies abound.

Here they laid you.

Ready for the bough that bore you to be hoisted high on the stake.

Maybe they couldn't trust the ropes to hold you.

Maybe they wanted to inflict still more pain.

Your hands now to be pierced.

Your blood to soak into the olive wood, death would stain the wood of healing.

Your hour had come.

Nails

From childhood you knew about nails.

They were always around in the carpenter's workshop.

Daggers of iron;

glistening when new,

the colour of earth when old.

Instruments of building.

Instruments to bring together pieces of timber.

Instruments to fashion usefulness from raw materials.

But you grew to know that nails were only crude.

Nails were not your crafted joints, those of a skilled carpenter,
seamlessly joining oak and ash.

Nails were instruments for a quick fix in times of need.
Best used out of sight where eyes cannot see.
Now nails were to be seen in all their crudeness.
A skilled carpenter will be tortured by the crudest items of his trade.
These soldiers do not show how to build, they are only out to destroy.
Destroy a life that has grown to adulthood
surrounded by the very instruments that will be used in his death.
Joints shattered like timber in the hands of a clumsy new apprentice.
But not now joints wood,
now joints flesh and bone instead.
Crunching as the daggers of iron drive through.
Nails.
Some glistening new.
Some earth brown.
All turning crimson.
Not out of sight these nails.
Theirs was work intended for all to see.
Lifted high above the crowd.
Not a temporary fix these nails.
Theirs was work intended as to be as permanent as death itself.

Week 5: March 29th: A Reflection on the Psalms in Holy Week by Peter Box

Psalms for Holy Week. Many of us will, quite rightly, revisit the Gospel narratives for this week. You might well ask, “Why look at The Psalms then”? Part of the answer here is, that “Jesus knew them well enough” and more than that there is much in them that have an eternal ring in the consideration of human behaviour throughout all generations. And above this there is much theology and prophesy that adds to our understanding of the work of our Saviour Jesus. The notes below are by no means comprehensive, the purpose being to offer some enhancement to our central focus on what happened to Jesus in these last days of His earthly life.

Sunday Psalm 118 The triumphal procession of Jesus into Jerusalem

May God Bless the one who comes in the name of the LORD!

From the temple of the LORD we bless you.

The Lord is God; he has been good to us.

With branches in your hands, start the festival and march around the altar

You are my God, and I give you thanks;

I will proclaim your greatness.

Give thanks to the LORD, because he is good, and his love is eternal!

Singing the Faith 265

Ride on, ride on in majesty!

Hark all the tribes "Hosanna" cry;

Your humble beast pursues its road

With palms and scattered garments stowed.

Monday Psalm 136 The day following Palm Sunday. A note of jubilation.

The recurring phrase "for His mercy (love) endureth for ever" is a clear indication that it could be sung. Firstly there is praise of God's works, His providence and His divine grandeur. The Psalmist then gives us a whistle stop tour of early Hebrew history. Verses 21-26 draws us back to "promise, providence" and the need to be ever thankful. Chris Tomlin in ***Singing the Faith No: 77*** draws out the "Strong, Faithfulness of our God" which is what we need to remember through this very dark and testing week.

Forever God is faithful

Forever God is strong

Forever God is with us, forever: Sing Praise, Sing Praise!

Tuesday Psalm 71

Throughout this psalm offers praise and supplications, verse 23 and 24 exemplifies this theme. In this present season it is profitable to think about the Psalmist's petitions for "deliverance". Did Jesus consider such a prayer we might ask? (In the garden of Gethsemane.) Remember Jesus asked that the cup be taken away if possible.

Singing the Faith 81 teaches of God's grace and how we are richly blessed under His care.

O May this bounteous God

Through all our lives be near us, with ever joyful hearts

And blessed peace to cheer us; and keep us in is grace, and guide us when perplexed...

Wednesday Psalm 70

We have here a cry from those that feel insecure. In verse 5 we get a hint of real anxiety ".....do not delay" The reference to being "poor and needy" could mean just that or it is possible to read this as "being weak in spirit". The whole Psalm is a prayer for help.

There must be, if we are honest with ourselves, many, many times when we need God's help. The old favourite "Just as I am" may well ring in our ears,

Singing the Faith 556:

Just as I am, without one plea

But that you died to set me free,

And at your bidding "Come to me!"

O Lamb of God I come!

