

Service of the Word

Sunday, 29th March 2020, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Opening Words

God's grace, mercy and peace be with you
and also with you.

Prayer of Preparation

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Confession and Forgiveness

You enter the desert to face the hardest truth; we live in self-deception.
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

You offer the bread that gives true life; we consume what leaves us craving more.
Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

You refuse to worship empty power; we let greed rule our world.
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

Silence

The almighty and most merciful God grant you pardon, forgiveness of all your sins, time for true repentance and amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The Peace

He will not command legions of angels nor ride the machine of holy war; he will become a slave, take our hate and fear into his heart and win us with forgiveness and love, for he is God's unexpected peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you
and also with you.

Hymn (*Sung to the tune of *Kings Lynn [aka O God of earth and altar]*)

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|----|--|----|---|
| 1. | O God of all salvation In this, our darkest hour, Look down at your creation With pity and with power. In all the pain we're seeing, For parent, partner, friend, We'll cling with all our being To love that cannot end. | 2. | O God, your loving passion Is deeper than our pain, Look down, and in compassion Bring us to life again. When we are found despairing, When all seems lost to sin, We'll hear your voice declaring That love alone will win. |
|----|--|----|---|

3. **O God, when hate grows stronger,
With fear to pave its way,
The cry, 'Lord, how much longer?'
With broken hearts we pray.
In all that is dismaying
In humankind's freewill,
We'll join our voices, praying
That love will triumph still.**

4. **O God, whose love will never
Be silenced, stalled or stilled,
Set us to work wherever
There're bridges to rebuild.
We'll take our life's vocation
To make, like heav'n above,
In this and every nation
A kingdom built on love.**

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Collect Prayer

God of compassion, you call us out of the bindings of death on this, our resurrection day: make us ready to surrender the fear in which we hide to step into your future alive and unashamed; through Jesus Christ, the life of the world. **Amen.**

Prophecy — Ezekiel 37:1-14

Hymn—STF 416

*(*Sung to the tune Corvedale)*

1. **There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.
There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.**

2. **There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.
For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.**

3. **But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.
If our love were but more simple
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the presence of our Lord.**

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863)

Reflection: Seeking Newness in Crisis

The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, late in his tragically short life, lamented that we 'read the New Testament all too little from the point of view of the Old'. He further remarked, 'I don't think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly'.¹

Bonhoeffer's counsel is particularly appropriate for us today. Not because this particular part of Ezekiel contains some of the bits we like (the valley of dry bones!) in the Old Testament. Rather, when we hear the background of Ezekiel's prophecy — as it's meant to be heard — we hear a more hopeful message of comfort and consolation — words we so desperately need today in our darkness.

Ezekiel is prophesying in Judah at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. He sees a vision of the glory of the Lord departing from the temple. God has run out of patience with the people of Israel and is about to abandon them to being exiled, says Ezekiel.

And that is precisely what happens in 586 BCE. The Babylonians arrive with unstoppable force and cruelty and carries Israel away into captivity. For thirty-three chapters, Ezekiel has been trying to warn them that this is going to happen, that they need to change their ways. Already in Babylon, Ezekiel receives a message that tells him

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953), pp. 94, 40.

that 'The City has fallen'. It has actually happened. Nebuchadnezzar had entered Jerusalem and taken it captive; Israel was on its way out into exile.

It is difficult for us today to grasp the true meaning and impact of this national disaster. In the memory of the Jewish people, this is the first Shoah, holocaust. Its leaders were deported; its temple worship stuttered to a halt; and the land lay, not exactly empty, but chaotic and full of despair, panic and fear. Where do we hear these words today?

It was precisely for such a time and in the face of overwhelming evil and suffering that Ezekiel prophesies. The vision of the valley of dry bones came to be understood as a prophecy of restoration and renewal. Since the bones represent Israel, the restoration is for the whole nation.

How will God bring about this radical newness? 'Hear the word of the Lord! . . . I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live'. God will bring about newness through the spirit/breath/wind (the word used here is *ruach* (and means all these three and more). And in case the image is not strong enough for us, God explains it in a further image to Ezekiel: 'I am going to bring you up from the graves, O my people', and bring them back to the land of Israel. He will put within them his spirit – the life-giving and renewal power of God.

Here is a powerful message of resurrection! And you can begin to see why the lectionary pairs Ezekiel 37 with the raising of Lazarus. And not just individual resurrection, but all of God's people, raised out of dry death and brought back to spirit-filled life.

So in the midst of national catastrophe, when all seemed lost, and when we have good reason to despair and 'say God has forgotten us' comes the hopeful promise of return from exile to the home, a return from death to new life, restoration in the power of God's Spirit.

This is God's promise to us today. To all who are anxious and fearful of what lies ahead, God promises to act in power to bring new life. That longed-for promised of resurrection and newness is vividly captured in this poem by Walter Brueggemann.

We name you wind, power, force, and then,
imaginatively, 'Third Person.'

We name you and you blow . . .
blow hard,
blow cold,
blow hot,
blow strong,
blow gentle,
blow new . . .

Blowing the world out of nothing to abundance,
blowing the church out of despair to new life,
blowing little David from shepherd boy to messiah,
blowing to make things new that never were.

So blow this day, wind,
blow here and there, power,
blow even us, force,

Rush us beyond ourselves,
Rush us beyond our hopes,
Rush us beyond our fears, until we enact your newness in the world.

Come, come spirit. **Amen.**

Hymn–STF 391

1. **O breath of life, come sweeping through us,
revive your Church with life and power;
O breath of life, come, cleanse, renew us,
and fit your Church to meet this hour.**
2. **O wind of God, come, bend us, break us,
till humbly we confess our need;
then in your tenderness remake us,
revive, restore; for this we plead.**
3. **O breath of love, come, breathe within us,
renewing thought and will and heart;
come, love of Christ, afresh to win us,
revive your Church in every part.**

Elizabeth Ann Head (Bessie Porter Head) (1850-1936)

Reflection – I am the resurrection and the life

How hard to hear the things I think I know,
To peel aside the thin familiar film
That wraps and seals your secret just below:
A king of reversal, where the poor
Are rich in blessing and the tragic rich
Still struggle, trapped in trappings at the door
They never opened, Life just out of reach . . .

Open the door for me and take me there.
Love, take my hand and lead me like the blind,
Unbandage me, unwrap me from my fear,
Open my eyes, my heart, my soul, my mind.
I struggle with these grave clothes, this dark earth,
But you are calling, 'Lazarus, come forth!

Jesus said to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' Do we believe this today?

Ezekiel promised a radical message of restoration and renewal to his people in the face of national disaster. And here Jesus speaks resurrection and newness in the face of family crisis and panic.

Disaster, crisis, fear, panic, death! Where do we hear these words today?

It's quite natural human response in the face of crisis like an outbreak of coronavirus to panic and fear, to seek instant respite.

But, as always, Jesus, the resurrection and the life, springs surprise on us. His response in the face of this crisis is not normal. Lazarus, good friend to many, including Jesus, has fallen ill. Concerned about his health, his sisters Mary and Martha send word to Jesus: 'the one you love is ill'. What would be *our* natural thing to do, I wonder!

Jesus does not do the normal thing. He delays. Waits. Lingers. Eventually Lazarus dies.

There is more. Jesus hangs back for two days before he announces his intent to go to Judea to see about Lazarus. For his disciples this announcement raises big issues. 'Rabbi', they say, those folks have been trying to stone you—and you want to go back?' It is as if they were saying that to go back to Judea would mean the death of Jesus. But Jesus does not do the normal thing. He does not take stock in their fear. Jesus says that the he knows what he is doing. Still not normal. Why place yourself in danger, Jesus?

There is more! 'Jesus wept'. Jesus is about to raise Lazarus with his thunderous cry of 'Lazarus come forth'. He is about to raise him back to life, but he stands there for a moment before the tomb and he weeps.

Jesus does not do the normal thing.

Martha says to Jesus, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'. Moreover, hints Martha, even though you've delayed, 'but even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask'. Was Martha being evasive with her answer? I wondered. Was she merely saying nice words?

I am inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt. That Martha's words about Jesus' ability to speak life and bring newness reflects her belief that with Jesus some non-normal things can happen. Martha is open to believing something that has not yet occurred, but could—given the fact Jesus is involved in things.

So it might be that in these times of crisis of anxiety, the time has come for belief to come to be vested, not in an idea, but in the person of One who seems to be willing to face death himself. Belief take on personhood. What Jesus says to Martha, he says to us today: 'I am the resurrection and the life . . . Do you believe this?'

Lent is a good time to believe that with Jesus non-normal things can happen. Even today, in this not normal times we find ourselves. Moreover, as the New Testament scholar, Marianne Meye Thompson, writes, 'John 11 testifies that though the present reality of the world is marked conspicuously by death, that death is not God's final word over creation. Therefore, appropriate response to the life-giving God is hope in God's faithfulness to these promises to give life'.²

So maybe, just maybe, believing in Jesus, as abnormal as it may seem even now, in the face of global health crisis, really is the only real option that presents itself, at least for those who have listened to Jesus long enough to come to trust him.

Malcolm Guite again, on believing in the abnormal.

How can you be the final resurrection?
That resurrection hasn't happened yet.
Our broken world is still bent on destruction,
No sun can rise before that sun has set.
Our faith looks back to father Abraham
And forward to the one who is to come.
How can you speak as though he knew your name?
How can you say: 'Before he was, I am'?

*Begin in me and I will read your riddle
And teach you truths my Spirit will defend.
I am the end who meets you in the middle,
The new beginning hidden in the End.
I am the victory, the end of Strife
I am the resurrection and the life.*

Hymn—STF 733

**God, hold us, enfold us, through desolate loss.
The sign of your love is your own empty cross.
The shock and the anger, the hopeless despair
are echoes of Calvary. God, meet us there!**

**God, hold us, enfold us, through long empty days,
when living is pointless, a meaningless maze.
We need you to listen to raging and tears,
to anguish and doubt, to remorse and to fears.**

**God, hold us, enfold us, by friends who can share
our sorrow and pain with compassionate care.
By their words, you speak out your loving concerns.
They hold us for you, while the tide of grief turns.**

**God, hold us, enfold us, till weeping has passed;
when flickering hope parts the shadows at last.
One step at a time you will help us to move
to face new horizons, held safe in your love.**

Marjorie Dobson (b. 1940)

² Marianne Meye Thompson, 'The Raising of Lazarus in John 11: A Theological Reading' in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 236.

Prayers of Intercession

For a swift end to COVID-19. For those infected and those who have been exposed; grant them strength, healing, and protection.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For their loved ones and carers; grant them peace, comfort, and endurance.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For those leading nations; grant them sound minds, courage, and humility.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For doctors, nurses, technicians, researchers, administrators, and all other healthcare employees around the world; grant them strength by your life-giving Spirit, wisdom, and resources to do the work before them.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For those who must work, despite the threat of sickness; grant them protection and continued provision.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For those who have become unemployed or underemployed during this pandemic; grant them comfort, wisdom, and financial provision.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For churches, ministers, lay leaders and all members; grant them discernment and creativity to lead and minister in unprecedented circumstances.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For parents, children and families; grant them wisdom, protection from fear, patience and joy.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For those for whom home is not a safe haven; grant them refuge.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For those who are alone; grant them a sense of your nearness and love.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

For all navigating decisions during this time of uncertainty and fear; grant them your peace.

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

And for all the prayers we cannot voice because our language is insufficient or our ignorance too great;

God of laughter, God of sorrow, **God of all times; hear our prayer**

Eternal God,
through the self-offering of your Son
you have filled our lives with your presence.
Help us in our sufferings and trials
and strengthen us in our weakness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

In confident and trust, let us unite our prayers together in the words Jesus gave us.

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen**

Final Hymn—STF 638

1. **Through all the changing scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.**
2. **Of his deliverance I will boast,
till all that are distressed
from my example comfort take,
and charm their griefs to rest.**
3. **O magnify the Lord with me,
with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called,
he to my rescue came.**
4. **The hosts of God encamp around
the dwellings of the just;
deliverance he affords to all
who on his succour trust.**
5. **O make but trial of his love;
experience will decide
how blest are they, and only they,
who in his truth confide.**
6. **Fear him, you saints, and you will then
have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight,
your wants shall be his care.**

Nahum Tate (1652-1715), and Nicholas Brady (1659-1726). Based on Psalm 34

Blessing and Dismissal

May the living God
remove the COVID-19
that lies upon our world;
may the crucified Christ,
shatter our brittle fear,
may the risen Saviour
draw the sting of death,
bringing all to life in him;
May the flowing Spirit
set us all and creation free
and seal our hearts with faith.

The almighty and merciful Lord,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
bless *you/us* and keep *you/us*,
now and always. **Amen.**

Abide in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

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