

**Sunday March 5th -
A service of worship for use at home
Prepared by Rev John Wiseman**



This short act of worship for you to use at home is based on the service which would have been held at Church today, to use at home. If you are well enough, why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you. I have included some links to allow you to access versions of the hymns / songs / music via YouTube

Let's begin by singing a new hymn but to the familiar tune for the well known 'Blessed assurance Jesus is mine)

Children are welcome, Christ said one day,
When the disciples just urged them away.
Children are welcome at Jesus' knee:
God's own examples for ministry.
Welcoming God, you open the Way;
Even the smallest worship and pray,
Singing with faith and serving you well,
Your life to know and good news to tell.

Women are welcome, as are the men;
Through God's own Spirit, we're partners
again.
Partners as prophets, ministers, too:
No more divided — made one in you.
Welcoming God, you open the way;
Those once divided join now to pray,
Serving at Table, preaching your Word,
So that your love for all will be heard.

Outcasts are welcome; sinners are, too,
Eating with Jesus and being made new:
Some like Zacchaeus turned right around;
Wounded and poor ones felt peace
profound.
God of great love, you stand at the door,
Welcoming people outcast and poor.
So you forgive and call us to be
Filled with the joy of your jubilee.

So may we welcome into our pew
All who in Jesus are being made new —
All those who seek him, wanting to know,
Wanting to love him, wanting to grow.
Welcoming God, you stand at our door,
As someone different, outcast or poor.
With longing eyes, Lord Jesus, you search.
May we all welcome you in your church.

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Opening prayer:

O God of grace and truth, we gather together here in this space to offer you all thanks and praise,
Gathered with the promise that even when heaven and earth pass away, your words will never pass away.
Like a potter you created the earth,
and we are your handiwork.
And today we stand full of Advent expectation,
waiting for a sign, waiting for a light in the darkness.
In Jesus, you have come among us,
teaching us to live in readiness for your reign, for your kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

Though he was killed, you raised him to life,
restoring to us the light of your presence,
and empowering us by your Holy Spirit..

Therefore, with our hearts full of excitement we offer to you all that we are and all that we can be.

Forgive us that we still fall short, that we still falter, that we still fail
Allow us to hear your words of grace telling us that once again you offer grace and forgiveness.
And be with us this morning in this act of worship. Amen

For this morning's bible passage please read John 11:1-45

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Today’s Message

Our reading for today is one that I am sure is familiar to many people here.

The story of the raising of Lazarus. But like many stories it has many layers and hidden depths, ones that often get overlooked or ignored.

The characters are ones we are familiar with. It is a family we already know...well the two sisters at least. We have met Mary and Martha met previously in Luke chapter 10. Their brother is Lazarus whose name means “God is my help” whilst the place where they live Bethany, means “house of affliction”

The story begins with the sending of a message from the sisters “Lord the one whom you love is ill”

It is not a request to a stranger but to someone close to the family. The depth of the relationship between the two sisters, Lazarus and Jesus is established from the outset...the one Jesus loves is ill.

And yes despite the close connection and the illness Jesus does the opposite of what might be expected. Far from rushing to pack his bags he remains where he is for two days. Now rabbinic thought believed that after three days the soul leaves the body...before that the soul was thought to wait around for three days until the colour of the face began to change as the body decomposed. By the time Jesus gets there, having delayed two days and then undertaken a two day journey across the Jordan to get there, Lazarus will be well and truly dead in everyone's eyes

After two days Jesus tells disciples going back to Judea and not for the first time the disciples don't understand. Why go back now when Lazarus is dead and why for back at all when they have just escaped from the Jews trying to stone Jesus to death. Why go back now?

And not for the first or last time the disciples miss the point. Still stumbling around in darkness rather than walking in light. Seeing only the surface level of the situation Jesus asks them to look deeper for the spiritual significance of his words and actions. Once again Jesus sees and knows something the disciples do not. Once again Jesus displays that God's timing is not ours. The speed or time when God acts is Gods to decide

Healing Lazarus of his illness might have impressed his followers
But raising him from the dead will enable the disciples to believe
Jesus it seems wants to take them further.

They believed He could heal, they had already seen evidence of that
But if he could He give life to the dead even after four days?

This would give them a new vision of who he is and what his messiah ship will involve. And it is precisely because Jesus leaves safety and head towards danger, it is because Jesus is prepared to die, that Lazarus will live

And please note which of the disciples it is who is the first to declare that he will accompany Jesus back into the danger zone. It is not Peter or Andrew or James or John, the expected candidates who step forward. No it is Thomas, always remembered only for his doubts, who has the courage to stand beside Jesus in his decision to return back towards possible trouble.

Jesus has still not reached either Bethany or the location of the tomb when Martha comes to meet him. Remember in Luke's story when Jesus dines at their house it was Martha who was frantic in the kitchen whilst Mary simply sat at Jesus feet.

Here once again Martha is the one 'doing' leaving her sister once again simply sitting, not this time at the feet of the master but it appears overwhelmed with her grief.

Martha rushes to meet Jesus and greets him with words that can have two distinct meanings
If only you had been here, my brother would not have died....a regret, an outburst of grief
If only you had been here, my brother would not have died....an accusation full on anger and resentment

And yet even in her grief she is able to acknowledge that even now Jesus might be able to do something. In her darkest moments she clings onto the faith that she has. Faith that we may

think is at the point of breaking but faith that we are about to discover is much stronger and developed than we could ever have imagined

“Your brother will rise again” says Jesus.

Martha agrees. Yes he will rise again on the last day when all the faithful will be resurrected...a view commonly held by Jewish religious groups such as the Pharisees at this time (but not the Sadducees so how might they react to what is about to happen)

But the last day is not now and Martha is filled with grief now. Her hurt is too much to wait till the last day!

What Jesus says next turns Martha’s view inside out and upside down

“I am the resurrection and the life” he announces

Death is all around, her brother is 4 days in the tomb and yet Martha suddenly realises that what she thought would come on the last day, at the end of time, is according to Jesus here right now, in the present, in front of her, in Jesus himself

That any resurrection in the future will be through Jesus and depend on peoples belief in him And unlike many of us who faced with such a stunning revelation would be lost for words Martha is able to sum up her thoughts, her belief, and her faith in a single sentence. One that Martha utters whilst her brother is still in the tomb, still dead.

“I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one coming into the world”

Does that sound familiar, have we heard anyone else make a similar statement of belief?

I love the fact that planted within the great drama of "The Raising of Lazarus" there is such a wonderful subplot: "The Confession of Martha" -- or at least that's what it could be called. In the three synoptic gospels, it is Peter at Caesarea Philippi who blurts out the truth about Jesus. Here it is Martha (v.27).and yet Martha’s equally valid and insightful declaration does not get anywhere near the attention Peter’s does. Written by male authors, from a male perspective to a mainly male audience the central role of woman throughout scripture is often ignored, ignored to the detriment of the whole story.

Onto the scene comes Mary, the other sister. Jesus is still not at the house or tomb when she meets him, throwing herself at his feet and throwing out the same words as her sister...maybe ones of remorse, maybe ones of anger and resentment

“If you had been here...my brother would not have died”

This time it appears it is too much even for Jesus. There are no words of comfort, no conventional expressions of sympathy, and no probing questions of faith.

Jesus is deeply troubled and moved in spirit. Looking at the original Greek the word ‘en-brimo’ is one that is most frequently used to describe horses snorting in their nostrils, whilst the second word "tarasso" means to be disturbed or troubled

Taken together they give us an idea of how strong the emotions were that overtook

Jesus....shaking and shuddering with the emotion, the pain, the grief, the loss the hurt

And in the shortest verse in the entire bible the humanity of Jesus is captured perfectly....Jesus wept

If ever we wonder whether the God in whom we believe knows what we go through here is the evidence.

Arriving at the tomb Jesus commands for the stone to be rolled away....Another sneak preview of events that are to come. Maybe thinks Martha, Jesus simply want to see Lazarus body but is fearful of the smell of a 4 day old corpse

Despite her declaration of faith a few verses earlier, does she really believe what will happen? That the future resurrection in which she believes is going to break into her present, before her eyes

Jesus once again reminds her it is for God's glory that all this happened; he prays a prayer of thanks to God and asks that those present may simply believe that he was sent by God. Then Jesus shouts in a voice that will literally wake the dead three simple words in Greek Lazarus! Here! Out!

And out he comes. The dead man raised to life, still wrapper in linen bandages that require loosening by the awestruck by standers. If they are shocked at what they have seen, just imagine how Lazarus felt at what had happened to him

Whenever we turn on our news all we see are stories of death, destruction

We live in a society that is terrified of death, of when we will die, how we will die. We spend a fortune trying to make our life last longer. But in our search for quantity I feel we sadly neglect the quality.

When Jesus said he came to give us life and life in abundance I don't think he was talking about the amount of time we spend on this mortal coil but the abundant life God intends for each and every one of us: joyful in our work, confident in our gifts, secure in the love of the God who calls us to live not in the anxiety of earning approval from others but in the peace of knowing that we are both fully loved and fully known.

Through faith in Jesus what was once death is now alive again....our relationship with God.

Each one of us is called out of the darkness and into the light

Out of despair into hope, out of hate and into love, out of death and into life,

Each one of us is called to be full, called to be whole, called to be alive, alive in Christ. Each

one of us is called to realize our full potential as children of God and to the life abundant

which is our inheritance. And because we have a promise of eternal life, life here and forever

more, we need no longer fear death for we know what and who waits for us on the other side.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winning Indian writer and poet also exclaimed Death is not extinguishing the light, it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come.

Whilst each of us waits for that glorious dawn let us ensure that we both continue to walk in the light and be a light to others

A light that calls people out of our tombs and into a new life in and though Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of Intercessions

Today I simply invite you to focus on and pray for the stories that have dominated our news over the past week

Pray for the life of your community

Pray for the life of your church and circuit

Pray for those that you know who are in need of God's healing grace

Pray for yourself

Let us conclude this act of worship by singing again. It's another new hymn but to the familiar tune for 'God is love let heaven adore him'

"Lord, if only you had been here,
one I love would not have died."
Martha shared her grief with Jesus
in these words she sadly cried.
Jesus said, "I'm resurrection.
Martha, do you know it's true?
I'm the life for which you're longing.
" She said, "I believe in you!"

"Lord, if only you had been here!"
Jesus heard these words again.
Mary, sitting home and waiting,
spoke to Jesus of her pain.
So our Lord was deeply troubled
in this world of death and sin.
Sometimes all we see is struggle;
death and evil seem to win.

"Lord, if only you had been here,"
we cry out when all goes wrong —
When our grief is overwhelming,
when life's troubles seem so strong.
Then, O Lord, we hear your answer:
"I am resurrection — See!
Not just in some distant future
I am life! Now live in me!"

When we share your resurrection,
when we know that you are life,
We find courage for our living
in this world of pain and strife.
We your church will work for justice,
welcome strangers, help the poor.
Faced with death, we'll be a witness:
you are with us, Risen Lord.

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A blessing...

May the blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever.

Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

Amen