

SERVICE FOR SUNDAY 29TH MARCH 2020

Healing God, we gather in our homes to worship you, acknowledging the diversity of our lives, the challenges we each face, the joys and sorrows we bear.

Bring us together, O God, that each one of us may see you in the place and situation that we find ourselves in. Amen.

Lent Cross

As I put this service together for this week, I looked back to remind myself what last week's Lent Cross liturgy would have been, if we had been able to meet for worship. These are the words that I had selected, some months ago, when I was preparing for Lent:

Jesus said: "Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Prayer:

Our Lord our God, help us to live as people who know that we are loved, as your children, not condemned as servants. Amen. *(A candle is added to the Lent Cross)*

As I looked back to these words, I had one of those moments when shivers go down one's spine, one of those WOW moments! The words just jumped off the page. *Take a moment of quiet reflection as you consider the above words.*

The symbol I chose for this week, to be added to the Cross is Bandages. I always try to link the symbol with the appointed reading. I trust that as you read the appointed readings you will see the link.

Christ came into the world to save and heal. To set us free from all that binds up

Prayer:

God of countless mercies, give us the grace to be buried daily in the love of Christ, like the grain that is buried in the earth. Help us to sow new seeds of growth and thereby to live more abundantly and be fruitful. Amen.

Take a moment of quiet reflection as you consider the above words.

Read or sing:

**When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.**

The appointed Old Testament and Gospel Readings for the Fifth Sunday in Lent:

Ezekiel 37.1-14

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to

me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

John 11.1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your

sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “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?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Thought for today: FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT (First Sunday of the Passion)

As some of you may know, we have three children, Stephen, Michael and Sarah. When Michael was a young boy, he had a Hamster called Hammy. Not the most

original name for a Hamster! As you may know, Hamster don't live to a great age. Hammy was over two years old when he became extremely unwell! It was Christmas week and Christmas Day was just a few days away. I could not bear the thought of the family and our three young children, waking up on Christmas morning to find that Hammy was dead in his cage. I took Hammy, accompanied by the three children to the vet. The kindest thing to do was to have Hammy put to sleep. Michael took of his little baseball cap and agreed to this. We took Hammy home, placed his tiny body in a shoe box and gave him a Christian burial, at the bottom of our garden.

It was some months later after I had put the children to bed, that I could hear an argument taking place in the boys' bedroom. I went up to see what was going on. I walked into the room and ask what was going on. Michael replied saying, "Stephen says that Hammy is dead!"

"Yes", I responded, "don't you remember, we buried him in the back garden." As quick as a flash Michael retorted, "But the vet only put him to sleep!"

Often when we speak about death, we don't want to use direct words and we pussyfoot around or act in a cautious or non-committal way, rather than "Calling a spade a spade." We try to hide from the truth instead of facing what is real and all about us. Over the past few weeks many folk have tried to hide from the reality of Coronavirus, and not taking the Government's advice. I believe that folk are now taking notice, but it has taken the situation to reach an extreme point before many people paid attention. In the book of Ezekiel, God uses the extreme image of the valley of dry bones to get the Ezekiel's attention.

Ezekiel's image of the valley of dry bones has often been seen as a prophecy about life after death. It is not, and was never meant to be understood that way. Ezekiel's meaning is made very evident in verses 11-14. Ezekiel has his eyes resolutely on this world, not the next, and is addressing a serious problem facing his people. He is using the language of the world to come; in order to speak about the here and now.

The prophet is writing in exile to a people in exile; they had lost everything. They had journeyed hundreds of miles across deserts, taking with them no more than could be carried, on the way to a country they did not know and to which they had no wish to go. They had left behind homes, possessions and jobs. As always happens in such circumstances, many had been torn apart from their families and did not know what had happened to those they loved. They had left behind the one sanctuary in which their God could legitimately be worshipped. They had lost the land which God had promised they should hold forever. To us, in our more comfortable circumstances, even in these times of the Coronavirus; their sense of loss is mind-boggling. What did they have left? -Certainly not their faith; they had lost that, along with everything else.

The bones which Ezekiel sees in his vision are his people. Their condition is desperate. They are more dead even than Lazarus. Lazarus had only just begun to decay. They have rotted and been reduced to piles of not just bones; but 'very dry bones'. However, to God, the life giver, nothing is too dead for renewal.

This Old Testament reading has to do with God's potential for us in this present world. It tells us that however great our traumas, whether as communities or as individuals, our lives can be put back together again, not instantaneously, and perhaps not without further pain. The new life may not, and almost certainly will not, restore all that was lost, but it can make possible a new beginning so that even those already bound may be untied and let go.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is a miracle which is also a parable, demonstrating that Christ is the life-giver. The lectionary stops at v. 45 (reasonably, since this is another very long reading) but if we take note of the verses immediately following, it becomes clear that in St John's mind, this raising was the event which made Jesus' opponents finally decide that he had to be removed. It brings everything to a head, and in that sense seals Jesus' fate.

The crucial verses in the chapter are 23-27. They might even be described as some of the most crucial in the entire gospel. When Jesus promises Martha, 'Your brother will rise again', she interprets the words in the conventional eschatological (*the end times*) sense. The resurrection is concerned with the far future. It is something that will usher in the world to come. This is some comfort to those mourning the loss of a loved one. Do not let us dismiss that. Jesus does not dismiss it. The resurrection at the last day is very much part of the belief system with which he has been brought up, and he does not abandon it now. But he adds something much more momentous. Resurrection is not just about the world to come. It is not only a matter of the distant future. The new life which Christ offers is something that may be had now, and the raising of Lazarus is a concrete demonstration of that fact. All the New Testament writers agree that the resurrection is not merely something that happens to Jesus; it is something which Christians share with him. Let's call a spade a spade. Sharing Christ's resurrection is indeed what being a Christian is all about. And it is something we can share, and should be sharing, now, this minute. Eternal life is not something we have to wait for. Thanks be to God for his word.

Let us pray

Loving God, we bring before you the sick and suffering of our world, all those wrestling with illness in body, mind or spirit.

We pray for those afflicted in body -enduring physical pain, overwhelmed by disabling disease, waiting for a procedure or further treatment and fearful of what the future may hold.

We pray for those disturbed, those whose confidence has broken down, those unable to cope with the pressures of daily life, being apart from family and friends. We pray for those afflicted in spirit -those who feel their lives to be empty, or whose beliefs are threatened or who have lost their faith.

Living God, we thank you for all who work to bring help, wholeness and healing to the sick - doctors, nurses, surgeons and medical staff.

We pray for those who have to continue working for the good of others. Support and strengthen all those who share in the work of healing,

all who strive to bring relief, all who minister to others.
Grant them your wisdom and guidance, your care and compassion,
your strength and support. Equip them in all they do, and bring wholeness through
them.

Finally, we pray for your Church in the healing ministry you have called it to exercise,
an inner healing of body, mind and soul
which only you can offer. Grant that your people everywhere
may be so filled with your Holy Spirit, and so touched by the grace of Christ, that we
may share effectively in the wider work of healing, through our lives and witness
bringing wholeness to broken people and a broken world. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer, in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

Look around at home and identify things that bring you comfort, e.g. a greetings card, a familiar and comfortable item of clothing, a photo, a favourite chair. In what other ways might you offer comfort to someone when everything seems to be going wrong for them? What Bible verses, hymns or songs give you comfort? Sometimes just being a calm and non-judgmental presence can bring a sense of peace and acceptance to another person – words may not be needed at all! How could you be alongside someone else to offer comfort at the moment? We remember today that Jesus is our ever-present comfort when we are troubled or feel all alone.

God of hope, heal me and restore me, that I might know your resurrection power in my life. Amen.

The Blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, be with you,
with those you love and with those you ought to love this day and forever more.
Amen