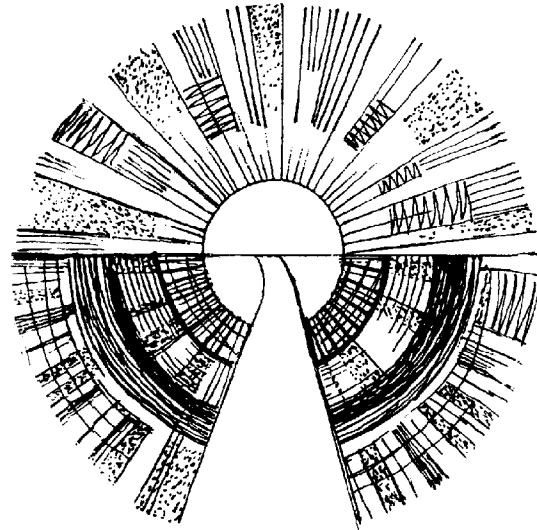


Worship @ Home

Sunday 29th March 2020

Revd Val Reid

Christchurch Hitchin and Pirton



Call to worship

Come and worship the resurrection God,
The Lord of all creation,
Who is always present, whatever we face,
In life and in death.
Worship him today in spirit and in truth.

Today's reading: John 11: 1-45

I invite you to read or listen to this morning's lectionary reading.

As we move through John's familiar story, we will pause to reflect and to pray.

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.'

Pause for reflection

Jesus chooses to head back to Judea, even though it carries huge risks.

Most of his disciples are reluctant.

Thomas – the doubter – the one who always asks difficult questions – Thomas is the one who is willing to go with Jesus towards the front line.

Pray for courage when hard things are asked of you.

Remember that Jesus travels with us.

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for 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.'

Pause for reflection

Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

We confess that all too often we blame you when things go wrong.

We demand miracles.

We expect you to sort our lives out.

We want our faith to be an insurance policy against pain and loss and fear.

Forgive us.

When Martha 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.

Pause for reflection

Jesus began to weep.

Pause to take time for lament.

The last week has been unbelievably hard.

It's OK to weep for what we have lost.

For what we have had to let go of.

For the anxiety that we all live with.

Jesus understands.

Jesus wept.

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 for 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 upwards 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.

Pause for reflection

Thank you, Lord, for your constant presence.

Thank you for holding us and comforting us.

Thank you for crying with us when we are hurting.

Thank you for weeping with us when we are broken-hearted.

Thank you, Lord, that you forgive our fears, our faltering faith, our desire to blame.

God of new life,

God of renewed hope,

We claim your promise now.

Amen

Reflection – Revd Val Reid

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

How many people have been saying that this week?

Alongside Martha and Mary.

They both use exactly the same words.

What sort of God allows my brother to die?

My sister?

My mother?

My child?

If only things had been different.

If only God would do what we want.

If only God would sort out this mess.

Protect us.

End Coronavirus.

Guide us to a supermarket with paracetamol.

Where's a resurrection miracle when you need one?

There certainly are resurrection miracles in the gospel stories.

But they are the exception rather than the rule.

Tom wrote thoughtfully on Monday about why God doesn't heal everyone.

I don't think John tells this story because he expects everyone who dies to be miraculously brought back to life.

That's not what this is about.

It's a rich story.

A complex story.

There is material here for plenty of sermons!

What can I say in five minutes that makes sense?

That speaks to us at the end of week one of lockdown?

There are two things that have spoken to me, as I have read and re-read the story of Lazarus.

Or is it perhaps the story of Mary and Martha?

Because Lazarus only has a walk on part at the very end.

The first thing that struck me was the honesty of the two sisters.

And of Jesus himself.

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

Both Martha and Mary are willing to say what is in their hearts.

They are willing to name their anger.

They are willing to show their grief – they openly weep with their community.

They are willing to speak the truth about death.

It stinks.

Lord, there is already a stench, because he has been dead for four days.

And there's a very interesting little exchange between Jesus and the disciples early on.

Jesus uses a common euphemism for death.

Lazarus has fallen asleep...

Oh well, they say, that's OK then.

If he's only asleep.

Jesus has to put it to them in words of one syllable.

Lazarus is dead.

There is something important here.

We are a society that is not very good at facing and naming things that make us anxious.

Ageing.

Poverty.

Death.

We prefer to look away.

Pretend it won't happen to us.

Focus on happy things.

Activities to do while we are stuck at home.

Things to watch on TV.

New skills to learn.

PE with Joe every morning at 9 o'clock.

What gets in the way of resurrection?

Our reluctance to be honest.

Our unwillingness to face the pain.

To name the problem.

But there is a long tradition of lament in the Hebrew Scriptures.

And complaint.

These things are the language of faith.

God loves the Abrahams, the Jobs, the Jeremiahs, the Marthas – the people who have the courage to tell the truth.

Even if it involves simply naming our loss.

Even if it involves anger.

Even if it involves challenging God.

It is only when you identify and speak the truth, that you can begin to recognise your need.

We have plenty of opportunity to look death in the face at the moment.

Many of us are paralysed by fear.

But it is as we admit our helplessness in this terrifying situation, that we are most conscious of the resurrection power of God.

When I am weak, then I am strong.

And the second thing that struck me was this.

Your brother will rise again, Jesus tells Martha.

I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day, she replies.

I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus.

This is one of the great 'I am' sayings of John's gospel.

Over and over again Jesus lives out a parable that says something profound about his nature, and the nature of the God from whom he came.

'I am', of course, is God's own name.

The name God gives to Moses by the burning bush, when Moses desperately needs something to hang on to.

To support him through the risky mission to which he is called.

There are only two tenses in Biblical Hebrew.

Things that have been completed.

And things that have not been completed yet.

When God tells Moses that God's name is 'I am', that is the 'not completed yet' tense.

God is a verb.

An uncompleted verb.

God was working then – and God is working now.

I think that's why John tells this story.

Because resurrection isn't something that will only happen at the last day.

Resurrection is something that is happening now.

Right at the end of this story, as Lazarus comes out of his tomb, his hands and feet and face still bound with strips of cloth, Jesus says to his sisters and his community:

Unbind him and let him go.

Look around at your community.

How much unbinding is happening all around you?

We are all trapped in tombs – some imposed by the government to protect us.

Some tombs of our own making.

But God is surely working in us, and in others, to bring moments of life and hope out of the despair.

God is an uncompleted verb.

Amen.

Blessed be your name

Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name

Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

*Every blessing You pour out, I'll Turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord, Still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name*

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

*Every blessing You pour out I'll
Turn back to praise....*

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name

*Songwriters: Beth Redman / Matt Redman
Blessed Be Your Name lyrics © Capitol Christian Music Group*

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Prayers for ourselves and others

Make yourself comfortable.
Notice the rhythm of your breathing.
Something we have taken for granted all our lives.
Not any more.

Pay attention to your body.
Are you feeling relaxed?
Tense?
Anxious?
What does that feel like in your body?
Don't ignore it.
Notice it.
Invite Jesus to sit alongside you.
To weep with you.
To pray with you.

You are not alone.
When we pray, we are reminding ourselves that there is nowhere we can go where God is not.

God's grace surrounds us.
God's love upholds us.

*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.*

We can't make sense of those words.
But they are a promise.
A promise from a faithful God.
There is no situation so dark that God cannot bring new life.
Whatever that new life might look like.

So let us pray.
I invite you to begin with yourself.
Be conscious that you are held in God's love.
Place your hand over your heart.
Say out loud:

May I be safe.
May I have ease of being.
May I live with kindness.
May I know God's resurrection power.

Now think of someone you love.
Someone you care deeply about.
Place your hand over your heart.
Say to that person:

May you be safe.
May you have ease of being.
May you live with kindness.
May you know God's resurrection power.

Now think of someone who is mourning.
Perhaps they have lost a loved one.
Perhaps this isolation means they are struggling with mental health.
Perhaps a relationship has broken down, and they feel alone.
Place your hand over your heart.
Say to that person:

May you be safe.
May you have ease of being.
May you live with kindness.
May you know God's resurrection power.

Now think of someone who is working to help and to heal.
It may be someone in your own family or circle of friends.
It may be someone you have seen on the news.
Someone who is there for others when they are ill.
Dealing with emergencies.
Accompanying people as they approach the end of life.
Place your hand over your heart.
Say to that person:

May you be safe.
May you have ease of being.
May you live with kindness.
May you know God's resurrection power.

*I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.
Use whichever version you are familiar with.
Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.
Although we are apart, we join together in praying the prayer that Jesus gave us.*

Our Father...

Blessing

As we wait on you, Holy God,
Renew our strength, our hope, our vision.
Although we are standing two metres apart,
Although we cannot touch each other,
May we enfold in love and hope
All those whose lives cross ours.

Amen.

Music

You Say (Lauren Daigle)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>