

A service of corporate reflection for Sunday 29th March 2020

(it may be helpful to light a candle to remind us that wherever we are we are gathered together in God's presence)

WE COME TO WORSHIP AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

Though we may be physically apart, we ARE one; we are the church of God, a gathered community, brought together in the bonds of peace, assembled today in thought and concern, in spirit, in love and in prayer.

AS WE GATHER IN WORSHIP, WE PRAY

Lord we come to be with you in many different places, yet as one community, experiencing varied emotions. Some of us are bereft at not worshipping together; others of us are relieved that we can remain at home; some of us may, in our loneliness, be fearful of the unknown, but, we remember through this changing time, that You are changeless and all is known by You. We thank You for the assurance that nothing can separate us from Your love, and so, we offer up to you Lord, with thankfulness, the night that has now passed and the day that lies before us. Amen

Prayerfully read the following hymn. Alternatively click on the link and follow it as it is sung.

HYMN STF 135

I owe my Lord a morning so
for God has meant this Through fears of
night and hidden light
God moves and wills my way.

I owe my Lord a morning song
for Jesus rose at dawn ;
he made death die and would not lie
that others might live on.

I owe my Lord a morning song ;
the Spirit gave me voice,
nor did she force my soul to praise
but honoured me with choice.

I owe my Lord a morning song.
How can I help but sing
when God is all in all, and I
am one with everything ?

John L. Bell (b. 1949)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OyNxDKh_dl&feature=youtu.be

THE PSALM FOR TODAY - 130

From the depths of my despair I call to you, LORD. Hear my cry, O Lord; listen to my call for help! If you kept a record of our sins, who could escape being condemned? But you forgive us, so that we should stand in awe of you. I wait eagerly for the LORD's help, and in his word I trust. I wait for the Lord more eagerly than sentries wait for the dawn— than sentries wait for the dawn. Israel, trust in the LORD, because his love is constant and he is always willing to save. He will save his people Israel from all their sins.

WE RESPONSE TO THE PSALM

Holy God, Creator of Life, we feel we are living in dark times. Nevertheless, you offer to us the grace of new life, forgiving us of our sins and setting us free. When we see despair, you surprise us with the breath of your spirit, which calls us out of our old routines, to delight in new ways of being. Fill us with your perfect peace, and your compassion. In the name of Jesus, our resurrected Saviour, in whom we delight, and upon whom we and depend.

Amen

We ask that in these days, the Holy Spirit will rest upon each one of us and give us the strength and hope that we need.

We reflect upon the words of the following hymn; pause where you see # and ponder upon what that phrase means for you.

This hymn can also be accessed at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjyd25TyzUw#action=share>

HYMN STF 386

In the beginning was darkness and nothing ; #
your Spirit was moving over the deep. #
You spoke a whisper and creation existed, birthed by the mighty words that you speak. #
Just say the word and my weary soul will be renewed.

***Refrain - Breathe on me O breath of God and fill me with life anew. #
Breathe on me O breath of God and set this heart on fire for you. #***

Bones in a valley were changed into an army,
raised by your Spirit's powerful touch. #
Here in your presence I'm needing your refreshing ; #
Lord please revive my heart with your love. #
Just say the word and my weary soul will be renewed. #

Refrain

Revival fire, fall down like the rain.
Revival fire, set my soul ablaze.
Revival fire, fall down like the rain.
Revival fire, set my soul ablaze.

Refrain

Vicky Beeching

THE READINGS

- **Ezekiel 37: 1-14 The Valley of Dry Bones**

- **John 11: 1-45 The Death of Lazarus**

COMMENTARY

The voice of the Most Venerable Archdeacon of Canterbury Cathedral boomed out, with gravitas, leading us into a meditation on the raising of Lazarus. It has been an experience I have never forgotten! She read the gospel twice and we were called to listen to what God was placing in our hearts. I had always had a certain feeling of revulsion for the text from John, so I was not looking forward to it! Imagine, a whole hour contemplating this on my own, in silence- it was going to be too much to bear- it was cold outside and my chair was uncomfortable, but I chose the lesser of two evils and just sat... uncomfortably! Very uncomfortably!

Begrudgingly, I entered into the time of meditation. I closed my eyes, and all at once I saw in my imagination, the desperation etched into the face of Martha as she ran towards the Lord. Her face was screwed up in agony at the death of her beloved brother- "How COULD Jesus have let this happen?" It was a desperation I too had known and that I thought would never pass.

Then I saw Jesus weep, and heard in my memory, a nun's wise words from when I was a child- "Do you know the sentence "Jesus wept" is the shortest sentence in the bible and the most important, because it shows that our Lord REALLY understands us!"

That drew me back to a time of terrible personal agony, marked by depression and grief after I was widowed at the age of 29. I was ferociously angry and exhausted by my circumstance. As I lay on the floor, thinking that there was nowhere lower that I could possibly go, the words to the prophet Ezekiel filtered into my soul and spoke powerfully to me-

“Get up, mortal [wo]man I want to talk to you!” (Ezekiel 2 v 1)

It was an astounding moment as I lay there, realising that the God, who I felt had completely abandoned me, who failed to understand me, had in fact been supporting me all along, supporting me in the way that the floor was holding me, surely, without faltering, never ever letting me fall.

It was the moment my heart, my soul and my mind “got up” again. It was my moment of resurrection and the fulfilment of the words, *“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,”* I had felt like an empty shell and now, here was God summoning me and breathing hope back into my life.

I turned back to the reading as I contemplated Lazarus. Poor Lazarus; having completed his life, and laid gently to rest, was in my opinion being quite rudely “awoken!”

What did HE feel about that I wondered?

What if I had been Lazarus? I think I might have told Jesus to go away- and perhaps not very politely, because there I was in my imagination, cocooned in my safe place, nothing could touch me or harm me. It was dark and cool and quiet in my tomb, and I could just rest, and then there was this bothersome, disruptive command to get up to come out and face the world.

When the stone was rolled away, did Lazarus experience the terrible pain at the back of his eye or even in his soul, that bright light shining into the darkness brings?

Was he begrudging like me? Did he experience the same sense of hesitation that was being shown to me as I reflected? I just don't know, but one thing I did know, was that life was never going to be quite the same for Lazarus again and it has never been quite the same for me!

And then my thoughts turned towards the church as a whole. Have we perhaps lain in our safe, cocooned “crypts” of churches for too long? Are we afraid or too comfortable to

leave the safety of what we know? Will the light of day shine upon our collective souls and ways and expose our creaking flaws? Will it mean we have to be different?

The hour whizzed by and I very surprisingly, ended up not wanting to leave the meditation! I was being brought back into my surroundings just as I had entered- begrudgingly! It had been a deeply provoking “journey” inwards that I have never forgotten.

Role on a few years, and we have arrived at a point where we HAVE all been “called out” of our churches. Because of global events, we have rightly been told not to meet as a physically gathered church. We have been birthed out of our “cocoon-churches”, into the “bright light” of our communities/ homes to worship.

We may be feeling as vulnerable as Lazarus, emerging from the tomb into the shocking light, and perhaps questioning how we will maintain an essentially dispersed community.

What I have noticed recently, is that there is, up and down the country, in every denomination, a propensity, even a frenetic drive, for churches to replicate Sunday worship via technology and broadcast, but this to my mind shows up the greatest “creaking flaw” we have in Western Christianity. It demonstrates we know how to DO church but not how to BE church.

We are being shaken up like the old bones that Ezekiel prophesied to, but life in its fulness depends upon the Holy Spirit of God breathing into us, and “resurrecting” us and our communities of faith.

Perhaps what should be at the heart of our calling, as we pray as a dispersed community is for the breath of the spirit to enter into us individually and corporately, so that we may discover how to be the church in such troubled times.

Ezekiel essentially presented the heartening news that revival was possible WITH God. That same breath-taking truth is needed in our world today like never before. Where dry

bones persist we need to pray for the Holy Spirit's quickening power, to enter the lives of all people, that a genuine and multifaceted revival may sweep the whole earth.

May these days ahead, be resurrection days; days of openness to the breath of the Holy Spirit, and may the church of Christ hear the voice of the Lord to stand up, to come out and to BE a real and heartening sign of hope for all people.

WE PRAY TOGETHER

We pray for those who are ill at home or in hospital and those who anxiously watch and wait;

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

We pray for carers and all medics who seek to relieve suffering

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are working long hours to alleviate anguish; for our government, for scientists, for our local government officials, for our police and armed services.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

We pray for those who feel entombed at home, by the restrictions placed upon them; those who face violence at home, those with difficult life circumstances, those afraid and filled with anxiety, those who live alone.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

We pray for one another, pausing to bring to mind our church family.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer.

Help us to believe, Lord, that changes and endings are but beginnings, and that closures are but the doorway to a new life. For you are the Lord of the resurrection, the Lord of revival and hope. Amen

WE CONCLUDE BY REFLECTING UPON A POEM AND A PAINTING BY SIEGER KODER "THE CHRYSALIS "

*The burial cloth
Translucent
Revealing
A body at rest.
The face at peace.
Wounded hands
Marked with red blood.
Inside, the tomb is dark and spacious.
Outside, the promise of a bright warm morning.
The light is breaking
Through the stone
Which seals the entrance.
Within the linen cloths
The body dazzles,
Like – A pearl in the oyster shell
A chrysalis in its cocoon
A seed in germination
An embryo in the womb.
The inexplicable
Untouchable Invisible*



*Recreating energy!
Into the soil,
Swollen with new life.*

BLESSING

Bless us all Lord, with the confidence, hope and serenity of the Holy Spirit now and forever. **Amen**

Dcn Selina Nisbett