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Sunday 26th March 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Rev’d Sue McCoan

**Call to Worship**

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits **and in his word I hope**

My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning.

**More than those who watch for the morning**

O Israel, hope in the Lord

**for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him there is great power to save.**

O Israel, hope in the Lord **and trust in his holy name.**

*from Psalm 130*

**Opening Prayer**

Loving God,

we gather as your people

setting aside, for this time, our everyday life,

our work and our leisure,

our duties and distractions,

to centre ourselves on you.

May your life-giving Spirit dwell in us,

filling us with peace,

uniting us with Christ;

may the worship we offer

be a gift to one another and acceptable to you.

We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

**Confession and Pardon**

God of grace,

there are times when we feel so far away from you:

when we are swamped by the depths of trouble;

when we are dried up, isolated, broken;

when we long for a peace we cannot find,

for a rest that will not come.

We wonder why you do not hear our cries for help.

In you, Lord, there is forgiveness.

And when we stop, and turn to ask for the forgiveness you promise,

we find it is already given.

When we silence our cries, we find you have heard us all along,

and your still, small voice speaks to us of steadfast love.

In your endless mercy, give us the grace to receive your forgiveness,

to embrace your love, and to live again in the light of your hope. **Amen.**

**All Age Activity**

Bring in a smallish pot plant before the service so the congregation don’t see it. In a similar pot, put compost and a very obviously dead twig. Show people the dead twig – you could pull it out to show there are no roots, snap a bit off to show how dry it is – and ask what it would take to bring it back to life. Talk about things being dead and lifeless; about times when you don’t know what to do, or you feel ready to give up. Talk about Mary and Martha, who were really sad because their brother had died. But they were friends with Jesus, and Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. When we are in trouble, we can pray for God to bring us new life and hope. Bring out the live plant as an illustration - God can make us thriving and healthy again.

**Prayer for Illumination**

As we break open the Scriptures to hear your word,

break open our minds to let it speak to us afresh,

and break open our hearts to let it settle into our lives. Amen

**Readings**

*Ezekiel 37:1-14* | *St John 11:1-45*

**Sermon Notes**

Theme: God brings life in seemingly impossible circumstances.

Sub Themes:

1. separation and re-uniting. Dry bones scattered, need to be brought back together before life can come. Lazarus, Jesus, Mary & Martha, all separated by distance or death, all united in the end.

b) hearing the word of the Lord, or the voice of Jesus, is the start of new life.

*Ezekiel’s Vision*

One of the horrors of dealing with the aftermath of war is the discovery of mass graves. People who were somebody’s son, somebody’s daughter, sibling, parent, friend, killed and dumped like so much rubbish. Ezekiel sees a whole valley full of bones, unidentified, scattered across the ground. Because the bones were not covered, the birds and wild animals have picked them clean. It is a stark image of death. Faced with this, the Lord’s question, ‘Can these bones live?’ seems absurd. Ezekiel’s answer, ‘O Lord God, you know’, leaves open the possibility that God might yet be able to do something. Sure enough, the Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones – to address them directly – and calls them to hear the word of the Lord which will bring new life.

Verses 11-14 explain that the bones represent the house of Israel – God’s people, dried up, scattered and without hope. The new life given to the bones represents the promise that God will restore the people to new life and bring them home from exile. Note that before the bones can come to life, they first have to come together. This may be about the people returning from exile. It might also be about the healing of divisions between those who were exiled and those who were left behind; between those who assimilated to life in Babylon and those who held to their traditions.

*Raising of Lazarus*

Unlike Ezekiel’s vision, Lazarus, Martha and Mary were real people, friends of Jesus. Mary and Martha hosted meals for him (Luke 10:38-42) and he stayed at their home in Bethany when he visited Jerusalem (John 12:1-2). When Lazarus falls ill, Jesus is the person his sisters want to see. But Jesus waits before responding, and by the time he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead and buried for 4 days. The grief of Martha and Mary is compounded by their sense that Jesus had let them down: ‘Lord, if you had been here’, they each say ‘my brother would not have died’. (v21, 32). The situation seems hopeless. Like Ezekiel prophesying to the bones, Jesus speaks directly to the dead man, calling him to come out. To everyone’s astonishment and probably horror, Lazarus emerges. When we next hear of him, in chapter 12, he is at the table eating dinner.

*Possible Messages*

Is there a situation that seems hopeless to you, that you want to bring to God?

***Or,*** you could dwell on the need to gather, to come together as God’s people, to acknowledge a shared experience.

***Or,*** are there areas in your spiritual life that need to be renewed and revived by the Spirit of God?

**Prayers of Intercession**

God of hope,

we pray for people and places where hope seems hard to find.

We pray for people who are separated from the ones they love,

or the place they call home:

those who are isolated by bullying or abuse;

those who wait anxiously for news;

those who have lost hope.

We give thanks and pray for all those working for peace and reconciliation

among countries and families.

We pray for the Church.

We pray for Christians who suffer persecution from the state

or hostility from neighbours;

for congregations that are struggling for want of people or resources;

for people who have not felt welcome or safe in church.

We give thanks and pray for new forms of Church,

for pioneer ministries,

for community projects that bring your Kingdom to many people.

We pray for our leaders, local and national;

for economists and bankers,

for businesses and pressure groups

and all who influence the lives we lead.

We give thanks and pray for people of vision and insight

who can see better ways to manage the economy

that place the needs of the planet above the greed of the wealthy.

We pray for the created world.

We mourn for the dry valleys that once were fertile plains,

for the lands swept by floods and storms,

for the loss of habitats and species

and the creatures who depended on them.

We give thanks for prophetic voices who call for change

and pray that the whole world might hear that call and rise to its challenge.

We pray in confidence and hope.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Offertory Prayer**

Generous God,

Thank you for gift of life and the promise of new life.

We bring our gifts in many ways – in time, money, and skills –

and offer them as a sign of our gratitude.

Bless those who are unable to give, and use us all to serve you. Amen.

**Blessing**

May the Spirit of God breathe into your life,

bringing renewed strength and hope,

and may the blessing of God,

Creator, Redeemer and Spirit,

be with you all, today and always. **Amen**

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| Suggested Hymns | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Breathe on me, breath of God | 295 | 596 | 370 | 67 |
| Come Holy Spirit Come |  | 594 |  |  |
| Come, living God, when least expected | 354 | 609 |  |  |
| Holy Spirit, Gift Bestower |  | 590 | 383 |  |
| O breath of life, come sweeping through us | 302 | 595 | 391 | 488 |
| She Sits Like A Bird, Brooding on the Waters |  | 593 | 393 |  |
| Loving Spirit, Loving Spirit | 326 | 597 |  |  |
| Come Holy Ghost Our Hearts Inspire | 312 | 598 | 155 |  |
| Spirit of the living God | 308 | 619 | 395 | 613 |
| I Will Be With You |  |  |  |  |
| These Are The Days of Elijah |  |  |  | 1012 |
|  |  |  |  |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*