

DSW Written Service – Sunday 26th March 2023
5th Sunday of Lent – Passion Sunday

Call to Worship

Jesus said: I am the resurrection and the life all who believe in me, though they die yet shall they live. Choose this day whom you will serve. *God has set before us life and death, praising the light or cursing the darkness, loving others or cultivating selfish indifference.* Therefore choose life, loving your God, obeying God's voice, and cleaving to God all your days. *By the grace of Christ Jesus we this day choose life.* Amen.

Prayers

Loving God, we remember today how much Christ loved us, how much he was willing to sacrifice and endure for our sakes. **Teach us to Follow.** Yet set before him the need to choose – between the way of self and the way of the cross, the way of the world, and the way of love, the way of life that leads to death and the way of death that leads to life. **Teach us to Follow.** We thank you for the choice he made, and all that lay behind it, the faith that gave him the inner strength to resist temptation and accept your will, the courage to take the path of suffering and death, the love which guided all. **Teach us to Follow.** We are narrow in our vision, more concerned with earthly satisfaction than spiritual fulfilment, taking the easy, comfortable way rather than the way of Christ. **Teach us to Follow.** Loving God, lead us when our time of trial comes, when we are faced by the need to choose, and deliver us then from evil. **Teach us to Follow.**
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Prayer of Confession –

Spirit of Life, we confess that we do not live into the promise of life. We are focused on success, on having more, on being satisfied and comfortable. We have turned away from the promise of life in You to pursue worldly pleasures that will eventually leave us empty. Only You can fulfill us, and by serving You in loving others and caring for the needs of others, we find Your Spirit of life in us. Forgive us for chasing empty promises and wealthy dreams, and turns us back to Your ways.

(We pause to bring the confessions of heart and minds to God)

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. In Christ there is light, there is life, there is hope. You are forgiven. You are given new life, eternal life that begins now. The Spirit of Life is upon you. Go and share the good news. Amen.

Hymn: - STF 355 – Jesus Lover of my soul

1 Jesus, lover of my soul,
let me to thy bosom fly,
while the nearer waters roll,
while the tempest still is high;
hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
till the storm of life is past;
safe into the haven guide,
O receive my soul at last!

2 Other refuge have I none,
hangs my helpless soul on thee;
leave, ah, leave me not alone,

still support and comfort me.
All my trust on thee is stayed,
all my help from thee I bring;
cover my defenceless head
with the shadow of thy wing.

3 Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
more than all in thee I find;
raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;

false and full of sin I am,
thou art full of truth and grace.

4 Plenteous grace with thee is found,
grace to cover all my sin;
let the healing streams abound,

make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art;
freely let me take of thee;
spring thou up within my heart,
rise to all eternity.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Reading: John 11: 1 – 45 (extract below, you may want to read the full reading in your Bibles)

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 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.'

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I really don't like to wait in a long queue in a Supermarket and I definitely don't like to be waiting in queuing traffic on a motorway. This Lent, Cora has challenged me to act differently in these situations, rather than getting impatient or fractious about having to queue, having to wait, that I should pray for the people that are in front of me. Obviously I won't know much about them, but what I see in front of me, what I get a sense of from observing them, I should pray about that. Boy is it a hard habit to cultivate – but in this 5th week of lent, I have found myself starting to do it more automatically, and it feels good to be praying rather than getting het up by a queue!

Then today we get to this long, but rich reading from the Gospel of John, about the Story of Mary, Martha and their ill brother Lazarus. This is a rich text because it gives us cause to think about a nugget or tenant of our faith – the Sure and certain hope of resurrection. **Where do we rest our hope? To what do we finally aspire?**

Lets begin our look at this rich passage from John's Gospel, by setting it in some context. Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, which is a village near Jerusalem. This was a place that Jesus knew well, and stayed often, especially when he came up for feasts. Jesus felt at home with Mary,

Martha and Lazarus, this if you like, was a home away from home. However, for the occasion we look at today, we find Mary and Martha in a dire situation, their brother Lazarus, is gravely ill. So the sisters send word to Jesus to come to his friend. Strangely though Jesus makes them WAIT – not just a few hours – but SEVERAL days.

So, while Lazarus falls ill and dies, the story focuses on Mary and Martha. When Jesus finally comes, Lazarus has died, and Martha goes out to confront Jesus: *“Lord, she says, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”*. I can only imagine what an excruciating wait that must have been for Mary and Martha. I think they must have been frustrated, even angry at Jesus – because he seemingly abandons them and Lazarus at their perceived time of greatest need.

We live in a world of instant gratification, of wanting and expecting a response there and then. You only have to think back to the horrific attack on Parliament a few years ago – to know how quickly, within 82 seconds the attack was stopped. To me, this passage says something about the hope that Mary and Martha place in Jesus, in God. In God there is hope, there is the spirit that breathed life and moved over the waters of creation. And because of Jesus, God, there is always the sure and certain hope of a new life, and eternal life, for all those who believe. I think there is also something significant here, about God’s timing. If you remember, when Mary and Martha send word to Jesus, he doesn’t respond in seconds or hours but in a few DAYS.

Jesus isn’t being obnoxious or rude, he isn’t stuck in a queue on his way, he is simply running to God’s agenda, God’s timing and God’s plan. This is two fold – in that it teaches us that we must learn to wait in faith, but also it serves as a moment that allows Christ to reveal God’s power and his future, for all people, the great resurrection hope for all humankind. But of course – poor Mary and Martha – don’t know that, they couldn’t possibly have known the full power of this moment, they were too caught up in their emotional, and frankly understandable state of grief and disbelief. Sometimes God allows a situation to go from Bad to worse because he is planning to do something more powerful and indeed transformative in our lives. We have to remember that Christ has a purpose that will bring more Glory to God – not just through his life and death, but through his resurrection, overcoming death and therefore overcoming the world. What I would say is that God is never Late! God allowed Lazarus to die because he knew he would bring resurrection life to the situation, and Lazarus was the instrument of that miracle, and that sure and certain hope that we all hang our faith upon. Resurrection is not something that you have to believe, it is not something that you just confess in faith or even that which we can fully comprehend. No – Resurrection is to be experienced.

At the heart of this story of Lazarus is this concept of Resurrection. It is not a theory, it’s not ambiguous, it’s a promise, it’s real and its hope for all people. Resurrection is about relationship with God. So now I want to jump to the end of the story – when Jesus calls Lazarus, by name, to COME OUT. Amazingly Lazarus comes out – this is a Miracle and it’s a sign to the resurrection hope. But that is not the end of the miracle – because once Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus commands the waiting crowd to *“Unbind him and let him Go”*. The community in other words, is commanded to participate in God’s actions, to bring it to its desired end and outcome, and it is for us to join in, helping to complete God’s redemptive act. I think that’s kind of astounding when you think about it! The community of faith, gathered around Lazarus is invited to participate in God’s redemptive world. Yes this is all God’s work, but Jesus invites the community, us here today to participate in that work.

Opportunities to unbind and let go abound, but we need to look for them so that we might hear Jesus calling us by name to make a difference to those around us. While we call this scene “the raising of Lazarus,” it’s striking to realize that the actual sign Jesus performs takes up just two verses of the forty-five of this story. Maybe that’s because, as is typical of John’s Gospel, what matters most isn’t the sign, but rather Jesus’ interpretation of it and our response to it. Lazarus will die again, but the community empowered to unbind and set loose will endure. Indeed, it has endured, persisting

through the centuries in works of courage and mercy, right here in Dorset South and West Circuit. How do we do that you might ask?

Well I think Paul gives us some good advice when he says that we should “set our minds on the spirit”. This is a mindset that leads to life, that is abundant and lasting. Fulfillment in life is not in the “Stuff” of our world, but in the radical reorientation that comes through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Life in the spirit takes up our dried hopes and dreams, puts new flesh on our withered bones and restores our hope, our eternal hope of the life of eternal resurrection with God.

But like Mary and Martha, like Cora has challenged me this lent, we are required to wait, to wait prayerfully and earnestly, because waiting requires us to trust and to be obedient to the truth of the resurrection life to come. However, we are NOT called to wait passively or quietly, and indeed we are not called to wait on our own! Waiting should be active – seeking god, praying, listening and meditating on his word. Being on a spiritual, faith journey, often means waiting for answers to be revealed for new truths to come into our sphere of understanding, but is in waiting and listening and learning that important training takes place.

I feel inspired and empowered to live into the freedom that I know is ours through Christ. **Where do we rest our hope? To what do we finally aspire?** God is inviting us to make a difference in this world right here, right now. God, in other words, is beckoning us to claim Christ’s resurrection power now by participating in and completing the fantastic work God is doing all over God’s creation. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession -

Words of response after each prayer below: Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Let us pray for the Church of God throughout the world, for ... and for ...

Let us pray for those who have power and influence and for all who govern the nations, for ... and for ...

Let us pray for the powerless, for all victims of famine and war, and for all who strive for justice and peace, for ... and for ...

Let us pray for the afflicted and sorrowful and for all who need our prayers, for ... and for ...

Let us remember before God those who have passed from this life in faith and obedience, giving thanks for ... and for ...

Eternal God, through the self-offering of your Son you have filled our lives with your presence. Help us in our sufferings and trials and strengthen us in our weakness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done; On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And Lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, The power and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen.

Blessing

Go now and proclaim the Gospel, not just through words but deeds through what you say, what you do, and who you are. May others, as they meet with you, meet also with Christ, and know his living presence for themselves. The blessing, of God almighty, Father, Son and holy Spirit, rest, remain and abide with you all, with those you love, and those you are called to love, now, in the name of Christ. Amen.