



Service for Private or Personal Use 29th March 2020

Thank you for the feedback about last week's service. Many people used it, and everyone who commented had found it a helpful substitute for being in church. One person played all the hymns from their large collection of recordings. Others sang (in the privacy of their home!).

You may want to set aside what you normally put in the offering, to bring to church when services resume, or forward it periodically to your church treasurer.

I have altered the font, and the size of type, at the suggestion of another helpful piece of feedback. I am always willing to be told how to improve.

You might like to sing or hum:

Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord who healeth thee (x3)

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul (x3)

Prayer

O God, at a time when I would love to be with my family and friends, help me to remember that you are still God, and you are still with me – and with them.

At a time when I am increasingly aware of the restrictions put on me and on others, help me to remember that there are no limits for you. At a time when the medical profession particularly are stretched and struggling, help me to remember your loving care, and remember to pray for these hard workers.

At a time when the statistics seem overwhelming, help me to remember that you count the hairs on my head, that every individual is precious in your sight.

As spring-time unfolds, may I find time to rejoice in the beauty of 'a host of golden daffodils' or a butterfly – things that remind me that the rhythm of life is still in your hands, and so am I.

May the warmth of the sunshine be matched by the warmth of your love within my heart.

Amen.

You may like to use the hymn “How great thou art” (82 in Singing the Faith) or some other hymn that celebrates God’s greatness and faithfulness, such as “Great is thy faithfulness” 66 in Hymns & Psalms; 51 in Singing the Faith)

Read Psalm 130

Think:

This rather melancholy Psalm is set for today. It is one of the seven ‘penitential psalms’ (the others are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 143) which represent the humble approach to God by those who know they deserve nothing.

In Methodist history, this was the psalm that John Wesley heard sung at St Paul’s Cathedral in the afternoon before he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’ as true saving faith was awakened in him in the evening of 24th May 1738.

What “depths” are you aware of at present? It may be loneliness and isolation; it may be illness or depression; it may be sadness and loss. But God does “hear my voice.”

“There is forgiveness with you” is a great comfort for sensitive souls. The New Testament says that “If we confess our sins God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Take a few moments to ponder the wonder of this. If there is anything you particularly need to confess to God, do so quietly, in the assurance that he forgives generously.

The watchmen waiting for dawn to break (verse 6) is a lovely picture of confident anticipation. What does it say to you about “waiting for God”? And we may hope in him with confidence, as verse 7 reminds us.

Perhaps thoughts have struck you as you have reflected on this psalm – maybe even that psalms in “the minor key” can still speak to us.

If you find it helpful to turn some of these thoughts into prayer, pause and do so. Some people – not everybody – find it helpful to write their prayers rather than speak them. Do whatever you find works for you.

Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world;
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross,
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Read John chapter 11 verses 1 to 45 (*You may find it interesting to read the story in a traditional version and then in a modern paraphrase*) Allow your imagination the opportunity to play over this dramatic story, to enter into the roller-coaster emotions of Mary and Martha – yes, and Lazarus!

The story begins with a man who was ill – how very topical. The first message the sisters send to Jesus is the simple: “He whom you love is ill.” Do my prayers hurry too much, telling the Lord exactly how I think he should answer my prayers? Is it enough just to tell him what is on our hearts, and leave him to deal with it in his way?

The first comment of Jesus is that “This illness does not lead to death,” but we know that Lazarus does die. Even odder, Jesus loved the three of them (were they orphans?) and yet he delayed for a further two days before he went to them. How do I deal with God’s delays, especially when this results in the situation getting a lot worse?

We notice the courage of Jesus, in going to a place of danger. This is not the wimp that we often see portrayed. His courage inspires Thomas – who was not doubting on this occasion!

Jesus tells them that Lazarus is “sleeping” (verse 11). He said this about Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:39) and New Testament letters use the same image. However, the disciples totally misunderstand, and assume Lazarus is now on the road to recovery. A poem by John Donne begins “Death, be not proud” and speaks of sleep as the image of death. It ends in triumph that death itself is doomed to die.

The English word ‘cemetery’ comes from the Greek word for ‘a sleeping place.’ If we had taken it from Latin instead, we would call it ‘a dormitory.’ That makes it very different!

When Jesus approaches Bethany Martha comes out to him, and immediately blurts out her complaint: “Lord, if you had been here (if you had got a move on, and come when we asked) my brother would not have died.” Are you shocked by such bluntness? Jesus wasn’t, and he still isn’t when our faith can voice its complaints.

If she had not spoken so plainly it is likely we would not have heard those great words: “I am the resurrection and the life” which mark the start of almost every Christian funeral. Yes; Jesus goes on to speak of them “even though they die, yet shall they live.” Death is a reality, and one that many people are facing right now. As Christians, we will not use trite answers, but we have a hope that lies the other side of death, in the place where Jesus has already gone ahead of us.

Mary is called, and pours out the same complaint to Jesus, but gets a different reply. This time it is the weeping without words, sharing her grief. He does feel what we feel; he does know what we go through. While, surely, he knew that within minutes Lazarus would be restored to life, he still weeps. He grieves over the hurts that leave deep scars in people's lives – the letter to the Hebrews says that he is able to sympathise with us in our weakness. Having taken our nature, he shares the toughest and grimmest moments, as well as the most joyful.

Little imagination is needed to sense the tension in the air as Jesus first commands that the heavy grave-stone should be rolled back. Martha protests that by now decay will have set in, and the stink will be unbearable. Jesus persists: he will not be frustrated by this grave-stone, any more than by another on Easter Day.

What must they have thought as he first prayed, thanking God for hearing him, and then shouting to Lazarus to come out? Did they think he had finally 'flipped'? That now he would be shown up as a deceiver, who played cruel tricks on the vulnerable and grieving? That he would need a very smart excuse when Lazarus failed to come out? That's the trouble when we know how the story ends – we miss the drama and the tension. And faith glows dimly instead of flaring like a beacon.

We have not used today's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 37 (the valley of dry bones). It also speaks of the God who raises the dead, though this is probably a vision rather than a historical event. It was a message of hope addressed to a desperate situation. The God of hope still speaks into our despair.

Ever practical, Jesus has another command, to let the poor man out of his bandages and let him go home. Miracles still need the everyday common sense.

C S Lewis said that he did not think of Stephen as the first Christian martyr (Acts chapter 7), but Lazarus. The poor chap had to go through dying twice, before he entered heaven.

I don't know what strikes you most from this story and these reflections on it. Hold onto them. Use your imagination to replay the story, and place yourself within it.

Some scholars are surprised that such an amazing story is found only in one gospel, and others that John has taken the parable in Luke 16:19-31 and turned it into a narrative. On the other hand, how audacious it would

be to concoct a story like this if it had never happened, and all the first readers would know.

Whatever you make of it, you may wish to pause and turn some of your thoughts into prayer.

Some of the great Easter hymns might be appropriate – such as ‘Thine be the glory’ (S t F 313 / H&P 212) or ‘I know that my Redeemer lives’ (S t F 303 / H&P 196)... or many others. Use a favourite.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, who went the way of suffering and the cross to bring us to glory, I/we pray for those who are facing death now. Draw close to them, and tell them of your peace.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19, or to other causes. May they know that you share their grief, that you have wept as they weep, and that you have conquered death.

We pray for those who care for the sick and dying, often struggling with their own emotions or with exhaustion. We pray for those who deal with the dead – not only the undertakers and crematorium staff, but also bereavement counsellors and doctors who must break the news, and pastors who support the bereaved.

We pray for those who feel angry with God, and dare not express that anger. May they find the tender sympathy that carries them in their sorrow and confusion.

As restrictions on our liberty become tighter, help us to live as people of hope and people of the light. Where we have opportunity to bear one another's' burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ, may we do so cheerfully.

You may wish at this point to make personal prayers – for yourself, your family, your friends from church, or others whose needs you are remembering before God.

Lord, who loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus, you also love me; you also love those I have named before you: in that great love, display your saving power and help, for the glory of your name. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer – use whichever version you find most helpful today.

This Sunday, the second before Easter, is often referred to as ‘Passion Sunday.’ You might like to use a hymn that focuses on our

Lord's passion, his sufferings for us. Some might find 'O love divine, what have you done!' (S t F 278 / H&P 175) expresses their feelings. Others may prefer S t F 279 'O precious sight, my Saviour stands' or S t F 283 'The desolate Messiah stands.' Those using H&P might find 171 'My God, I love thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby' or 172 'O dearest Lord. Thy sacred head...'

**The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

No reference has been made to the Epistle for today. It is Romans 8:6-11, a passage about new life in the Holy Spirit, because of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, when the Bible readings will be –

Matthew 21 verses 1 to 11

Psalm 118 verses 1,2 and 19 to 29