

For Sunday March 29th

Confession

Living God, more than ever, we stand in need of your healing power. We confess that we have taken your gifts for granted and not trusted in your promises.

Forgive us for not nurturing and caring for the gift of your creation.

Forgive us when we have put our needs before those of others.

Forgive us for our greed and our desire always to have more.

Forgive us for thinking we can manage without you.

Living God, send your healing Spirit through the whole world. Awaken us all to the needs of others and particularly to the needs of the most vulnerable: the elderly, the sick, the isolated.

In this time of fear and anxiety, send us your peace.

In this time of self-isolation, make us more aware of the needs of others.

In this time of withdrawal, draw us close to you.

We make these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen

Psalm 130

In praying this Psalm, like the Psalmist, offer God your frailty and anxiety – and bathe in God's tender mercy...

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Israel (Lancaster!), put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Worship and thanksgiving

Take a moment to let God look at you.

Breathe in God's love.

With your hand on your heart, ask Jesus to bring to your heart the moment today for which you feel most grateful.

Recall what was said and done in that moment. Enjoy the gratitude you feel again now. Breathe in its life.

Give thanks to God for your day. Give thanks for all the gifts in your life.

Gospel: The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45)

'This sickness will not end in death.'

This rich Gospel, like so many of the brilliant set-pieces in John's Gospel, is full of meaning and significance. If I were exploring it on Sunday night, I might split it into 3 parts:

1. Jesus hears the news but delays responding – why do you think he does this?
2. Jesus arrives in Bethany and interacts with Martha and Mary, reminding us of the extraordinary role women had in Jesus' ministry – ponder/pray the astonishing statement, *'I am the resurrection and the life'*.
3. Jesus orders the removal of the stone and Martha gives the very human and mundane response about the smell of decay. This might be a big leap but, in these times of sickness and death, *what rottenness is being revealed in our world?*

But don't stay here! The whole story moves us to this final scene of resurrection. There are many different translations for Jesus' final order but the one I like best is: 'Unbind him and let him go!'

Some final questions to ponder:

- What do you need to be unbound from or freed from?
- What does our world need to be unbound from?

Some final reflections (covering all the Lenten themes we had been looking to cover)

Jesus – **'self-portrait by God'** – reveals his full humanity as he is moved by the grief of others to weep at the death of his friend. And yet, this same Jesus demonstrates his divine power as he calmly commands Lazarus to shake off the curse of death.

The **healer**, so confident of His Father's power, allows arrogant death to get his clutches on Lazarus then plucks them off like just so many twigs. And so he breaks the final and absolute taboo. His healing then is not just of Lazarus but of all who fear death.

Like any great **teacher** he knows words are best understood through action and delivers the most stunning lesson to his disciples about the real meaning of Resurrection. It is not a vain future hope but the power of life within him.

In the run-up to this moment of revelation, it is 2 **women** who are drawn more deeply into the reality of who Jesus is. Firstly, Martha draws from Jesus his 'I am' statement (the 7th and the most complete in this Gospel) and responds with her own confession of faith: *'I believe that you are the Christ'*. And it is Mary who first boldly reproaches Jesus for not having arrived sooner, and then reduces him to tears with her own tears of loss.

Death is the ultimate violence that human beings experience. It is the ultimate **violence** that Jesus himself accepts. It is how God chooses to remove violence from our world. That it still exists is because we have made God in our own image and decided that God is actually capable of eternal violence. But Jesus' loving, life-giving presence gives the lie to this.

His **prayer** to bring about this eclipsing of death is so simple and trusting – *'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.'* For Jesus, prayer is just acknowledgement of the intimate relationship that already exists.

We don't have to ask God to be who God is – we just have to be thankful that God is who God is! (*This may take reading a few times!*)

We don't pray to change God but to change ourselves.

The Lord's Prayer

Jesus taught us to pray 'Our Father' because he knew we need each other. As you pray his prayer, bring to mind our Sunday night community and all at The Cornerstone.

We greet each other with a remote hug/handshake of peace!

Closing Prayer

Living God, thank you for the signs of spring that lift our spirits. May they herald the death of what afflicts us and the emergence of new life, all across our world. In Jesus' name, amen.

The grace

Over the page is a further reflection on what is going on, inspired by the Gospel story – something to read at another time.

Please let me/Steve know if you need anything...shopping, a phone call, a Skype conversation (if you are really up-to-date!)

Sending lots of love, Simon

A reflection for Viral Times - 'This sickness will not end in death.'

It seems so topical. A sickness hangs over our whole world. And, for many, it will end in death. So how can we find any good news in these words? Jesus knew Lazarus would die but he also knew that death would not have the last word. He would have the last word. He was the first Word and He would be the last Word. Not death. That is why he can say with such authority: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'. So how can we apply this to these terrible troubling times?

What Jesus does in the story of the raising of Lazarus is to break the taboo that keeps us all in fear. He reveals that death is not a full-stop. That it is the precursor to Resurrection. It is too glib to apply this to every death that results from the corona-virus. For those with faith, Resurrection may bring some consolation in the face of death – for those without faith, it is no help. But we have to think about/believe in Resurrection to get through this health crisis. We have to believe that humanity will emerge from this crisis and in some new form. We have to be new, different, recreated in some way. How?

Well, what is the current situation revealing about us? It seems like both the positives and the negatives are teaching us some wisdom. Panic buying suggests that 'me' comes before 'us'. Not taking sensible precautions suggests that some people literally cannot see beyond the day. Rich people selling their shares in hotels while millions of people don't know how they will pay their rent suggests that our economic system isn't really working. Nature suddenly getting some healing and breathing space because our obsession with cars and planes is on hold suggests that things are out of balance. The closing down of shops and the cancellation of sports events (and especially football) causing a genuine fear of depression suggests that our culture has become addictive.

Conversely, the kindness of neighbours, the huge rise in volunteering, the creative and positive use of social media and the sacrificial commitment of people in the NHS and other key services suggests that there is deep goodness within many people.

If the above are true – and I think they are – what will post viral resurrection look like?

A rise in recovery programmes and 12 step spirituality for all our addictions

A different economic system in which profit isn't worshipped and massive personal and national debt don't leave us permanently on the edge of the abyss.

A final realisation that the planet is a gift to be nurtured not exploited

A rediscovery of community because we really, really don't like being on our own and can't cope with it.

Perspective about things, about football, about celebrity. They don't make us happy. They can't make us happy.

A re-awakening in the power of tender and loving touch.

For any of this to happen, we are all going to have to die a little. We are going to have to die to our selfishness and our greed – to our false selves and our egos – to our addictions and obsessions. We are going to have to let die the myth of constant growth. We are going to have to die to our belief in our invincibility.

It is going to be difficult and painful. We are entering a tomb. Let's pray that God will roll the stone away and bring us to real freedom.