**29th March 2020**

**Gospel: John 11.1-45**

**Call to worship**

Come and worship the resurrection God,
the Lord of all creation,
who is always present, no matter what.
Worship him today in spirit and in truth.



HYMN:

1. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.
2. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.
3. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Till I am wholly Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.
4. Breathe on me, Breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life
Of Thine eternity.

**A gathering prayer**

God of new life,
God of risen hope,
as we gather today,
may we know your resurrection power in our lives.
May our spirits be renewed.
May our bodies be restored.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Living Lord Jesus,
let us draw near to worship you.
Let the same spirit that brought Lazarus out of the grave,
and raised you to new life,
dwell in us today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession**

Lord, forgive us when we don’t always trust you,
when we don’t always trust that you know best.
Forgive us when we think our timing is better than yours,
when we think that we know best.
Forgive us when we demand things from you,
when we want everything now,
and stamp our feet when we don’t get it.
Forgive us when we turn away from you,
when we don’t understand why things have gone wrong,
when we feel let down and hurt,
thinking that you have rejected us and abandoned us.
For you never reject or abandon us.
Forgive us, Lord, and give us renewed hope.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, Lord, for your constant presence.
Thank you for holding us and comforting us.
Thank you for crying with us when we are hurting.
Thank you for weeping with us when we are broken-hearted.
Thank you, Lord, that you never let us down,
that you always give us hope.
God of new life,
we give you thanks and praise today.
**Amen.**



Lords Prayer:

**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**

**Bible Reading John 11.1-44**

**Sermon**

We have had a week of isolation. How are you all doing? In the wartime prisoner of War movies, like the Great Escape, solitary confinement was always reserved as a punishment. If Steve McQueen had been a naughty boy and had been riding his motorbike where he shouldn’t have, he would be banged up in solitary confinement.

I hope you understand that staying in is not about punishment but about trying to stop the spread of this virus. I know for many of you it is punishing to be cooped up all day especially with members of your family or on your own.

There was a social media video doing the rounds of a man who was asked the question who would you like to spend twelve weeks of isolation and quarantine with. Is it a) your wife and young children or b) …. B he said. B

Hopefully there isn’t any blood on the walls – but living in close proximity to other people can bring with it certain tensions and challenges.

I read the other day about different personalities and how they are responding to the coronavirus crisis.

The Organizer has their world turned upside down by the virus. They want things in order and is most risk adverse and they will go all out to try and restore order in their world.

The Artist is happy go lucky type who is unfazed by the crisis. They don’t like the face mask and if they have to wear it, their rebellious nature will want to decorate it.

The Networker will spend lots of time checking in with friends and family and how they are doing. They will be update news faster than any of the authorities.

The Perfectionists laments the handling of the situation and sees many possibilities of turning around the situation and preventing the next one from happening.

The Craftsman is unhappy that they have to stop work and entertain the panic. Crisis what crisis – its just a bit of flu in their eyes. Those unaffected should just be allowed to continue on with their chores.

The Carer is always looking out for how to help others and will perhaps naively put themselves in harms way for the sake of others.

The Investigator is skeptical of any official advice and wants to conduct their own research. The amateur epidemiologist they trust no one except themselves.

Whereas the Expositor will find out the latest advice and the latest rules and restrictions and broadcast it to everyone they can. They can tend to spread panic and anxiety though…

I don’t know if you recognise yourself in any of these personality types and reactions to the crisis?

We are all different and react to crisis and trauma in different ways.

I woke up in the middle of the night a few days ago in a bit of a panic attack. I was gasping for air thinking I’d come down with coronavirus. I tried to engage my rational mind about this and thought myself to be calm. I took a few deep breaths and realized that I was just reacting to the build up of stress and anxiety of the day. I’d probably been watching the news and social media too much. Time to enjoy the sunshine and find time to be present to myself, to the moment, to God.

I read an article by

Imogen Wall, who is a Mental Health First Aider.

IN CRISES, WE START DOING WEIRD STUFF:

If you’re having a wobble, you may also have noticed all sorts of weird stuff going on. Are you arguing more, talking faster, struggling to sleep, restless, desperate for information? Or are you teary and overwhelmed, perhaps feeling a bit sick? Struggling to make decisions? Just want to stay in bed? Tummy upsets? Having headaches? Ranting, picking fights or getting into arguments? Laughing unexpectedly or saying random, inappropriate things? Developing Very Strong Opinions on epidemiology overnight? Or have you just completely gone to ground?

If you are feeling any of these things: good news! You are not going mad. And you are 100% not alone. You are, in fact completely normal: a fully emotionally functional human being. Congratulations!.

WE ARE LIVING IN TURBO-ANXIOUS TIMES.. We’re in the middle of an unprecedented crisis that has showed up unexpectedly It’s terrifying and it's getting worse and it makes us feel totally out of control. And this is on top of anything else we have going on.

HERE’S THE SCIENCE BIT. When we are exposed to threats and need to deal with them, our brain springs into action. Specifically a tiny, innocent-looking thing buried behind your ear called the amygdala (fun fact: it's the size and shape of an almond). It’s the bit in charge when we are frightened and right now, it’s in full tin-hat klaxon mode. Unfortunately, it’s also very ancient bit of kit. It came into being when threats basically consisted of being eaten by large scary animals like bears. You know that thing about when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail? Well, to the amygdala, everything looks like a bear. It’s also pretty basic, so it really only has two settings. They are no bear :) and BEAR!!!.

WE ARE ON SETTING: BEAR!!!. Because all threats look like a bear to the amygdala, it preps you accordingly. There are really only two reactions to a bear about to eat you: fight it, or run away really fast. So this is what the body gets you ready to do. It’s called the Fight or Flight response (there’s also freeze, meaning you just get paralysed). It does this by flooding your body with chemicals like cortisol, and adrenaline. Your heart rate goes up, you feel super alert, your breathing goes shallow, your muscles are ready for action. These chemicals are also largely responsible for the huge range of other cognitive/physical/emotional reactions. In group fear situation like a pandemic, this tends to happen whether you think you're scared or not - anxiety is even more infectious than COVID 19. Your body reacts even if your conscious mind doesn't.

Obviously this is all great if you really are running away from a bear. But we’re now in a situation where we’re being asked to do the EXACT OPPOSITE of running away. We are being told to sit tight. Literally stay still. Process large amounts of information, make complicated and life changing decisions, and stay calm. All the while a bit of your brain is running around yelling BEAR!!! BEAR!!! BEAR!!! This isn’t easy. The result is an awful lot of stress and anxiety. And if you’re anything like me, you end up feeling really overwhelmed and having all sorts of reactions.

SO WHAT TO DO: well, the good news is it is possible to calm down. We can turn the amygdala from BEAR!!! to NO BEAR , and not just by distracting it with cake and tea. Here are some solid, scientifically proven things you can do.

Control your breathing and you are basically telling your body: it’s OK. There is no bear. Your body will then start to dial down the adrenaline and cortisol and all the other reactions will slow to a halt.

CALL A FRIEND: Don’t suffer alone. Call a mate - someone who’ll listen while you have a bit of a rant, or a cry, or a general wobble. Someone you can trust not to judge you and who’ll just sympathise..

LAUGH: always a good medicine

DO SOMETHING WITH YOUR HANDS. that you have to focus on to get right. Cook. Tidy. Knit. Draw. Bake. Garden. Mend things.

TREAT YOUR BODY: We hold stress in our bodies at least as much as our minds. Take a bath or a shower. Exercise, enjoy the spring time, the garden if you have one.

STEP AWAY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA/THE NEWS: All it will do will scare you more and make things worse.

BE KIND: to yourself and others. Now is not the time to start a makeover your life. You'll probably struggle to concentrate, fail and make yourself feel worse. Think comfort books, comfort telly, comfort everything.

 Everyone is wobbly, everyone is going to have a meltdown at some point. Understand that if someone is angry or aggressive, then they are also just scared. And eat more cake. Cake makes everything better.

So, there we go. Hopefully a bit less BEAR!!. Keep calm and carry on.

Thanks Imogen for that advice.

This gospel reading today is the powerful and moving tale of the death of Lazarus. There is two things I want to look at. One is the reaction of Martha and Mary to grief and how different personalities react differently. The second thing I want to look at is where is Jesus in all this?

Martha and Mary are two sisters and their brother Lazarus is ill. They call for Jesus to come but he delays, during which time Lazarus dies. When Jesus does turn up the two sisters have different reactions. Martha comes rushing out to Jesus and confronts him:

**21**‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’

We have no idea about the tone in which Martha said this. The Bible lets us speculate. I can imagine Martha being a bit upset and angry.

In Luke’s gospel (10.38-42) there is a story of how Jesus turns up at Martha and Marys house Martha opens up the home to Jesus and gets distracted by all the preparations that are needed for the visitor. Her sister Mary just sits at Jesus feet listening to what he had to say. So, Martha gets angry and blurts out ‘Lord don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work all by myself? Tell her to help me? Jesus tells her to calm down and that at this moment in time Mary has chosen what is better.

Just from that little episode and this story of the death of her brother we can speculate that Martha is quite an outspoken practical activist type of person. The type of person who wants to be busy, doing something practical but then gets resentful when they see other people sat on their backsides. They think that what they are doing is the most important thing and berate those who don’t share their outlook.

Mary however in both these gospel stories comes across as more of a thinker, reflecting deeply on events and conversations. A bit of an introvert perhaps, someone who keeps their thoughts and feelings to themselves and is not forthcoming. They are hard to read.

In the story of Lazarus while Martha comes out to confront Jesus and gives him what for, Mary is reluctant to meet Jesus until she is forced to by her sister. Mary falls at Jesus feet weeping. She says: ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

she doesn’t add any statement of faith unlike her sister Martha who said: ‘But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’ Again, its speculation but Mary seems to be consumed with disappointment, even resentment and bitterness that Jesus has let her down.

They say you have to watch out for the quiet ones. The extroverts are all on show you know what they are feeling and thinking because they tell you, and they often tell you to help themselves process what they are actually thinking and feeling. The introverts are mulling on those thoughts and feelings in private and then pow – at some point it comes out and may take you by surprise.

In conflict Martha blows out. She fronts up with the anger but at least you know where you are with her. Jesus confronts her and calls for faith: Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26**and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

**27**‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

Mary suppresses her anger until she is forced into a corner and then it explodes.

We are all different. There are strength and weakness to all those approaches so its not a competition. But difficult times call for understanding and compassion to each of us as we help each other through these anxious days. So, I hope you can appreciate the differences we have as children of God reflecting the diversity of God’s creation.

But look at Jesus in this story.

Martha and Mary are special to Jesus. Yet when he hears of Lazarus’ illness, he stays where he is, in a place of safety (John 10.31-40). He has already sensed danger from Jerusalem (7.1-10). As then, he changes his mind, but by the time he arrives it is too late.

John 11 can be read as a parable by those who want to know where Jesus is when life falls apart. Like the earlier story in 4.46-54, about the Royal official whose son was gravely ill, it suggests that he is present even in his absence. We can imagine him carrying his concern for the Bethany family from the moment he hears about his dear friend’s illness, even though he is not able to act immediately out of concern for safety. Jesus’ faith carries him through the risks and dangers of the journey to Bethany and into the place of loss and death (vv.4,9-15,25), and the words he shouts into Lazarus’ tomb ‘Lazarus Come Out!’, are creative and life-giving. If Jesus brings life in these circumstances, how much more is the crucified and exalted Lord the ground of hope in the face of every anxiety and variety of death.

Yet there can be no mistaking Jesus’ humanity here. He weighs up whether he should travel to Bethany. He is worried about his own and his disciples’ safety. He is deeply moved by the sisters’ disappointment, anger and grief. He challenges Martha and she responds. But he takes a different response to Mary’s bitterness and resentment. He doesn’t rebuke her, nor challenge her. He lets her talk. He listens nonjudgmentally. He weeps with her. Such compassion and love.

Have you had conversations with people who say, ‘I used to believe but…’?

Then they tell of an experience of tragedy, bereavement or injustice. They’ve asked: ‘Where was God?’ and ‘Why weren’t our prayers answered?’ How might you respond? Might a comforting hug or an encouraging silence be better than seeking an explanation? Those who are hurting need to know that you have heard them.

Jesus wept. The shortest verse in the Bible yet the most moving and arguably the most powerful verse. God in Christ weeps with us in our suffering and anxiety at this time. But God also weeps for a broken and suffering world whether it is coronavirus, poverty, injustice, abuse, violence or hatred. This is not a God who causes suffering, but a God who weeps with us in the suffering.

We are led to believe that the next couple of weeks could see the peak of the fatalities due to coronavirus in this country and we are preparing ourselves for the worst hoping that it may not be as bad as we fear. But many more will die. Our hearts and prayers go out to those having to have funerals at this time when only main relatives can gather at a graveside or at the crematorium for the committal of loved ones.

This week an Italian priest who gave a respirator to a younger coronavirus patient he did not know has died of the disease.

Father Giuseppe Berardelli, 72, died in hospital in Lovere, Bergamo - one of the worst-hit cities in Italy. He was the main priest in the town of Casnigo.

According to the hospital, he refused to use a respirator his parishioners had bought for him - choosing to give it to a younger patient, instead.

Residents of Casnigo were reported to have applauded from their windows and balconies as the coffin was taken for burial. There was no funeral.

At least 50 priests have reportedly been killed by coronavirus in Italy.

On Tuesday, Pope Francis led a prayer for the deceased doctors and priests, "thanking God for their heroic example in serving those who were sick". Greater love has no one than this that they lay down their lives for others (John 15.13)

On Thursday there was a clap for our carers. I knew about it but had not kept track of time as we were having a family meal. I heard this commotion from outside and thought ‘what is that racket?’ Then realized what it was. We all went out to clap those on the frontline and thank them for their work.

As we approach Easter we still celebrate and claim the game changing victory of Jesus, the resurrection and the life.

As someone who conducts funerals, I look over a coffin and quote St Paul’s words from his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 15:

Where, O death, is your victory?
    Where, O death, is your sting?’[[i](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28774i)]

. **57**But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I couldn’t do funerals if I didn’t believe that death does not have the last word; that I can proclaim over a coffin that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in him will live, even though they die; **26**and whoever lives by believing in him will never die.

Do you believe this?’ Jesus asked Martha.

 Do you like Marth respond by saying: **7**‘Yes, Lord,’ ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. Or do you respond like Mary knowing in her heart that Jesus is Lord yet not expressing it?’

The Jesus who weeps with us is the Jesus who is our hope for life, for death, for life beyond death.

**Prayers of intercession**

Prayer

To all those who are alone and feel isolated from community:
Lord be a companion and friend.

To children who can’t play with their friends and whose days lack structure:
Lord be a companion and friend.

To those who have the virus and those who are concerned about loved ones:
Lord bring healing and comfort.

To those who grieve for loved ones who have died:
Lord bring healing and comfort.

To decision makers and all in authority:
Lord give wisdom and compassion.

To neighbours and all who seek to help others:
Lord give wisdom and compassion.

For those who work in the health service:
Lord we give thanks and ask your blessing.

For those who care for us and make us smile:
Lord we give thanks and ask your blessing.

In the name of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life.
Amen

*Stuart Wild is a minister in the Bolton and Rochdale Methodist District.*



**An active way into prayer**

Give out teardrop shapes, cut from thin or tissue paper. Invite people to think of a person or a place that weeps with sadness and needs fresh hope and God’s resurrection power. Be still and quiet for a few moments, holding your teardrops before God.
Then say together:

**Thank you, Lord,**
**that you weep with us as you wept with Mary and Martha.**
**Comfort us as we comfort others.**
**Bring restored hope to those we hold up before you today.**
**May they know your resurrection power.**
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

*Invite everyone to put their hands on each other’s shoulders (to represent being held by God), or more simply hold hands.*
When we are sad, God:
**Hold us in your arms** *(squeeze gently)*.
When we are crying, God:
**Hold us in your arms.**
When we have to wait, God:
**Hold us in your arms.**
When we wonder where you are, God:
**Hold us in your arms.**
When we feel hurt and let down, God:
**Hold us in your arms.**
When we want to give up, God:
**Hold us in your arms.**
Hold us, O God, and never let go.
**Amen.**



HYMN:

There is a redeemer
Jesus, God's own Son
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Holy One

Jesus my redeemer
Name above all names
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Oh, for sinners slain

Thank you, oh my father
For giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on Earth is done

When I stand in Glory
I will see His face
And there I'll serve my King forever
In that Holy Place

Thank you, oh my father
For giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on Earth is done

**A sending out prayer**

May we share in Christ’s sufferings

and know the power of his resurrection

and may the blessing of God

Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us always

Amen.