**26th March 2023**

**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.

**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 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.

Blind us by your grace. May we know we are loved and held by you.

**Amen.**

**Bible Reading John 11.17-44**

**Sermon**

Life and death are usually two times in life when we are jolted out of our sleep walking through life and may consider those big questions: why are we here and where are we going? What is the point or meaning of life.

When you see the face of a newborn baby you can’t but be amazed at the gift of life. The wow, the wonder of it all. Where does life come from? Why is there something instead of nothing?

Then at the end of life, the painful moments of decline and suffering and death, the ‘ows’ of life, the hard times, is there any hope, is there any point, what happens next after death.

A couple of years ago there was an advertising campaign on public transport networks aimed at encouraging people of all faiths and none to think about and engage in prayer. One advert said ‘*My heart, it still keeps beating. But what for? Show me how to measure my life in something other than years?’*

This baptism of Ernie, we give thanks for new life and place it in the context of believing we have a Creator, a God who loves us, even before we may come to love God – or even if we spend our lives ignoring God or disbelieving in God.

Christians believe that behind all things is God, not some vague impersonal force, or spirit, but personal who we believe we have seen in the form of a man, Jesus, who showed us what God is like. That God loves us.

Someone who is with us through life: its joys and its sorrows and who offers us hope and an eternal destiny.

This gospel reading today is the powerful and moving tale of the death of Lazarus. The other end of life to the birth of a child.

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 angry and upset.

While Martha comes out to confront Jesus and gives him what for, Mary her sister, 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.

Maybe you’ve felt let down by God. Angry? Bitter?

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 meanwhile 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 look at Jesus in this story.

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?

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.

Three years ago to the day, as Covid raged through the world 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 were reportedly killed by coronavirus in Italy.

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.

Belonging to church is helping each other in our relationship to God, to find hope and meaning in life and to make a difference. It is great support to know others support you and are there for you. Its great to learn wisdom from each other and to encourage each other to be open to the mystery of life. Through prayer, bible study, worship, service we can feel closer to God and hear God’s word to us.

When my dad was dying I remember people in church praying for me and for him. It was a great comfort. Through being part of church, I’d learnt different ways of praying and being open to God. I prayed the night before he died in despair ‘what am I going to do without him Lord?’ I sensed God saying to me ‘He’s safe in my hands’.

The next day we were called to the hospital to his bedside. It was agony watching my dad try and catch his breath, writhing in the end as he neared the end of his life. We took turns to do vigil by his bedside. The last thing he said to me as I held his hand was ‘I’m safe in God’s hand’.

Which was remarkable for two reasons.

One my dad never talked about faith. In his mind real men don’t talk about such deep and personal things. Religion was for weak people and women.

Secondly, of course, it was the exact words I believed God gave me the night before.

It was the last words my dad spoke to me and has been a source of great comfort ever since, despite the trauma of his death.

He’s got the whole world in his hands.

Do you believe this?’ Jesus asked Martha in the story about Lazarus.

It changes your life if you do.

**Prayers of intercession**

God of comfort and peace, we place in your tender care those who mourn the death of a loved one, those where the passing is recent, those for whom it is a time of anniversary and those for whom the pain never seems to get any better. May your love strengthen and support them.

Comfort those who mourn,
**and fill them with your peace**

God of yesterday and today, we pray for those who are devastated by their current situations. We remember the people of cities in Ukraine that have been destroyed in the war there; the people of Syria and Turkey who lost homes and livelihoods in the recent earthquake; those who have lost jobs because of the current economic situation. May your wisdom encourage and guide them.

Comfort those who mourn,
**and fill them with your peace**

God of power and love, we hold before you our planet. You are at the heart of creation and we are destroying the beautiful world that you have made. Give strength and wisdom to those offering advice and those making decisions concerning the changes that are happening to our planet. May our actions be in time to preserve what you created.

Comfort those who mourn,
**and fill them with your peace**

God of today and tomorrow. Your grace is eternal and knows no ending. We pray for those who have lost hope as a result of the cost of living crisis; those who are fearful of what the future holds; those who do not know how they will pay for food or heating. We pray for those awaiting test results who are worried that they will receive bad news and do not know how they will cope. May the promise of new life enable them to face tomorrow.

Comfort those who mourn,
**and fill them with your peace**

May your love bring comfort and strength and peace to all those who need it for whatever reason. In silence we name before you any about whom we are especially concerned at this time.

*Silence*

Hear our prayer, Gracious God. For we offer it in the name of our Saviour Jesus and for his sake.
**Amen.**



**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.**

**May we be drawn closer to you to know your presence and power in our lives**
**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.**

**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.