

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 22 March 2026 - The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Ezekiel 37. 1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

Homily

Today's homily has been written by Canon Jan Payne, LLM, 5folds Benefice

Today we have arrived at the 5th Sunday in Lent and our time of Lenten reflection and study is almost over. Today, Passiontide begins and we turn our faces to begin the slow journey to Jerusalem, with the triumphant entry of Jesus marked next week on Palm Sunday and then, through Holy Week to Easter itself. As we do so, our Gospel invites us once again to engage with the story of the raising of Jesus's friend, Lazarus, from the dead.

The raising of Lazarus is only found in the Gospel of John and, at its heart we find one of the great "I am" statements from Jesus that describe who he is. "I am the resurrection and the life" (v25). Yet this is also a very human story of bereavement, sadness and grief but equally of perhaps confusion, maybe irritation but, finally, of good news and hope. This passage also includes, in English translation, the shortest sentence in the Bible, "Jesus wept". It is certainly a key passage. It is the seventh and final miracle, or "sign", recorded in the Gospel of John, and it serves as a means too for the plot to kill Jesus to gain momentum.

We know from earlier chapters that Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were close friends of Jesus and it is they who send word to Jesus, initially, that Lazarus is sick. Given their close friendship and the number of occasions on which the Gospels have recounted Jesus healing the sick, it is, perhaps, surprising that Jesus doesn't just get going to Bethany immediately to see what he can do. Most of us faced with a close relative or friend being seriously ill, potentially dying, will not wait around too long if we want to see them.

Yet Jesus waits.... We may ask ourselves why? After all, he appears to have real affection for this family. Perhaps it is simply that had he gone immediately, he would have arrived when Lazarus was still living and any recovery would simply have been seen as another act of healing. By waiting for death to occur, it becomes more final and, perhaps even dramatic.

Jesus explains that it is for God's glory that the sickness will not end in death – and he, Jesus, will also be glorified through it. In other words, death will not have the last word after all.

After two days of waiting Jesus tells his disciples that now they will go to Bethany and for a while, they assume Jesus telling them that Lazarus has “fallen asleep”, simply means just that and he will therefore get better. Of course, that is not what Jesus means – he is going to wake Lazarus from death, nothing more and nothing less.

On arrival Jesus finds that Lazarus has been in his tomb for four days and Martha comes out to meet him. This is the same Martha who is criticised for complaining when Mary doesn't help her with the housework but instead sits and listens to Jesus. In her grief, Martha makes it very clear to Jesus that if he'd been there at the relevant time, Lazarus would not have died. It is a simple statement of faith.

Writing on this passage, Mark Nam observes, “Initially, Martha has faith to believe that Lazarus will be raised ‘at the last day’, referring to the Jewish understanding of a dead person being raised in the future. Jesus responds by saying, saying, ‘I am the resurrection and the life’, thereby re-orientating Martha's focus from a conceptual belief in resurrection on the last day, to a personal trust in him who provides it in the present.”

“Do you believe this?”, asks Jesus. “Yes, Lord” she says, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world”. Such a profound statement, simple yet so rich, accepting and prophetic. Martha has recognised that resurrection is not simply an end of time event, it is the person standing before her.

Then Mary arrives – the ever faithful one who has sat at Jesus's feet to hear his every word and teaching. She follows her sister in telling Jesus that Lazarus would not have died if he'd been there and she weeps. The crowd she's brought with her weeps and then we are told, deeply moved in spirit and troubled, Jesus also weeps. It is, perhaps both humbling and comforting that confronted by this outpouring of human grief and emotion, God's son also weeps. God doesn't distance himself from us in our grief at times of death, he enters into it and meets us there.

Then come the practicalities. Jesus asks for the stone to be taken away from the door to the tomb. Mary reminds him that after four days, there will be the smell of death from the

tomb. Jesus reminds her that he had told her if she believed in him, then she would see the glory of God. All seems lost but, nonetheless, the stone is removed and Jesus prays aloud and commands Lazarus to come out – and he does, still wrapped in his grave clothes. Jesus orders that they be removed and he be let go.

It is as if Jesus is inviting his disciples to participate in this miracle by helping free Lazarus from the cloth that binds him. That freedom is also offered to us as we place our faith in the resurrection of Christ and in that we have hope beyond the grave, and beyond whatever situation is holding or binding us up.

The raising of Lazarus is a miracle for his family but it is also a sign, one that points us forward to another tomb and another day when the crucified Son of God will, himself, rise from death. It is perhaps a little curious that John does not go on to record what happened to Lazarus after this but perhaps, with an even greater story to tell, he felt no need? There is evidence that Lazarus went on to live for several years afterwards, until his final death.

What we can hold to is that Jesus will win over death and that carried him through from Good Friday to Easter. That also involved some waiting for those who had been so faithful to him. Perhaps, therefore, we shouldn't be alarmed when we have to wait when answers are not immediate. May we learn to trust God in our waiting, in times of difficulty, and, ultimately, in holding fast to the truth that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Amen

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how _____ felt or I wonder how _____ felt when _____ happened?
- I wonder how you feel about _____?
- I wonder where you are in this story?

- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what the [tree, pearl, coin] could really be?
- I wonder why _____ said _____?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

Almighty God, at a time when our world seems to be falling into ever deepening crisis, with war between nations, natural disasters, violence within towns and cities across the globe, sectarian hatred and more, we cry out to you in lament at the turmoil, sadness and grief we see around us. We pray most urgently for the coming of peace, your peace which passes all understanding, that we may live in a more caring world that respects the created order you have made. We lift to you the governments and leaders of the world that they may care for the people of their nation with wisdom and integrity.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray for your Church. We give thanks for the ministry of Bishop Dagmar, Acting Bishop of Ely, as she prepares to leave the diocese in May to move to Edinburgh, and for Bishop Sarah as she moves from Durham to be with us. Bless them both we pray as they take on new responsibilities and get to know the teams around them and the churches and people they care for.

We pray for our own Church(es) and all who minister here [*you may care to name them*]. As we draw ever closer to Holy Week and Easter, give them understanding and energy to share again the truth of the Gospel story of resurrection.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Comforting God, surround any who suffer in body, mind or spirit at this time, or are under the weight of financial debt or homelessness. We give thanks for all the agencies and emergency services that offer care, for our local GP surgery, pharmacy and hospitals. Be close, we pray, to all in need that, as with Mary and Martha, they may know your healing presence in their lives. [*you may care to name them if you have permission to do so publicly*].

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Loving God, your Son taught us that he is the resurrection and the life. We pray for all who are drawing ever closer to death at this time and those who watch and wait with the dying. [*you may care to name them if you have permission to do so publicly*]. May they find strength in the knowledge that earthly death is not the end but the opening of a door to a new beginning.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Finally, we pray for ourselves – for our individual needs and what is uppermost in our minds at this time.

A short moment of silence may be kept

Heavenly Father, guide my every thought, word, and action. Help me to be present, to love well, and to trust you fully. Give me peace in uncertainty and strength for whatever I face. I invite you into every moment of my life,

Merciful Father, accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

Suggested hymns/songs

Breathe on me, breath of God;

Dear Lord and Father of mankind

Father hear the prayer we offer

From heaven you came helpless babe (The Servant King)

I heard the voice of Jesus say;

Jesus is Lord, the universe declares it

Morning has broken;

O breath of life come sweeping through us

Praise to the holiest in the height

Take my life and let it be

There's a wideness in God's mercy

Activities to accompany the service

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@lectionary resource)