**Southwell Minster**

**The Fifth Sunday of Lent, Passion Sunday**

**29 March 2020**

**Pre-recorded at home and broadcast on YouTube for website transmission**

*Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11: 1-45*

*Prayer:*

Let me first acknowledge with you how strange this is! Let me also say that mentally, as I am speaking, I will be panning around the nave and quire thinking of all of you who would usually be at worship today. Please know you are in my prayers and thoughts, and please keep me in yours.

But now I’m at home, in the study upstairs overlooking the east end of the Minster, and behind me is a very special picture. It was a gift from a missionary doctor friend in Uganda, painted on waxed canvas. In previous homes, I’ve hung in in my dining room. It’s the Last Supper, of course, and in my study in The Residence it’s a focus of prayer for the Cathedral community, although separated today, gathered and fed and strengthened by Jesus. I love the silhouette of the disciples, looking up, expectant and I think joyful in their posture…the wonderful African expression of delight in community, sharing food and drink and just BEING together.

Like many of you, I’ve been grateful that it’s at least Spring – the first day of BST today. Dawn chorus’ symphony heard clearer because of little passing traffic; the greening of trees and shrubs, longer daylight, God’s creation we’ve been talking about caring for in our Lent focus, is busy healing itself because human activity has slowed down abruptly and we’re noticing it’s beauty mor, because we’re less busy.

And, I’m so grateful also that it’s Lent, and today the move into Passiontide, because its themes – challenging and uncomfortable as they are, speak deeply into our lived experience just now.

Lent urges solitude (perhaps a more positive word that self-isolation) because when alone our minds can be uncluttered and turn to prayer. That is NOT to say it’s easy for most of us because we made to be sociable and in relationship. Lent invites us to examine our priorities and face head on our cravings, those things that distract us and may – if left unchecked – lead to addiction and dependency. And so, to let go for a short while is liberating but more importantly helps us identify with Christ in the wilderness, totally dependent on the Father.

But Lent, and more sharply Passiontide, faces us with death before we’re turned to life – the life of Easter faith.

And so today the readings hold nothing back. The dramatic valley of dry bones in Ezekiel’s prophecy, it’s powerful imagery of being cut off, separated, parched and hope-less. Until – and we may smile with the thought of this …the sound of rattling of bones clashing together, sinews, flesh and skin noisily rushing around …and finally breath. God’s breath, the same breath breathed over the lifeless void before creation in Genesis …the breath that breathes life again. The breath of the Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that Jesus breathes into his disciples in ‘lockdown’ in the Upper room on Easter day – but we let’s not move ahead too quickly.

Hold the image of God’s life, renewing and restoring Israel from exile. God will for his creation is LIFE, ‘Saying yes to life’ the title of Ruth Valerio’s Lent book which for now we have had had put to one side.

And now to the gospel reading, the longest single story in John’s gospel apart from the passion narrative. So much to notice here – do read and re-read it. Here are some brief pointers.

Notice first v 1 A certain man was ill. And the unusually he is named. Lazarus of Bethany. Its significant that we’re told… Lazarus is the Greek version here means ‘God is my help’ while Bethany – a village just two miles from Jerusalem means ‘house of affliction’. We know Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are friends – disciples of Jesus, and their home is open always to Jesus. But Jesus is two days journey away and a message is sent.

Notice they simply tell Jesus the problem. ‘Lazarus is ill’. I wonder if that might help us to know how to pray in the current crisis – not to feel we need to give God the instructions what to do or how to do it. Just say in prayer …our world, every part is ill, in fear, shaken. People are sick and suffering. Can we be patient and find courage, even when God *appears* to be doing nothing?

Second, helpful for us now, Jesus appears willing to delay intervention. It’s almost callous – why did he delay a further two days? Well…we know the end of the story; this is miracle of raising a dead Lazarus not healing a sick Lazarus. We’re back to the mystery of God’s timing; the reoccurring these in John’s gospel abut Jesus’ timing – ‘the hour’; not a linear timeline but a ‘Kairos’ moment – THE time.

Lastly – v. 35. The shortness of this verse ‘Jesus began to weep’. The emotion in the Greek word is stronger than ‘weeping’ – it’s deep shuddering, shaking with the emotions of grief and pain. This is *passion*… Jesus experiencing the depth of our human emotion, the human condition at its rawest in love and sorrow.

And so, Lazarus is summoned from his tomb …and again almost comically, the word conjures up him ‘shuffling’, all caught up in the graveclothes, new life being unravelled, released around him.

So, this Passiontide we are to travel with Jesus to his passion and death on the cross. In our limitation and confinement, we are to look for signs of life and renewal.

For this will come …and lest we make this too personal …this cry is for our world, thinking of those desperate places of poverty and need, remembering millions facing the same threat as us but with few resources and help; and we think also of all those on the frontline of giving care, who’re showing compassion, bearing so much death and pain.

A prayer as we close:

*Lord, help us to hope in you for the future and open our lives to you here and now*.

***Dean Nicola Sullivan***