

## Fifth Sunday of Lent

### Fifth Sunday of Lent – 29 March 2020

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Angus Mathieson, Interim Head of Faith Nurture, for his thoughts on the fifth Sunday of Lent.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

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## Introduction

The Ezekiel passage, the Gospel story, the Psalm and the Epistle, remind us and future generations that God not only gives life, but restores life – that death will not have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken away.

Additionally, in Year A, the lectionary assigns John as the Gospel reading for four out of the five Sundays in Lent, supplying interpreters and congregations with Johannine narrative.

All the readings begin with a dark period then move to a different conclusion – inspiring life, and starting afresh, looking ahead to the events of Holy Week and Easter. Whether it's the dry bones taking on life; the Psalmist praising God, who will redeem Israel; Lazarus being raised from the dead; or the journey outlined in Romans, from flesh to spirit.

George Burns is quoted as saying – “Where the world places a period, God introduces a comma.” – Suffering does not have the last word.

### [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

Ezekiel is thought to have lived after the fall of Jerusalem, around 593-563 BC.

The people of Israel were in exile, living with some limited freedoms, but on the whole, their existence has to be seen against a background of disaster and a crisis of faith; the Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors, and had been banished. The Temple had been destroyed; the holy city sacked; and the soul of the people of Israel had withered on the vine. They recognise their plight at v.11: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

The story is one of a valley of dry bones. If you can imagine it, it would be like something out of an Indiana Jones film – struggling through to a hidden valley, covered with bones and skulls lying in chaos, almost as far as the eye can see. Or, alternatively, a more contemporary metaphor might be a Zombie movie! The curiosity of looking out on a landscape full of dry bones, in hot, arid, sunshine, in eerie silence, doesn't exactly inspire the listener to imagine new possibilities: the vision that things may turn out differently, and, as we wrestle with what may be a familiar story, we look for new learnings, and wonder about dryness and exile in our own lives.

Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest, so even though the bones are stripped, and completely dried out, the reader has to remember all the ritual prohibitions of being near

death. A whole range of ritual prohibitions existed to prevent priests going near human corpses, so going into this valley was no small feat.

The story begins in silence, with Ezekiel being led to this valley, and then becomes a word event. It is in response to the words of Ezekiel that the bones take on flesh and life; it is in response to Ezekiel's words that the bones rattle, that bodies begin to breathe, and noise, beyond the dialogue of Ezekiel and the Lord, occurs

Ezekiel is the smooth diplomat in his interaction with God and is almost coy in his utterances. God says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" and Ezekiel responds – recognising God's place – saying, "O Lord God you know". It is then that Ezekiel prophesies to the bones; then to the breath; and then God explains.

The last verses are about God's prophesy to the people of Israel; about the great return, eventually, from exile. God explains that these bones are the whole house of Israel, and the prophesy is made that the people will return to Israel: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil" (v.14).

## [Psalm 130](#)

A song of ascents, beginning with the profound words, "Out of the depths I cry to you."

In some of the commentaries, it carries the title, 'A pilgrim's song.' It would have been a song of the pilgrim travelling to Jerusalem. It's worth reminding ourselves that all journeys to Jerusalem start from the depths, with Jerusalem set on the hilltop.

The Psalm opens with the author addressing God, in the most personal terms, pouring out their heart to God, (vv1-3) and then recognising that with God there is the forgiveness so desperately needed (v.4). This is someone whose life is completely out of kilter, where everything is upset and chaotic. Depending on how you read the Psalms, this is written by someone with a completely pessimistic view of the world, or, on the other hand, by someone who has a good realistic sense of the human condition, of how the world is; even a world with God at its heart. Here is someone who knows what it is to be separated or distant from God.

And then the passage transitions, away from the personal, moving into a confident statement which is full of hope; not a facile optimism, but a conviction that with God there is a welcome, steadfast and everlasting love, and the promise of life itself, after the waiting (v7ff).

The Psalms in general, and this one in particular, do not gloss over the difficulties and frustrations of life; the writer is well aware of what it is like to be broken, to be a wounded healer, and to wait through the long watches of the night. Perhaps the challenge to the reader is to see that forgiveness is central to the way that God is known.

This Psalm is a useful corrective to the idea that with enough effort; with the right mental attitude; all our problems can be solved. The reality is that when we are in the depths, we are in a place which we cannot get out of by our own efforts, and we turn to God, and to the wider community which we call the Church, as the Psalmist does in this move from individual lament and complaint, to recognising God's love.

### **Romans 8:6-11**

These short verses talk about life in the Spirit, as opposed to life in the flesh, and are typical of Paul setting different ideas in opposition to each other.

The recipients of this letter are a minority, in the capital of the Roman Empire; they would have been living in the poorest accommodation. Against that background, these verses are a wonderful affirmation of, and an orientation to, life. The verses point the reader to an eternal power, available to the believer, in his or her place in time and space. Life in the spirit is not about an ethereal other-worldliness, but is about how we live our lives as physical incarnate bodies. It challenges us about how we use our energy; how we shop; how we care for God's earth; and how we care for our neighbours. When the Spirit lives in us, our lives become expressions of God's grace; when we live in the flesh, our lives deny God's sustaining grace, and suggest that we are lords of our own lives, with no need to take heed of others. Flesh, if you like, is shorthand for a worldly life lived in service of our own needs and desires, rather than the life-giving Spirit which we have through Jesus.

The writer offers the choice – living within the rigid bounds of empire, or exodus and liberation, as God's people.

### **John 11:1-45**

Whereas the gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew prefer more indirect expressions of Jesus' divinity through parable, John's gospel surprises us with frequent and startlingly personal expressions of self-disclosure, in seven signs. Each of the seven signs, or miracles, contains some element of disclosure, and these verses are no different. This, the story of the raising

of Lazarus, is the last of the seven signs, and it prefigures the events of Holy Week, with so many similarities... a tomb near Jerusalem, and a tomb blocked by a large stone, and the question, “Where have you laid Him?” (v.34)

Jesus declares that He is the resurrection and the life; and we also see His humanity, in the shortest verse in the Bible; Jesus wept. (v.35, NRSV He began to weep.) The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead only occurs in John’s Gospel. There is no mention of it in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

And as in Psalm 130, there’s waiting; Jesus gets the message that Lazarus is unwell... but as with the other signs, He takes His time, and stays where He is a further two days (v.6). The passage is a slow one; the message comes to Jesus, He stays where He is, then He talks about going to Judea, and the Disciples try to talk Him out of that, given their previous experiences.

We journey with Martha as she seeks out Jesus (v.20); we rest with Mary as she grieves over her loss (v.20 and v.32); and we share in the community’s grief and bewilderment as they gather around the tomb (v.38). The King James Version puts it succinctly at v.39 – the body has been lying for four days, and the KJV says, “He stinketh.”

While it gets headline billing as the story about the raising of Lazarus from the dead, in this village of Bethany, now located beyond the separation wall outside Jerusalem, and named after Lazarus in its contemporary Arabic name, it’s a much richer passage. It’s about that deliverance from death to life, yes, but it’s also about the one who brings that resurrection about; and it’s about the reaction of people to the events related in this passage. Martha and Mary both state, independently of each other, that if Jesus had been there, then Lazarus wouldn’t have died.

And into that situation, into their bewilderment, and faltering understanding, Jesus brings Himself. He brings clarity, and the light of the world will bring an end to their stumbling in the dark. His voice calls Lazarus forth from the grave, and calls us today.

## Sermon ideas

Picking up themes from both Ezekiel, and John, we could ask questions about where life is to be found; where are the dry bones in today’s world, and where are the people who need care, and attention? Who are the exiles oppressed by military power, singing the Lord’s song in a strange land and needing to hear God’s word and know God’s love; how do these verses speak to the New Scots, and to refugees around the world? How do we share the

unqualified good news of God's grace, God's forgiveness, with those who consider themselves dead? How do we bring comfort and meaning, or hope, to those suffering from the physical toll of climate change, of genocide, of poverty?

Equally, Jesus tells the people around the grave to unbind the grave wrappings from Lazarus, and to let him go. What is it that we can learn, from Ezekiel's prophesying, and what is Jesus calling us to do, as we recognise his true identity? There is a calling out of God's people to be different; to do something unusual and different; and to live differently. How can we proclaim the vanished power of the usual reign... or to quote part of Mary Oliver's poem, *The Summer Day*:

*"Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?"*

Ezekiel, Psalm 130, and the Gospel passage are all passages which ask us to be patient, and yet are passages which challenge us. How do we cope with waiting; with leaving space for God, with being expectant, even when there are little or no signs of God? Do we trust in the promises that God will forgive; that God's steadfast love lasts for ever? Waiting is particularly hard for us in this time of Lent... can we journey alongside Jesus, can we stay awake?

When have we felt as though we were wading through a valley of dry bones, shouting to God from the depths? How has God been present, or not present in those times... is our personal spiritual life dry, or abundant, or somewhere in between? What do we learn, and how do we grow out of, and from, the difficult and hard paths we sometimes find ourselves walking along? How do we unbind ourselves, removing the grave clothes of self-doubt, isolation, and marginalisation?

Who does God speak to us through; how do we discern God's voice and know God's love? What are the words we need to hear for our lives today, and how do we open ourselves to the living breath of God's Spirit, and the one who proclaims "I am the resurrection and the life"? How do we break out of the familiar and the trusted, to do a new thing?

### **Doing something different in the sermon...**

Sometimes I open up opportunity for people to have some dialogue with their neighbours in the sermon. For the Gospel passage, it would be around exploring when people have delayed responding, have chosen not to make a knee-jerk reaction, and whether that's worked out, and what people around them have felt or thought about that.

Sometimes equally the question is whether people have only seen God's hand a long time after the event..... what was the event? How did they feel? This is particularly apposite for the Psalm reading.

Or when have folk felt despair... did things change? How good are we at remembering the words, "And this too will pass"?

And an image... stark though it may be, can be found at this link:

<https://knowingscripture.com/articles/dry-bones-and-the-resurrection-of-the-dead-ezekiel-37-1-14>

## Prayers

My normal approach when thinking about prayers is to try and immerse myself in the texts. I do normally follow the Lectionary; I would read the texts early or mid-week, and be clear about the possibilities of using responsive prayers, or litanies. I also try, on Sunday mornings, to scan news headlines, or to listen to news on the radio. Karl Barth is reputed to have said we should pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand; when I went to Google to find out when this was, it turns out that the actual quote is: *"Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."* *Time Magazine, 1966*

### Prayers of approach

Out of the depths, we cry to You, O God.  
Hear our voices, and be with Your people  
as we gather in worship in this time and this place.  
Come through Your Spirit, living God, and partner with us;  
lead us to paths of steadfast love;  
lead us to new life;  
and lead the world to the peace which You offer.

Breath through us;  
help us to hear Your words, and to become even more alive,  
filled with Your Spirit,  
and help us to look for the new, the unexpected,  
and to dream beyond our boundaries,  
striving towards a new creation as Your people.  
Be with us in this gathering space;  
renew us; fill us; and open our hearts to Your presence,

for Jesus' sake.

AMEN

### **Thanksgiving**

We thank You for all Your gifts, loving God;  
source of every good thing.

We praise You for Your mercies,  
new every morning, and renewed in the evening.

We thank You, God, for bringing us together as Your people,  
inspiring us through Your Spirit;  
giving us ears to hear the words of the prophets,  
and voices to carry the message of Your continuing presence with us.

We thank You for people around us,  
caring, inspiring, and challenging;  
may we rejoice in their example and follow You more closely.

For Your love;  
Your persistent reminder that You will not let us go;  
Your people, flesh and bone, the body of Christ,  
we praise You and give You thanks.

We remember and give thanks for the great cloud of witnesses,  
those who have gone before us in the faith,  
those who have spoken Your word  
and lived Your love, that we may know You;  
those we have known personally, our family and friends, no longer present on earth  
but in Your closer company,  
those we have not known  
whose lives and words inspire us even now.

In gratitude we offer this and all our prayers,  
in, and through, Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN

### **Confession**

We are in Your presence, Lord,  
knowing that without You we can do nothing;  
without the breath of God,

we are dry bones;  
without the word of God,  
we have stumbled and fallen;  
without being part of God's people,  
we have put ourselves above contradiction,  
and lived as though we only had ourselves to answer to.

We see that the world is not as it could be,  
and we confess the part we have played;  
things we have done which have been hurtful;  
things left undone,  
and choices which have been unwise or worse.

We have failed to see You in our neighbour;  
we have misunderstood,  
and we have not recognised Your signs,  
Your work in the world through so many surprising partners;  
Forgive us God;  
and hear us now in the silence as we make our own private prayers of confession,  
speaking those things which can only be offered in quietness.

*SILENCE*

By Your love,  
shown in Christ,  
present with us through Your Spirit,  
take away from us what we need carry no longer,  
and in the days which lie ahead,  
give us what we need  
to know You more clearly,  
to love You more dearly  
and to follow You more closely;  
AMEN

### **Intercessions**

We recognise that all is not well with the world;  
and so we offer our prayers for church, world, and people.

For Your church;

that it may experience the new life which You offer through Your Holy Spirit;  
that it may be a welcoming and challenging place,  
witnessing to God's love in the world.

For the world;  
we pray for people who suddenly find themselves in unexpected places.

we pray for places afflicted by climate change...  
places of dryness;  
where forest and bush fires threaten life and limb;  
where floods mean people have to eke out a fragile existence in floating shanty towns or  
low-lying islands.

For those who have lost everything, and find themselves suddenly homeless and stateless.  
Trail wide the hem of Your garment;

**All: Bring healing, bring peace**

We remember those who wait;  
for medical results,  
for news about jobs or benefits;  
those who struggle in the long watches of the night,  
waiting until morning light dawns.

Trail wide the hem of Your garment;

**All: Bring healing, bring peace**

We pray for those who are ill, at home or in hospital;  
those who care for them;  
family members, friends, care assistants, nurses and doctors;  
for those who are in mourning, remembering the loss of someone close,  
suddenly reminded by everyday incidents of someone no longer there.

Trail wide the hem of Your garment;

**All: Bring healing, bring peace**

And breathe new life into Your people, living God,  
as we approach Easter.

May we journey towards Jerusalem,  
knowing Your presence,  
leading, guiding, challenging.

AMEN

## Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

## Bible Notes

### Fish, Blood and Bone – [Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

A fond memory I have is of watching my late father working away in the garden, dressed in tweeds and with a tie—it seems a different era now. As a youngster there was something mystical about the creative potential of the garden, but nothing seemed as mysterious as the box of fertiliser in the shed that boldly declared “Fish, Blood and Bone: allpurpose plant food”. For a young boy, this was awe-inspiring stuff! How was it possible? That box of fertiliser was not just food for the garden, it was food for a young imagination revelling in the grizzly. How does death result in new life? Blood and bones as a source of nutrition for seedlings? Gardens are amazing minicreations.

It is with that same sense of awe that one approaches the imagery from Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones in the desert. It is an image of which we are all familiar, the sunbleached bones of long since scavenged fallen creatures lying scattered amidst the sand and rocks. It may also conjure up memories of the astonishing scene (for its time) of skeletons rising up from the earth, brought to life by Ray Harryhausen’s epic stop-motion animation in the 1963 film ‘Jason and the Argonauts’.

The vision Ezekiel describes is different to some of the others he experiences, for it is less about getting a vision of the reality of heaven (see Raphael’s 1518 painting ‘Ezekiel’s Vision’) and more focused on the reality of the Israelites despair in exile and the promise of God to do something about it. The desiccated bones are a reminder of the fallen Israelites who lost their lives in the Babylonian invasion, but also in their lifelessness a reminder to Ezekiel that his prophetic word over the years may as well have been to lifeless skeletons for all the response that he had received.

The story is, however, about something new happening, enlivened by the life-giving *ruach* of God, the wind of life blowing across the dried up desert landscape bringing hope. Yet this is not just God’s doing, for God enlists Ezekiel to do the work. And, as the passage continues,

Ezekiel prophesies and what had seemed dried up, lifeless, devoid of hope suddenly springs up, receives flesh and purpose. Those who had previously been cut off (verse 11) and hopeless will reunite with those who remained in Israel.

This is, then, another reflection on being an exiled people, and as such it can speak to us today about the struggles and despair of those who find themselves in exile. The imagery of Ezekiel's vision is stark, and yet we do not have to go far today to find that imagery made real in the piles of bones scattered across Niger's Sahara desert from migrants seeking a better life who have succumbed to dehydration on the journey. In October 2013 ninety-two bodies were found, mostly women and children. For those who do make it to their destination, life can still be extremely difficult. The Church of Scotland Guild is currently supporting a charity, Out of Africa into Malta, which seeks to help exiles who find themselves in the small nation of Malta.

Nurturing new life, even in times when the blood and bones of innocents litters the landscape, is extremely challenging, but, just as Ezekiel could not stand back and wait, we are similarly called to prophesy for God's justice and hope. In what ways can individuals or the congregation as a whole prophesy to the community in order to bring the life-giving Spirit of God sweeping through? How can people who feel exiled be reunited within the community?

## **Retelling For Young People**

### **Mary and Joseph**

Our teacher in school is great. She gave us a biology lesson with a box of Lego! She told us we had to build a person and give them a name, and make up a story about the person.

I built a footballer, and I called him Messi after the great Barcelona star. I told the class that Messi was the greatest player in the world and he had scored all five goals for Barcelona in the Champions league final. One with his head, one with his right foot, one with his left foot, a back healer for the fourth and a spectacular over head kick for the fifth.

My friend Jenny created a nurse who cared for all the sick people, and went out to Africa to help lots of boys and girls who were dying of starvation. She called her nurse Matilda.

Jamie made a superhero he called Skeleton Man. Skeleton man could fall apart and come together again he told the teacher, and he would become stronger than anything else on the planet, and would fight for justice and freedom wherever he was needed.

Alison created a scientist who made great discoveries, and she called her Betty, which was her sister's name, because she was a scientist and wanted to be just like her. She said that Betty found a cure for feeding all the hungry people.

Euan made a racing driver and car out of his bricks and called him Seb after his favourite racing driver Sebastian Vettel. He showed the class Seb racing around the corners at fantastic speeds and beating every other car on the planet.

Mrs McJimpsey our teacher was so pleased with all her work that she called in Miss Brown the headteacher to give a prize to the best designed person, and it was wee Allison who got the prize from the goody box.

Then Mr Lewis our school chaplain came in to see our models and he told us a story about a man called Ezekiel who helped to put a whole bunch of bones back together again just like our box of Lego. And he told us that in the story God breathed life back into these old bones, and brought hope and new life to his people, just like our Lego people had done in our class. Can you believe it! That God could bring life into old bones? Everyone in our class did, because we had seen it happen with our box of Lego men and women. Maybe there is something in this God that Mr Lewis talks to us about after all.

## Activities

### God Made Me

You will need: pictures or images of different parts of the body on individual sheets or cards.

When you show the children each card they must point to that part of the body and shout out 'God made me'. The pictures could include; eyes, ears, arms, legs, nose, head, and so on. You could develop this further by asking how these parts of the body operate: for example eyes to see, ears to hear.

### The Word

*You will need: bibles.*

Ask the young people to sit and close their eyes, and as the reading is heard create pictures in your head of what this looked like.

Read Ezekiel 37:1-4 with pauses for the pictures to be built and seen in everyone's imaginations.

### Discussion

- When you heard the reading what films, games, TV programmes did this reading bring to mind?
- Did you like the e pictures you saw in your head?

### Prayers

#### Call to Worship

In the valley of bones,  
the Lord comes to bring life.  
In the valleys of our lives,  
the Lord comes to bring life.  
Come Lord and breathe on us today,  
Inspiring us to live in your Spirit,  
and in you love.  
Inspire our worship  
as we gather in your name.

#### Responses

**Leader:** Lord of Life

**All:** **lift us out of the valley of bones.**

**Leader:** Lord of Life

**All:** **brings to life in all your abundance.**

**Leader:** Lord of Life

**All:** **breathe on us now  
and gather us in Your name,  
here in this place  
to worship you.**

#### Blessing

May the spirit go with you  
The spirit takes brokenness, dust,  
absence of life, and long time death.  
The spirit gives life, renews, it revives,  
it gives life, it causes hope, it causes joy.  
May the spirit put breath in your lungs  
and you will come to life.

## **Sending**

God breathe us back to life:  
fill and renew our souls,  
quench our thirst  
show us how to live  
and love and breathe,  
reviving bone dry lives  
so that we may show others  
how to be your people  
this day and always...

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## **Musical suggestions**

*You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).*

*You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.*

- CH4 87 or 88 – Setting of Psalm 130
- CH4 422 – “Christ is alive”
- CH4 484 – “Great God, your love has called”
- CH4 626 – “Holy Spirit, truth divine” – Picking up on living in the spirit
- CH4 595 – “O breath of life” – asking for God to be with us as we look ahead in an uncertain time
- CH4 600 – “Spirit of God, unseen as the wind”
- CH4 619/620 – “Spirit of the Living God”

- CH4 526 – “This is a day of new beginnings” – what it says on the tin
- CH4 782 – “Lord of life, we come to you”
- CH4 271 – “Loving God you see us here” – To accompany the Lazarus story, or the Psalm
- CH4 730 – “From the falter of breath” – An affirmation of faith and identity in the face of grieving, to the Iona Boat Song
- CH4 731 – “When grief is raw” – A powerful set of words by Brian Wren for reflecting on grief

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