

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year A

Fifth Sunday in Lent – 26 March 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank the Faith Action Programme's Resourcing Worship Team for their thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

This material was written through conversation within the team, aiming to creatively incorporate the language of the Lectionary readings into the prayers, suggesting inclusive and participative ways of using this material in worship.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

Introduction.....	3
Ezekiel 37:1-14	3
Psalm 130	4
Romans 8:6-11	5
John 11:1-45	5
Sermon ideas	6
Prayers	7
Alternative Material.....	9
Musical suggestions	11
Reflecting on our worship practice	12
Useful links	14

Introduction

There is a lot of lament in the passages this week. It feels in some ways like the darkest point before dawn, and in our continuing Lenten journey in and through the darkness, there is a lot to be learned here.

It is not a comfortable place to wait, so how might we learn together to wait without rushing, but also know when to move on? How might we hold space for this in our gatherings and in the wider rhythms of our community's worship? In our waiting and watching how are we raising our awareness of the signs of hope? And how are we empowering our community to do the same, both individually and corporately?

We are reminded that even in difficult circumstances – even when there are no encouraging signs of life, or in fact they have been stripped away – death does not have the last word. God who has the power to redeem and resurrect, is with us as we wait, as we watch, and as we hope.

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

What a vision! This is not a pleasant place to be. As with a lot of circumstances that we must lament, it is not comfortable for Ezekiel to be here, or to witness and understand more deeply the circumstances that led to this situation. A valley of dry bones has to have come about through rather gruesome means. It is in the midst of this unpleasant and visceral image, that Ezekiel not only finds himself, but is asked directly by God an uncomfortable question. God calls him mortal, which is an interesting name to assign, and we might hear this resonate in the later passage from Paul as he discusses the flesh and the Spirit.

There is something powerful about lament in this passage – the reality is difficult; the vision is harrowing and speaks to the difficult spaces of grief. How often we can hurry past the gruesome reality, and Ezekiel, who will already be uncomfortable at being so near the death in this valley, will also be acutely aware of the backdrop of destruction and despair facing his people.

The eerie silence is broken as Ezekiel speaks into the midst of this death as God instructs the mortal to prophesy, even after an answer to God's question that feels a bit like deflection! (v3.) The noise builds as bones and breath and words and flesh come together in a dramatic promise of new life as God says, "I will put my Spirit within You, and you shall live and I will place you on your own soil."

Obedying God's commandment can have spectacular results in the most unpromising of circumstances. This is a dramatic demonstration that while we might be creating all the right conditions, without breath (or Spirit), there is no chance of life. Ezekiel has been given real hope that despite appearances, God's promise is still attainable – God's people will be filled with the Spirit and given their own land, and the ability to live their own lives. This is God's work. Only God has the power to re-animate and resurrect. It is not always easy to recognise that with God we are never beyond hope. God is with us (as God was with Ezekiel), breathing life into the midst of each circumstance.

[Psalm 130](#)

This psalm is a call from the depths of despair that not only hopes for a reply, but expects one. Although there is lament, waiting, and themes of desolation and despair, it is a psalm for the journey, and if we are journeying, we are going somewhere – the destination – Hope!

There is a real sense of solidarity in this psalm, with the Psalmist speaking in the voice of those who feel they have been utterly abandoned, yet still have the faith to cry out to God for help. There is always hope that we will be heard and saved. God/Love becomes a companion on the way, who leads us, accompanies us, waits with us, and promises redemption.

This psalm is about God's character, not about the character of the Psalmist. We have nothing in our power to redeem ourselves, we watch and wait, ever hopeful – with our whole mind and body – like those who watch for the morning. This refrain is repeated, which is a gentle reminder that the waiting is important, it is necessary.

We are then encouraged to hope in God's steadfast love, willingness to forgive us and redeem us; which in the depths of despair is no easy thing.

As with Psalm 121 in the earlier weeks of Lent – when our hope came from the same place as the threat – this psalm does not rush to easy comfortable answers, but rather draws us into a place of companionship with God, with the one whose hope we depend upon, and the only one who can save us.

Here, as with many of the Psalms, we are given language to help express our feelings, fears and hopes, in the midst of difficult circumstances. We are reminded of the power of the Psalms to help us wait in solidarity with those who cannot yet hope, to give us words to say

on behalf of those not yet able to express (this may well be us at some stage), and to bind us with a common language of prayer and worship as we journey towards hope.

Romans 8:6-11

In this passage Paul paints an alternative reality for us. Paul is talking about orientation here and about the now and the not yet – the way it is compared to the way it should be. Dualism can be problematic, so be careful with this text. Reference to body is neutral – there is no judgement, it is purely about our physical state – but we need to understand our orientation. How the body acts is key, and succumbing to ‘flesh’ is about how the body is used in problematic ways, this is also highlighted by the ‘mind’ refrain throughout the text.

‘Flesh’ is a reality dominated by death. The things that destroy life or do not last and die or lead to death. This can also be understood as the wrong perspective, or approach, or attitude, or world view.

‘Spirit’ is a reality where there is life and peace. Where our orientation, outlook and actions point us to that which brings life and may be seen as ‘eternal’. Paul also alludes to transforming into the image of Christ – what might this mean for us individually and our own bodies, and also as community, or ‘the body’?

Hope for the future and focusing on the Spirit brings life and peace for all. We need to set our minds on the Spirit, not focusing on our own lives or flesh – selfish, earthly matters – but looking to God’s law and Jesus’ command to love. This is not merely an ideal or something other-worldly or removed, it is for the here and now, rooted in all that we do for others here on earth, or as God puts it to Ezekiel – in your own soil.

John 11:1-45

There is a real picture of Jesus’ humanity in this passage. The image of Jesus experiencing grief for the loss of Lazarus is stark and moving and there is a tangible sense of solidarity with those who grieve. As we follow the story we also see the grief of Mary, Martha and the community at the centre of this story, and it is into this darkness that Jesus brings the light of life.

Through His actions, Jesus creates the opportunity for belief and displays God’s power to bring life. The crowd did not come to the tomb with the belief that Jesus would raise

Lazarus. Like the mud in the eyes of the blind man (referenced in v37), they, and we are offered new vision, to see fully that there is something beyond death.

There is obvious foreshadowing in this story; although the onlookers and disciples are not aware of this, they perhaps get a sense of the reality that Jesus/God is the only one who can bring resurrection. Lazarus means 'God helps', and as we see in the actions of Jesus, we are not left in our grief or despair, but have the voice of God calling us forward to live.

Sermon ideas

Lament is present throughout this week and we meet it in a few different ways.

Ezekiel – Nation/community in exile and losing faith

There are some obvious themes that could be looked at here, but perhaps there is also room to look at the experience of those who have been exiled or displaced? There may be people in your communities that have this life experience – how are we welcoming them, how are we journeying with them through difficult situations where it may be too soon for questions of hope?

Lazarus – Personal loss and grief

The issues around grief and how we hold space to express this and care for people are particularly important post-pandemic. There is notable trauma in our communities, even before the difficult circumstances of contemporary life and any particular loss come into play. How are we praying *with* and not just *for* people we know? How is the Church being a place of healing and of life within our communities?

Psalm – Despair and journey with God through difficult times

This psalm ask for patience. How are we reflecting this in our worship practice and leaving space for encounter with God?

In each of these situations there are questions about where we find life. What are the signs of life? Where do we need to intentionally invest time, effort and care in tending to these first signs of life and breath?

In all of the stories it is significant that God is present. The Eternal speaks to the mortal and God is in conversation with Ezekiel throughout his experience. God also speaks to the people of Israel in their despair, with a promise of life. Love walks with us in the psalm, and Jesus waits with the grieving community before calling forth life. In the midst of our grief (expressed well in Psalm 130) it may feel as though we are in a valley of dry bones, yet if we

look to Christ we are given a vision (as with the blindness metaphors) a re-seeing of 'life', with the hope of resurrection.

The passage from Romans points us to the hope of the same Spirit that raised Jesus, dwelling in us. How can we sensitively bring in themes from this passage into the midst of difficult journeys and the need for hope?

There is a range of different scenarios and responses in all of these readings, but common throughout is a movement from death to life. How might we creatively reflect this in our worship/liturgy through the use of silence, word, image, music and movement?

Prayers

Gathering prayer

We watch and wait for You, God our maker

Bring hope

We watch and wait for You, Lord Jesus Christ

Bring love

We watch and wait for You, Spirit of God

Breathe life.

Prayer of confession / repentance

When we set our mind to flesh, forgive us O God,
and re-orientate us to see the way of the Spirit, of life, and of peace.

When we make decisions that divide and dehumanise,
when we support systems of oppression through our silence or sponsorship
when we choose these ways of flesh and death

Come Spirit and bring life and peace

When we act without compassion or consideration,
when we make no room for the needs of others, seeking only selfish desire,
when we choose these ways of flesh and death

Come Spirit and bring life and peace

When we speak words of hatred and discord,
when we condemn or misrepresent with unwise words and narratives,

when we choose these ways of flesh and death

Come Spirit and bring life and peace

Help us look to Your resurrecting love. Amen

Prayer of thanksgiving / gratitude

God of the valley of dry bones,

we thank You that there is life after death.

That with You there is always the hope of resurrection.

God of the tomb and friend of Lazarus,

We thank You that You call us out of dead spaces,

To live in fullness and to go with You to the heights and the depths.

God of Hope

You are the only one with the power to resurrect that which is dead or dying.

We thank You, that You do not leave us alone before tomb,

but You stay with us, You weep and grieve and mourn with us.

When healing means death – You wait.

When death brings opportunity for new birth – you watch with us

and You call us to respond, with Your everlasting love as our support.

Prayer for others / Intercession

Loving God,

You are with us and You do not leave us.

In our grieving and despairing You are attentive to our cry.

In our waiting and watching You are with us.

God, in Your steadfast love we anchor our hope.

We pray for all who find themselves in the depths –

whether it is despair, or debt, or too much work and too little time,

whatever their circumstance and need,

God of hope,

Breathe Your life and peace

God,

for all who find themselves waiting, wondering about what next –

whether it is a choice about next steps, worrying about their next pay cheque or meal,

whatever their circumstance and need,

God of hope,
Breathe Your life and peace

God,
for all who find themselves watching, perhaps feeling bound,
whether it is a fear of stepping out, or of moving on,
whatever their circumstance and need,

God of hope,
Breathe Your life and peace

God,
You care for all Your children.
And so we wait and think of all those who are journeying from death to life,
from grief to healing, from despair to hope.
There are those we recognise on the journey,
and so many that we do not know or cannot yet see.
Whatever their circumstance and need,

God of hope,
Breathe Your life and peace

Blessing / Closing prayer

God of the living and of the dead,
unbind us and call us forth into Your world –
to live by Your Spirit,
rejecting the ways of death
and instead
conforming to the way of the Spirit.
May we bring life and peace to wherever we are sent.
Amen

Alternative Material

Examen – finding a rhythm through Lent for you, your community and the world

As we journey through Lent you are invited to consider what rhythm of prayer and reflective living may be helpful to you. Will you choose to fast from something, or choose to begin some form of practice? How will your journey through Lent allow you to consider the

bigger picture of faith, and how will it play out in your relationships, within the context of community and how will your Lenten journey imprint upon Creation?

At the beginning of the day you may find it helpful to pray to God to raise your awareness of God's presence with you throughout the day.

This prayer by St. Anselm of Canterbury may be helpful:

O my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You,
where and how to find You.
You are my God and You are my all and I have never seen You.
You have made me and remade me,
You have bestowed on me all the good things I possess,
still I do not know You.
I have not yet done that for which I was made.
Teach me to seek You.
I cannot seek You unless You teach me
or find You unless You show Yourself to me.
Let me seek You in my desire,
let me desire You in my seeking.
Let me find You by loving You,
let me love You when I find You.
Amen

At the end of your day, you might use the practice of the daily examen to consider where you were aware of God's presence, and how you lived.

Take a moment to settle into the space that you have chosen, or find yourself in.

As you sit, take time to notice your breathing.

As you breathe, notice the noises and movement around you, how you are feeling within and without.

Let these things fade so they are not at the front of your mind.

Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you as you open up your heart and mind to hear God and to be attentive (use whatever words feel right for you).

Look back

Think back over the most recent part of your Lenten journey – perhaps the past day, or the past week.

Notice moments of presence and absence. Give thanks to God for these moments, and try to see how God was present in that time with you.

Now take a few moments to reflect on these questions.

- How did I meet God today?
- How did someone else meet God through me today?
- How did I experience God's love today?
- How did I express God's love today?
- What might God be saying to me now?

It may be helpful to finish your time by saying the Lord's prayer.

Further material can be found on the Sanctuary First website for the journey through Lent and for worship gatherings: https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/themes/article_new/the-third-day-lent-march-23

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

- A suggested playlist of [songs for the Season of Lent](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.
- CH4 87 or 88 – Setting of Psalm 130
- CH4 271 – “Loving God, you see us here” – to accompany the Lazarus story, or the Psalm

- CH4 422 – “Christ is alive”
- CH4 484 – “Great God, your love has called”
- CH4 526 – “This is a day of new beginnings”
- CH4 595 – “O Breath of Life” – asking 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 626 – “Holy Spirit, truth divine” – living in the spirit
- 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
- CH4 782 – “Lord of life, we come to you”

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.

- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.