

SUNDAY 29th March 2020

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT Ezekiel 37:1-14 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath Thus says the Lord GOD Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, & our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

NIV John 11:1-45 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary & her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord & wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha & her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was 2 more days, ⁷ & then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light." ¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

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."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ 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."

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed

how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up & said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands & feet wrapped with strips of linen, & a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes & let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

SERMON IT began with the elbow bump or the touching of feet & then as the days have progressed & the seriousness of the situation has dawned on us, we have moved to a passing wave or the nod of the head & maybe soon, we could be restricted further to just telephone calls or online posts. Yes it's important these days to keep our physical distance BUT it's not always easy is it? Because in some situations everything within us just wants to draw close to someone either to celebrate with them or indeed to bring them comfort...BUT for the moment our natural human reactions to draw close to others need to be restrained even when that just feels wrong..

Our Gospel reading this week brings us the stirring & hope filled story of the raising of Lazarus. However our passage begins with Mary & Martha sending word to Jesus about how sick their brother is, only for Jesus to unexpectedly wait for 2 days before he comes to see them. As we see later in the reactions of Martha and Mary, they couldn't help but wonder why Jesus hadn't come sooner? Why did their friend Jesus, the one who had cured others, not just drop everything and run to Lazarus side? Didn't Jesus care what was going on?

Of course as the rest of the bible passage points out and as it says clearly in vs 5, it was never about a lack of love. No '*Jesus loved Martha & her sister and Lazarus.*' vs 5. It wasn't that Jesus didn't care, just the opposite! As we hesitantly turn on our News and see the growing anxiety and chaos in our world some inevitably find themselves thinking of God and asking the question why? Where is God in this, and why isn't he moving to stop it? These are real questions for some and there isn't an easy answer, especially if someone is ill or has lost a loved one. However the first and most important thing I want to say this week is simply this, while we often don't understand God's purposes and we find ourselves with questions, it's not about a lack of love... As today we read the shortest verse in the bible John 11:35 '*Jesus wept*' we see that God the Son wasn't immune from the pain of this world, rather he made himself vulnerable, he felt our pain, he wept, all out of love for his friend...out of his love for us.

In these dark days, we as followers of Jesus, must, as I heard Church leader Brian Sanders say, keep one eye on the pain. We must be ready, like Jesus, to weep with those who are heartbroken and indeed let them ask their questions like '*where is God?*' or simply '*Why?*' We mustn't think we have all the answers, but we must time and time again, even in the face of awful things show through our actions and say with our words, **God loves**

you....

Of course perhaps you are wondering, how can I show

God's love to others when I can't get out or when I don't have a lot of financial resources? Well, one interesting thought about this passage comes from the Christian author Tom Wright who suggests that while Jesus remained where he was for 2 days before travelling to Bethany to see Mary and Martha, he wasn't just sitting doing nothing but he was deep in prayer for his friend and that this situation would lead to a stirring in peoples' faith and to God being glorified vs4. Maybe you feel that you can do very little at this time, but as a Christian you can do the most important thing, you can pray! Pray for those who are sick, pray for all health care professionals, pray for wisdom for those making important decisions and pray for a vaccine to be found quickly. Prayer, isn't the last thing, it's the most important thing. In 1949 the communist party took control of China and all the foreign missionaries were expelled. Many of those missionaries boarded their planes fearing the worst, churches would be closed down, Christianity banned and believers jailed or worse if they didn't comply. When the Chinese Churches were forced to close their doors many western Christians thought, that was it, the end had come. However as China opened its doors to people from the west again in the last few decades a different story emerged, for the number of Christians in China had multiplied from half a million to more than 60 million today. In fact if current growth rates continue, "by 2030, Christians in China will exceed 200 million, making China the country with the largest Christian population in the world."

As is often quoted '*Gods ways are not our ways*' (Isa 55:8-9)& so what can look & feel like a defeat, such as the expulsion of missionaries or the closing of Church doors or even, as in this passage, the death of a friend can be used by God to bring about fresh life. Not that sickness or death is ever good or what God intended, rather they are results of humanity's sinful rebellion (Gen Chp 3). But just as Jesus with tears in his eyes, called Lazarus out from the grave all those years ago, so God continues to call people in the most difficult circumstances & give them new hope, faith & eternal life.

So as Brian Sanders says, while we must at all times have one eye on the pain and we must share the heartache, we as Christians should also have another eye on the possibilities that are in the midst of where we are now. Yes possibilities to help practically, but also opportunities to share the good news about Jesus. To mention his name in a phone conversation or to gather up our courage, and share our testimony with someone down the line. These are things that can bring light and life out of the dark situation we find ourselves in.

As the days go on and our Church doors must remain closed, I pray that we each see new life growing in our own hearts as we take more time to pray and listen to God through His word. However as we do that, lets also keep one eye firmly on others as we seek to be there for them in pain and with the other eye let's look for the possibilities that God opens for us to share with others the one who truly is 'the resurrection and the life.' Vs 25