

Sunday 29th March 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn Thy hand, O God, has guided
thy flock, from age to age;
the wondrous tale is written,
full clear, on every page;
thy people owned thy goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both of this bear witness:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

Thy heralds brought glad tidings
to greatest, as to least;
they summoned all to hasten
and share the great King's feast;
their gospel of redemption,
sin pardoned, earth restored,
was all in this enfolded:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

Thy mercy will not fail us,
nor leave thy work undone;
with thy right hand to help us,
the victory shall be won;
and then, by all creation,
thy name shall be adored,
and this shall be our anthem:
one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

E. H. PLUMPTRE (1821-91)*

Prayer

Eternal God ever present in creation, we offer you our praise and thanksgiving.

You are the creator of all that we know and all that we have yet to discover, the stars in and beyond our galaxy, the planets which orbit the stars, and life itself in myriad forms.

You are the sustainer of life, your Spirit indwells all life, even when it is not recognised, the Spirit binds and connects life.

You bring forth new life and in the knowledge of you we are constantly invited to see life anew, to live life to the fullness of our humanity and to live life lovingly.

In Jesus we find our way, our model of the fullness of humanity, our guide for the choices we make.

Loving God, for all this we offer you our thanks, and we thank you for this new day, and the many people who will support us this day and every day.

The Lord's prayer

Psalm 130 (Psalms for a Quantum World)

When there is nowhere else to turn
your presence is with me.
When hope is but the echo of a whisper
your presence is with me.
You hear me
through every atom of creation;
even when I have no voice
you hear the echo of my soul.

In this I trust and believe:
that all is forgiven
and all will be well
and all will be one;
for your presence is within and around me
and all people,
and all people are in you.

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Readings (see readings page for Contemporary English Version)

Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

Song

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones
Now hear the word of the Lord

Well, your toe bone connected to your foot bone
Your foot bone connected to your heel bone
Your heel bone connected to your ankle bone
Your ankle bone connected to your leg bone
Your leg bone connected to your knee bone
Your knee bone connected to your thigh bone
Your thigh bone connected to your hip bone
Your hip bone connected to your back bone
Your back bone connected to your shoulder bone
Your shoulder bone connected to your neck bone
Your neck bone connected to your head bone
Now hear the word of the Lord

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around
Now hear the word of the Lord

James Weldon Johnson



Reflection

On the face of it today's readings may be seen to be about resurrection, however if we delve deeper they are in fact about restoration, restoration of life and restoration of belief.

We are living through strange times, around the world people are dying of a disease which was not in existence last year. Covid 19 is the result of a mutation within the coronavirus family, an evolution which we are having to respond to in extreme ways until scientists find the key to living with this new form of the virus. We are in exile, locked down and isolated from the lives to which we have all become familiar even though those lives may have been quite different. We are in this together.

Israel was in exile in Babylon, isolated from the familiar and having to get used to a very different way of life. The prophet Ezekiel experiences a very strange dream in which he finds himself in a valley filled with the unburied remains of a large number of people. Dry bones scattered around shining white in the sunlight, like a scene from some crime drama. He hears a voice, the Lord, telling him to speak to the bones, to prophesy to them that life will once more come upon them, and as he obeys he hears a rattling as the bones began to move and reunite, then sinews and flesh appeared. However, this is not life, for life there is another stage, Ezekiel must command the wind of God to come upon the bones which it does, and the newly connected bones stand and come alive.

When I read this passage again I was struck by the second stage of restoration. It is not enough to be human, we are called to be fully human, to have within us the breath of God and to live our lives in the acknowledgement that the breath of God dwells within us. The Lord explains this experience to Ezekiel, so that he can tell the people of Israel that they will be restored, they will be reconnected, and new life will come upon them in a new way. This is the hope we hold in our hearts today; we will come out of the other end of this crisis and life will be restored, however it may be a very different life from before. Some will have lost loved ones and the pattern of their lives will be different, but also, we may all have learnt some valuable lessons about what is really important, about what it means to be community and why we need each other. We have seen how much the future depends on us working together, self-isolating to preserve life and buy time for the scientists to do their work. We are also realising that self-serving affects others as panic buying by some denies others of the essentials on which we all rely.

We have no way of knowing when restoration will happen in the current situation, but we can begin to live more fully human lives now. Modern technology allows us to keep communicating and we can begin exploring what it means to be church in different ways, church without buildings. The story of Lazarus has many strange elements the meaning of which has taxed commentators and theologians, and at which we can only begin to guess. Within the story is a strong element of timing, why did Jesus wait two days to return, knowing that the journey itself would take a day or more? Why did he not tell the disciples about the message for two days, and what did he do during those two days? Tom Wright suggests that during those two days Jesus was praying, that perhaps he knew he could not get back in time and so his prayer was for the preservation of the body of Lazarus so that when he got there he could restore Lazarus to life. Was the moment the stone was rolled away from the cave the moment Jesus knew his prayers had been answered, Tom asks, because there was no smell, and so he could call Lazarus from the tomb. Lazarus was restored to life but would eventually die this is different from resurrection to eternal life. However, this incident would have a marked effect upon those who witnessed it, in the witnessing would be the breath of God moving around them, stirring them to new belief. This is a reminder that we, as individuals, are not in control, however collectively in the Spirit of God, we can change things. The current crisis could

have a marked effect upon the way we live our lives, younger generations are experiencing a very different way of life and in some cases learning a way of living that would not have been dreamt of two months ago. The reflection [Lockdown](#) by Richard Hendrick reminds us that our enforced isolation is having a marked effect upon the planet on which we live, the skies are clearing, and nature is taking a deep breath. Poet Lynn Ungar also has an interesting take on where we find ourselves in her poem [Pandemic](#) (both pieces are on the website), in Lynn's poem she writes:

*Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.*

*Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.*

The delusion of separation has robbed us of our connectiveness but all is not lost and those dry scattered bones can be seen to be connected, the reality of oneness can be restored in our hearts and minds as we learn to live in the indwelling of God. God holds us, we are one and through crisis we are realising how wonderfully things and work together when we give them a chance. Whilst we learn our planet is restored, for how long is in our hands. Cry out against injustice, cry out against abuse, cry out rejoicing in God for in God is life for all.

Be still, be safe and learn.

Prayer

Sit quietly at a window and reflect upon what you can see and how different it is from usual. Think about what is missing.

Consider

The world is changed, and we feel isolated, but we are connected by the Spirit that indwells all of creation. The Spirit breathes life into creation, so our prayer is for a heightened awareness of all that connects us and the technology that enables us to keep communicating.

The world is evolving, and at a microbial level things are also evolving, new viruses emerge and we must learn to live with the change even when we feel threatened. The Spirit breathes life into coronavirus, it is part of creation and the challenge is to live alongside, so our prayers are for our shared life together within creation and for the scientists whose work will enable us to cohabit safely in the future.

Loving God,

We pray for our world, the world into which your Spirit breathes life; it is a changed world and life has changed but your love is still all around us and in the new stillness of life we are better able to sense your love. Help us to share your love creatively through letters and phone calls, through smiles at the window, and shared songs across a courtyard. We pray for the families most affected by the pandemic, those who have lost loved ones, those who feel particularly threatened and afraid,

those who feel particularly alone and isolated, may they sense your presence with them and feel your love around them.

We pray for the church, around the world and here in our own country, the church into which your Spirit breathes life; our experience of church is changed and how we can express ourselves as church has changed yet in the stillness we can find new expressions and sense you in different ways. Help us to remember our oneness even though we are not able to meet, help us to use this time to explore new ideas and new ways of being church and share our discoveries with others. Help us to hold our brothers and sisters around the world in our thoughts and prayers but also to keep supporting those who bring help and hope to those whose needs are different from ours.

We pray for our fellowship together and for the communities in which we live and serve, the fellowship and communities into which your Spirit breathes life; we pray for those who serve our changed communities, medical staff, delivery drivers, teachers and councillors, help us to be appreciative and grateful for those who serve in this way. We pray for our friends in fellowship who may be unwell, afraid, or lonely help us to be creative in keeping in touch, and faithful in prayer.

Loving God, you give us hope, you restore life when all seems lost, in you there is always a new creation, help us to know this, to trust this and to live this.
In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Hymn Breathe on me, breath of God,
 fill me with life anew,
 that I may love what thou dost love
 and do what thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with thee I will one will
to do and to endure.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
till I am wholly thine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, breath of God;
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity.

EDWIN HATCH (1835-89) altd.

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.