

**Worship from the United Reformed Church
Sunday 29th March – The Rev'd Phil Nevard**

Introduction

Welcome. My name is the Rev'd Phil Nevard and today's service comes to you from my (tidier) half of the study that I share with Lythan. In my heart I will be leading this worship with my lovely congregation at Kingsteignton URC in South Devon. We are delighted that you are joining us today. One advantage of a recorded service is that you can pause the service at any point. If you haven't already done so, I'd suggest pausing me now and making sure there is nothing immediate you have to attend to that will take you away from this time of worship. You might want to settle yourself with a moment of quiet before hitting play again. There!

Call to Worship *please join in with the words in bold*

People of God, on this wilderness journey, what will you eat?

The word of the Lord is our daily bread.

People of God, in this time of temptation, how will you live?

Our faith is in the faithfulness of God.

People of God, at this kingdom crossroad, whom will you serve?

We worship the Lord our God alone.

Hymn: *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*

(Reginald Heber 1783 – 1826)

Holy, holy, holy!
Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning
our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy!
Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons,
blessed Trinity!

2 Holy, holy, holy!
All the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling
down before thee,
which wert, and art, and
evermore shalt be.

3 Holy, holy, holy!
Though the darkness hide thee,
though the eye of sinful folk
thy glory may not see,
only thou art holy;
there is none beside thee
perfect in pow'r, in love,
and purity.

4 Holy, holy, holy!
Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name
in earth and sky and sea.
Holy, holy, holy!
Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons,
blessed Trinity!

Prayers of Approach, Confession & assurance of pardon

*Holy, Holy Holy! Lord God Almighty
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee*

The confident song of a well-known hymn
The slightly hesitant song of a chorus we haven't heard before
The triumphant song of the organ with power and depth
The song that makes our spirit dance at the sharing of good news
The silent song in a minor key as we hear of those who grieve
The song of hearts being lifted as we offer our lives to God in worship

*Holy, Holy, Holy! All the saints adore thee
Casting down their golden crowns...*

A tide of worship reaching back through the ages
and sweeping ahead to the future
A sea of witnesses gone before – we add our voices to theirs
Casting down our golden crowns...
laying before God what belongs to God
Our time, our wealth, our energy, our life
Our hospitality, our devotion, our generosity
The choices we face, the opportunities that come our way

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For All the Changing Scenes of Life was recorded for Songs of Praise, Maddy Prior sang As the Hart and Holy, Holy, Holy was recorded by the Hymns Project/Parkway Worship Ministry.

The reflective music for the sermon came from the Perfect Light Reflective Meditations for Piano (CD) Austin Kershaw & Kevin Mayhew Ltd.

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Thanks to members of Barrhead URC, John Wilcox, Liane Todd, and Kathleen Haynes for recording spoken parts of the service.

*Holy, Holy, Holy Though the sinful human eye
thy glory cannot see*

You do not hide from us – our sin clouds our vision
You do not hide from us – our sin deafens our ears
you do not hide from us – our sin deadens our hearts
We are blind to your glory, deaf to your voice and cold in your presence
Change us through our worship, warm our hearts, enliven our spirits
make us one in worship and service one with you, one with each other

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty
All thy works shall praise thy name*

Take us beyond an hour of worship to a life of worship
Take us beyond a hymn of praise to a life of praise
Take us beyond a prayer of dedication to a life of dedication
Take us beyond these walls to be your people in the world
Joining all your creation – in earth and sea and sky –
In one great song of Praise!

Loving God, the words of our hymns and our prayers
bring us face to face with an uncomfortable truth:
our daily living and our hourly choices
do not match what we sing or pray.
Too often the words feel like vague and hopeful aspirations
which we will never quite live up to.
We KNOW we have fallen short and we are fairly sure we will CONTINUE
to fall short.

Loving God, forgive us.

(moment of silence)

Yet, here are words you may trust;
here are words you may cling onto;

here are words which can free you from the paralysis of guilt;
here are words that offer you a way forward;
here are words that send you unburdened back out into the world:

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”
To all who turn to him, he says: “Your sins are forgiven.”
He also says: “Follow me.”

Prayer for illumination

We are about to listen for God’s Word. Notice I said “listen for” and not “listen to”. God’s Word is not simply words, not even words written in a special book or read in a Sunday voice. God’s Word is not simply text to be read and studied. God’s Word isn’t a thing to be looked at even listened to. God’s Word is something that HAPPENS. One of the ways God’s Word happens is when the words we are about to hear connect with our minds and our hearts and change our living through the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s why we pray before we read, and that’s why listening for God’s Word can be a risky business!

So we pray:

*Calm us now, O Lord, into a quietness that heals and listens.
Unlock the doors of our hearts;
open the shutters of our minds;
that we might hear Your voice
and be bathed anew in your Light. Amen.*

Readings

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)

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 round them; there were very many lying in the

Loving God, you give to us beyond measure, you give to us without counting the cost.

Accept whatever giving I can offer and use it that life may flourish and your Kingdom come. Amen.

Hymn: *Through all the changing scenes of life*
Nahum Tate (1652-1715) after Psalm 34: 1-4, 7-9

Through all the changing
scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.

2 Of his deliv'rance I will boast,
till all that are distressed
from my example comfort take,
and charm their griefs to rest.

3 Oh, magnify the Lord with me;
with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called,
he to my rescue came.

4 Fear him, ye saints,
and you will then
have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight,
your wants shall be his care.

Blessing:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
in the name of Christ. Amen.

*more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

And when we have watched and waited,
and our list of petitions has exhausted us,
may your voice be very clear to us.

Speak to us with your voice of hope and grace;
speak to us with your voice of wisdom and truth;
speak to us with your voice of love and compassion;
speak to us with your voice of challenge and calling;
And, having heard your voice, we will find new ways to follow you. Amen

Our Father....

Offertory

If you look outside your window you will see that we have used the latest satellite and digital tracking technology to deliver a drone carrying an offertory bag to your front door, this will then be diverted back to your home church.

Actually, we haven't! But the offertory is an important part of our tradition of worship – it's one of the few places where we all agree we should stand up suddenly and confuse the visitors!

It might be that your church has already thought about this, in which case you might want to take this moment to put some cash into your freewill offering envelope and put it somewhere safe until it can be collected.

You might also want to remember any local charities that are special to you. All of the events where they raise money or collect donations have been cancelled. Many of them find themselves with less money, more work and fewer workers to do that work. You might want to think about how you might reach out to them with some support.

A prayer:

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, and 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.'

St John 11:1-45 (NRSV)

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather

it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus[d] had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him. Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

they have never imagined.

Hear the voice of service managers
trying to keep stretched systems running,
those trying to respond to needs that far outstrip supplies.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!
Hear the voice of teenagers who have worked so hard
for exams they may never sit,
those who are afraid that their future prospects will be damaged.
Hear the voice of children who watch the adults around them,
those who may seem unaware but who are deeply affected by the stress
of those around them.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!
Hear the voice of those
who were only recently flooded out of their homes,
those who had everything taken from them
and have nothing to fall back on.
Hear the voice of those who live from doorway to bench,
who have no protection,
those who cannot find a safe and warm place to self-isolate and be fed.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord*

With tempered impatience, eager to see injustice ended, we expect the Day of the Lord. And we are confident that the light which shines in the present darkness will fill the earth when Christ appears for **our World belongs to God!**

Prayers of Intercession (drawing on Psalm 130)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!
Hear the voice of those who are anxious and fearful,
those who cannot shake that feeling of dread
that has fallen across their lives.
Hear the voice of those who have seen long-prepared plans fall apart,
those who are now finding it hard to see what their next step should be,

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!
Hear the voice of those who are working day and night
to bring relief to those affected,
those who don't know when opportunity for rest will come.
Hear the voice of those who now have no work and no income,
those who worry how the bills will be paid
or whether their business will survive.

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!
Hear the voice of politicians who are expected to provide answers,
those who are bewildered by events and dealing with issues

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Sermon

Before I begin the sermon, I am very keenly aware that there are many of you sitting there feeling a bit unsettled because we haven't had the notices yet (or if you're listening in Northern parts – the intimations!) So here they are:

- The Guild is cancelled
- All our services are cancelled
- the Games Afternoon is cancelled
- Messy Church is cancelled
- The monthly how to secure the china-cupboard steering group meeting is cancelled
- all the Easter events and services are cancelled
- We don't need any volunteers for the flower rota because flowers are cancelled

Life feels a bit like that now, doesn't it – everything is cancelled because everything is falling apart around us. It feels like we're in the middle of some uncontrollable and totally unpredictable whirlwind that is picking up the interconnected bits of our lives and flinging them around randomly! Today we heard Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones and then John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Both of those readings have memorable phrases that might easily find ourselves repeating today:

From Ezekiel, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

and from John, on the lips of both Martha and Mary: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Psalm 130 is also set for today, and we will return to that in our prayers later, but Psalm 130 also speaks words that we might be tempted to repeat sometime in this coming week:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
Amen

Hymn: *As Pants the Hart for Cooling Streams*
Nahum Tate (1652-1715)

As pants the hart for cooling streams when heated in the chase, so longs my soul, O God, for Thee, and Thy refreshing grace.	4 God of my strength, how long shall I, like one forgotten, mourn, forlorn, forsaken, and exposed to my oppressor's scorn?
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2 For Thee, my God, the living God, my thirsty soul doth pine; oh, when shall I behold Thy face, Thou Majesty Divine?	5 Why restless, why cast down, my soul? Hope still, and thou shalt sing the praise of Him who is thy God, thy health's eternal spring.
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Affirmation of Faith *please join in with the words in bold*

As followers of Jesus Christ, living in this world—
which some seek to control, but which others view with despair—
we declare with joy and trust: **our world belongs to God!**

From the beginning, through all the crises of our times,
until His Kingdom fully comes, God keeps covenant forever.
our world belongs to God!

We rejoice in the goodness of God, renounce the works of darkness,
and dedicate ourselves to holy living, for **our world belongs to God!**

As committed disciples, called to faithful obedience, and set free for
joyful praise, we offer our hearts and lives to do God's work in his world,
for **our world belongs to God!**

alongside a grieving person for long before he has to go and do something practical to fix the situation. Only in his case it's something practical that the rest of us cannot expect to do often – he fixes the situation by raising Lazarus from the dead! Thanks for the tip, Jesus!

Of course, my hang-up here is simply because I am stubbornly not grasping the full complexity with which John writes. John is trying to show us BOTH the solid, touchable humanity of Jesus, the Jesus who cries real tears – AND the mind-bending truth that Jesus is truly ONE with God. John is trying to tell us that in this weeping human Jesus lives the Christ, a living sign that the promises of God about life conquering death are not to be fulfilled long in the future, but are here and now and seen in this story.

Ultimately, the message is not that different to the message of Ezekiel's vision, and we should not be surprised because the same God is at work. The life-giving breath of God is already at work conquering death with new life.

These are all big questions, and maybe, like mine, your head is now hurting with the sheer scale of this story! So, my question looks like a smaller question, but it really isn't, not if you give the question the chance to take root and bear fruit in the ways you respond to a grieving world.

Who was the last person over whose death you truly wept? Can you remember the things that those around you said/didn't say or did/didn't do that brought you moments of peace, comfort or joy? Can you imagine how you might begin to offer those moments to someone else who grieves, even with the restrictions we may face at this time?

(music for reflection)

And now, as Paul very nearly wrote to the Philippians, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus in homes of United Reformed Church members and beyond:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

In the midst of this whirlwind, what might God be saying to us? I want to open up two possibilities for you to consider today and through this week. I will offer some brief thoughts and reflections and then a question to encourage you to connect what I have said to your own particular circumstances. Some music will play to mark some initial thinking and praying time, but I hope you will carry the questions through the week. Maybe you could phone someone in your church who you would normally have this kind of a conversation with and discuss your thoughts together. Or maybe, if you are an internet-savvy person, you could find a way to connect to others who are also using these recorded services and share your ideas about what God might be saying to you.

So, here's the first one.

Ezekiel goes out of his way in describing his vision to tell us just how dry those bones were. It wasn't JUST a valley of bones, it was a valley of DRY bones. It was like those compulsory scenes from the old cowboy films where the camera pans across the horns of a bleached, dry, skull separated from a long-dead cow – the idea is to create a sense of arid lifelessness. These bones that Ezekiel described are LONG dead – they are SO dead that they are brittle and crumbling – there is no chance at all of life within them.

In the early church this passage was at the centre of a serious disagreement about life beyond death and whether this would include what we experience as our bodies or not. Christians argued strongly that we would need our bodies, whilst the Gnostics longed for the day when the "soul" could be set free from its bodily prison. It was a fierce argument and probably not one that you or I are having today very often. It became particularly sharp as Christians were martyred in

amphitheatres. How (literally) chewed up and digested could a human body become before God could not reconstitute it for a bodily resurrection? Tertullian suggested that the more hard-wearing bits, the bones and the teeth, would sprout a whole new body and it would be fine, but the Romans got hold of this idea and would decapitate martyrs, burn the bodies and then float anything left down the Rhine in order to “rob the dead of their rebirth” and kill off the idea that martyrs would be rewarded with resurrection. Not even God could resurrect a body after all that!

I appreciate this is perhaps a little bit more grisly than you might have been expecting, but the great truth of Ezekiel’s vision and the arguments in the early church community is that God’s answer is clear. Can God bring new life EVEN when this happens – when bones are totally dried, when bodies are totally destroyed – when life as we know it has stopped happening – can God bring new life EVEN THEN??

God’s answer is emphatically YES! YES! YES!

You have probably guessed my first question!

Complete the sentence as creatively as you can: “My own spiritual life is as dry as a _____.” How might I use this unexpected gift of time as an opportunity to nourish my spiritual life and bring new life to my discipleship?”

(music for reflection)

And here’s the second.

I always find it difficult to focus the mind with John’s Gospel. He writes in a way that prompts questions at every point, his is a very different style to Mark where Jesus suddenly does this then immediately goes over there and does that and before you know it the story is over! In John’s gospel there is no shortage of meat to chew.

You might want to revisit the text during the week and dwell on some of the puzzles. You might want to reassess your ideas about Thomas who, in this passage, sounds more like Brave Thomas, or Reckless Thomas than he sounds like “Doubting Thomas”. Or you might like to dwell on the quite disturbing idea that Jesus deliberately delays his visit to a dying friend.

For now, though, I’d draw your attention to the powerful emotional content of this story – summed up in what quizmasters know as the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept.” Jesus weeps because Jesus loved Lazarus. Not the “*agape*” love that John is so fond of using, “selfless, self-giving love”, but “*philia*” love, the common Greek word for ordinary friendship between people.

At one of the Prime Minister’s early press conferences (which seems like a long time ago now), Mr Johnson told us, “...many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time. “ There will be lots of Marthas and Marys weeping over the death of their Lazaruses. There will be lots of Marthas and Marys trying to make sense of their loss and maybe asking, “if Jesus had been here, this would not have happened.” It’s not a new question to ask, but it is still a very powerful one, how can stuff like this happen if Jesus is alive in the world, or if God really cares about us?

Romans 12:15 famously calls us to “weep with those who weep”. Here, Jesus does just that – he weeps with those who weep. He weeps genuine, real, gut-wrenching tears as he feels the grief as sharply as they do.

I have to confess that I still retain a little bit of disappointment at what happens next. It has always niggled me that this was an opportunity for Jesus to show how to be around those who grieve, how to respond, what to say or not to say, how to bring comfort. He makes a good start by weeping with them, sharing their grief, but then he goes and raises Lazarus from the dead. In my less spiritual moments, and I have to be honest here, I think “There’s a typical bloke. He can’t sustain being