



Fifth Sunday in Lent

2 April 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Sally Foster-Fulton, Head of Christian Aid Scotland, for her thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Ezekiel 37: 1-14..... | 2 |
| Psalms 130..... | 3 |
| Romans 8: 6-11..... | 4 |
| John 11: 1-45 | 4 |
| Sermon ideas | 5 |
| Time with Children..... | 6 |
| Prayers | 7 |
| Musical suggestions..... | 10 |
| Additional Resources | 11 |



Ezekiel 37: 1-14

This is a tell-able, dramatic tale – a harrowing story, no doubt, but one that resonates when richly read. Whoever the reader, make sure the story is told and the rhythm builds and your listeners feel the life returning to those dry bones! There is power in simply hearing this well.

There is no way to downplay the desolation in this text, nor should we. In 597 BCE, the first of the Jewish exiles were taken to Babylon, then 10 years later, Jerusalem was reduced to a pile of rubble when Nebuchadnezzar (King of the Babylonian Empire) ran out of patience and, in a bid to seal their submission, slaughtered all in his way. We cannot find the valley of dry bones on a map, but the imagery is starkly reflective of that time and represents the complete devastation, humiliation and hopelessness of a thoroughly defeated people. The prophet Ezekiel, caught up in that brutal exile, unveils a gory image of conquest. When Ezekiel is called to prophesy to those bones, he is symbolically called to prophesy to the scattered and shaken people of Israel, far from home and fearful. The question echoes, will they live again?

Exile and return is a theme that stretches across our sacred story, and in the valley of dry bones, we find its ultimate expression – far from home, with no life left and no expectation that the present reality could change.

It is for Ezekiel to breathe a life-giving word of hope that will bring these exiles back home. The powerful image of wind in the desert, of life in the deadest of places, is one to conjure with.

As you think about how to preach this text, you may want to consider...

- Where are the dry bones today?
- Where are people fearful and forgotten?
- Where are lives barren and empty?
- What words do we have that can bring life?
- Are words enough and, if not, what else must we bring to desolate places?



Psalm 130

This Psalm continues the theme of hope hanging on in the depths. You can bring it to life by grounding it in identifiable experiences. The opening words are highly emotive – words not spoken, but cried – ‘can you hear me!’ they say.

Can you hear my cry?

- From the depths of this broken relationship, from the fears I have for my children,
- From the loneliness I feel surrounded by people and the emptiness I feel when surrounded by food and money and endless things?

Can you hear the cries from your people...

In refugee camps in Kenya, in Palestine and Greece?

Can you hear the cries of your people as they flee conflict in Syria, war and famine in South Sudan?

Reflect the events and issues and concerns that are live and real in the minds and hearts of your congregation. Bring the psalmist’s cry to life.

Further in the psalm, the psalmist speaks of waiting like one who watches for the morning. How many of us have experienced that nighttime fear – desperation that is magnified somehow by the darkness? From the watchers in the tower, keeping vigil until the daylight brings a sense of safety, to those who tonight, will sit and stare and pray for the dawn – this psalm is steeped in imagery that can connect it to the congregation.

Finally, it is important to unpack the understanding that the voices cry out because they hope someone will listen. Will we listen and respond to those who cry out for connection or care? Will we be the hope they need in the morning?



Romans 8: 6-11

To pin your hopes and aspirations on things alone (on stuff!) is to miss out on what is really important in life. This passage offers an opportunity to explore what is life-giving and life-affirming over and against what glitters and tempts, but will ultimately not satisfy. The text acknowledges that our 'mortal bodies' need to be sustained – that everyone needs food, water, safety and shelter; but we also need a chance to flourish and become.

It is important to note that the word 'mind' in the original text is best translated 'mentality, outlook, aspiration.' To set your path on a course where the ultimate goal is to collect possessions or acclaim or money risks losing your sense of self and your place in a much bigger picture. We risk forgetting that we are part of a local community and a global family. To set your aspirations, your deepest desires on the Spirit is to connect with all life, to place yourself, not in the centre of the universe, but alongside others. It opens the way for justice and generosity to walk with you.

There is a word to conjure with alongside this passage - Affluenza. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, Affluenza is 'the unhealthy and unwelcome psychological and social effects of [affluence](#) regarded especially as a widespread societal problem: such as feelings of guilt, lack of motivation, and social isolation experienced by wealthy people. Extreme materialism and consumerism ... can result in a life of chronic dissatisfaction, debt, overwork, stress, and impaired relationships.'

In this passage, we are challenged to set our sights and ourselves on Christ's path.

John 11: 1-45

The story of the raising of Lazarus brings us back to the overarching question for this 5th Sunday in Advent – can there be life again in stale, barren places? In all the death and dryness that sometimes surrounds us, can hope live and breathe and resurrect through Jesus Christ? This is an intriguing story that brings Jesus face to face with a very personal grief. In the gospel stories, the only individuals who are singled out as 'loved by Jesus' are the family in Bethany, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and the 'disciple whom Jesus loved'. Of course, Jesus 'loved his own', had compassion on the crowds and called his followers to love each other, but this was more intimate. It is poignant



that just before Jesus turns finally towards Jerusalem and his death, he endures a very personal grief in the death of Lazarus. At the beginning of the gospel of John (John 1: 29-42), after his baptism, there is a pivotal scene when Jesus is approached by two of John's disciples. They had heard John refer to him as the 'lamb of God' and had followed him. Jesus asks them, 'what are you looking for?' and they respond with another question, 'where are you staying?' He replies, 'come and see.' This is no casual exchange, but a deeply theological scene setter. A better translation would be:

- 'What are you seeking, what do you hope to discover?'
- 'Where will you endure, remain – where will you not be moved from?'
- "Come and perceive, understand, experience.'

When Mary comes to Jesus and falls at his feet, her grief moves him deeply and he asks her a question that echoes with the opening to the gospel – 'Where have you placed him?' Her response is a counterpoint – 'Come and see.' The words are the same in the original text – 'Come and perceive, understand, experience.'

Jesus enters into our pain, our turmoil, our neediness and our fragile mortality – the love is personal. And because he loves fully and calls us to do the same, new life is possible in the deadest places.

Sermon ideas

This is the penultimate week in Lent, a time of introspection, of soul-searching. We have metaphorically stayed in the desert, reflected and considered our lives and the part we play in the lives of others. We are hopefully learning something about how we want to live our lives – and how we can learn to die well. How we can learn to die to the things that harm us and others:

Our obsession with things...

Our prejudices...

Our wants over the needs of those we share life with...



When considering the sermon, it may be good to bring that question to the fore. All the texts in some way speak to that call to be an embodiment of hope in stale or scary places, to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters, to breathe life into the body of Christ by living fully like Jesus did.

There is the wonderful story (forgive me if you've heard it before but it would be a good opening/closing thought) about the parents who, angling for a bit more time with their coffee and papers, offered their young daughter a puzzle to put together. On one side of an insert of the paper was a current map of the world, so they cut it up and told her they would go out for a walk as soon as she'd put the puzzle together. Fairly happy with themselves, they settled down with their second cup. Two minutes later she came back and said the puzzle was finished. 'How did you manage that?' they said.

'It was easy. There was a person on the other side of the page, so I put the person together and the world followed.'

Life begins with relationships – listening, waiting with each other, realising that we are part of something so much bigger. If we are to bring life, justice, healing – hope, then we need to begin with ourselves and the possibilities our changed lives may bring to the world.

Time with Children

Body of Christ/Family of God

This talk supports thinking around the gift of life given to an individual and to a community – the gift we have a responsibility to help flourish.

Begin by having the children play 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes'. If there are older children, then let them take turns leading the game – they can try to catch the group out (for example, saying head, but touching toes.) After they play this game a few times, get them to think about how the body is made to fit together, to work together. One of the ways the church is described is as the 'body of Christ.' – meant to work together, so that everyone can have what they need and know they are loved.

You can ask them how they think they can do that – and how they think the church does (or should) We are also called the 'family of God' and like a body, we need to work together to bring hope and



justice to our communities. As we journey together during Lent, we can bring light and life and hope – especially if we work together.

Prayers

Call to Worship

There will come a time
when all around us will be gone –
blown away like dust...
But there will never come a time
when the wind-breath of God ceases to blow,
when the Spirit sleeps, when love lies lifeless.
Let us worship God,
who holds everything fast
and breathes life into life.

Confession

When our minds are on ‘what is mine,’
When our hearts are hardened to the needs of our sisters and brothers,
When we are disconnected and indifferent to the lives around us, forgive.
But do not forgive and let us forget –
breathe Your challenge, Your cause, Your commitment to love into our beings
and bring us back to life.
We ask this in the name of the One whose body we claim to be. Amen.

Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gone in a blink...
Dragging on forever...
Not enough in a day...
Too much on our hands – Time.



Run off our feet...
Left twiddling our thumbs...
So busy we spin our wheels...
How vast the stretching silence sometimes – time.

Don't run out of it...
Don't waste it...
Don't watch it...
Only it will tell – time.

God of eternity, all time is in your hands and so are we.
Thank you for the beauty you show us –
the love you shower on us –
the while we while away.

Help us to cherish the time we have with each other.
Gone in a blink, it will not come again so teach us never to take it for granted.
When we can sit and soak up the laughter of our loved ones, (children) keep us still. When we can learn something new, don't let us be so busy we miss our moment. When we can make someone's day, don't let us be too preoccupied with tomorrow.

God of eternity, all time is in your hands and so are we.
So we take time now to ask for your help.
In a world where people are hungry, where there is violence, where war rages
and apathy and greed fuel it,
where time and time again,
the poor and the weak have their brief time in the sun clouded over,
help us to take the lessons we learned at your feet and walk a different path.



Intercession 2

God, who hears the cries of your people,
God, who sits with those who wait for the dawning,
God, who holds broken hearts in yours,
Hear our prayer.

Open the eyes and ears of our spirits so we hear and sit and hold them too.

When our brothers and sisters are excluded
because of their gender, race, sexual orientation,
may we cry out to them that they are loved and embraced for who they are,
may we encourage them to become themselves
in all the glory you invested in their creation.

When our sisters and brothers are left on the margins
by markets that favour the rich, by employment that favours profit
over people who struggle to make ends meet,
may we act out to bring justice and equality and love to bear.

And where our family across this planet home cry out for enough –
food and water, shelter and safety, opportunity and challenge,
may our love meet theirs and breathe life back into our shared space.

We pray this morning for... (prayers of the day, be relevant to what is happening and the issues that resonate)

Amen.



Musical suggestions

| | |
|---------|--|
| CH4 344 | And Jesus said: Don't be afraid |
| CH4 689 | Just as the tide creeps over silver sand |
| CH4 729 | Help me, dear Lord |
| CH4 730 | From the falter of breath |
| CH4 88 | Up from the depths I cry to God |
| CH4 719 | The one who longs to make us whole |
| CH4 720 | There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord |
| CH4 284 | Hope is the candle (Interesting choice if focusing on Psalm 130) |
| CH4 717 | O Christ, the healer, we have come |
| CH4 718 | We cannot measure how you heal |
| CH4 721 | We lay our broken world |
| CH4 576 | Jesus before me, Jesus beside me (great for children) |



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.



You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Sally Foster-Fulton for providing us with this material.

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.

