

# starters for Sunday

## *Fifth Sunday in Lent*

**6 April 2014**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Margaret Whyte, retired Minister formerly of Glasgow: Pollockshaws and Locum at Bourock Church, Barrhead, for her thoughts on the fifth Sunday in Lent.

### **Contents**

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 .....	2
Psalms 130 .....	3
Romans 8: 6-11.....	4
John 11: 1-45 .....	4
Sermon Ideas .....	6
Prayers.....	8
Time with Children.....	10
Musical Suggestions .....	10
Additional Resources.....	11



## [Ezekiel 37: 1-14](#)

### **The valley of the dry bones**

The Prophet Ezekiel's wondrously evocative visions would have been compelling reading for the people of Israel, just like our modern day good thriller yet with the major difference that this is God communicating. Dated around 586BC soon after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, this is one of the best known of the prophet's visions, giving hope to the people that Yahweh will restore Israel. God is a God of justice, faithfulness and redemption and will not abandon his people.

The vision of the valley of dry bones is the stuff of nightmares. Had Ezekiel actually witnessed such a scene from some past massacre, the bones stripped of flesh by wild animals and dried in the baking heat of the sun, laid bare without a burial. What a gruesome memory. Could it have been the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem? This is all speculation of course, and Ezekiel lived in exile in Babylon before and after the fall of Jerusalem. Why were the bones of these warriors (or of an indigent people) left exposed without a burial; as a warning, as a punishment? There were cultures which left bodies exposed to the elements but for many who took great attention to burying their dead, leaving them exposed piled insult upon the physical defeat. For Israel this vision spoke of moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

Ezekiel was a man of vivid imagination and symbolism; a man of deep spirituality and holiness, preaching the need for personal spiritual renewal and penitence and that of the nation. This alone would bring God's redemption and restoration of the Temple and the nation to Jerusalem. This alone would put flesh muscle and sinew, this alone would breathe life back into these dry bones of a nation's spiritual life. This alone would restore the nation to their homeland, a nation who had lost all hope. God would never abandon his people.

It is the Spirit of God of course which brings about this resurrection. "Ruach" meaning breath, wind and spirit is used throughout this passage. That same spirit which moved across the earth at creation, which breathed new life into the dry bones of Ezekiel, which empowered the disciples at Pentecost, which inspired the formation of the Church and the writing of the Gospels, still can renew us and our Church.



As I was writing this I read a letter in the February Edition of Life and Work entitled “Heading for the Abyss” by Rev Jim McNeil of Alva, looking for a new vision for the Church, reminded me of the Vision of Ezekiel. Good sermon material I thought.

### [Psalm 130](#)

Every human emotion is expressed in the Psalms, joy, delight, fear, anxiety, sadness and grief and estrangement from God. However as an expression of deep anguish and despair this Psalm stands alone; and as a Psalm of hope and trust it is matchless. For anyone who has been in so desperate a situation this Psalm not only helps vocalise that despair but gives blessed assurance and reassurance that God’s constant love not only forgives all wrongs but will carry us through everything.

Who in such circumstances has not felt abandoned by God, who when things go wrong through family or personal illness has not felt, “God has turned away from me, I must have done something really bad.” In that situation we desperately desire not only reconciliation with God but that God comes and makes all things right. Like the Watchmen looking for the dawn, those whose sleeplessness comes from trouble or grief will recognise this image.

“From the depths of my despair, I call to you,” says the Psalmist in verse one, speaking of the Hebrew belief in Sheol the land of the dead, into which the dead were believed to sink never to reappear. He is in hell at that moment. And longs for God to carry him through as God allowed the people to pass through the waters of the Red Sea.

David is accredited with the Psalms but didn’t write all or perhaps even any of them. However I personally find it comforting that David may in his darkest moment – perhaps the death of his child, have been in a personal hell, that needed God’s forgiveness and to carry him through.

The Whole Nation at times of their darkest moments would cry out to God waiting for divine forgiveness and in the vivid metaphor wait for God’s deliverance as is God’s Covenant promise, as the watchman waited for dawn.

Those who have walked the floor longing for the morning realise how long it seems to take for morning to break and it is always darkest before dawn.



## [Romans 8: 6-11](#)

Life and death; physical and spiritual; the way of the flesh or the way of the Spirit are the themes of these few verses. Paul may have been thinking of the choices of his ancestors (Deuteronomy 30: 19-20) “I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God’s blessing and God’s curse... Choose life.” We want to choose life but the ways of the flesh are all too... and their call drowns out the voice of God.

The Covenant Promise of Israel was to a life of security in the land promised from Moses time. Life in Christ is very different as it is personal as opposed to that of the Community or nation; life for Paul is life in all its fullness here and through all eternity; death means separation from God. This is the finale for those whose only interest is in satisfying bodily desires. Nobody wants to be an enemy of God, controlled by our human nature, yet how often we forfeit our inheritance and our special relationship with our creator and redeemer by turning away from God.

Throughout his letters we can see how important it was to Paul how we live here and now. We can either “live in Christ” and have “Christ live in us”, or unthinkably we live without Christ.

The Spirit filled life is full of creativity, energy and intimacy with our God now and always. It is a life lived with the immense power of God – the power that raised Jesus from the dead. To Paul the choice is frustratingly easy – Choose life and live by and with the Spirit! The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

## [John 11: 1-45](#)

John’s Gospel is all about the power of God which Jesus used in all his miracles and signs proving that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, The Son of God. The story of the raising of Lazarus is the sixth of seven signs John cites as proof.

It is of course no coincidence that John tells this miraculous story here as a precursor to the greatest sign of all – the resurrection.

As John himself says, (20: 31) his purpose in writing his Gospel is so that people would believe that Jesus is the promised saviour and believing in him receive eternal life.



John builds up his body of proof through the signs of power but also through the “I am” sayings, recalling Moses asking God’s name (Exodus 3) “They will ask me, “What is his name?” So what can I tell them?” “God said, “I am who I am. The one who is called I AM sent me to you.”

I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life, I am the vine, I am the way, the truth and the life, I am the resurrection and the life (verse 25) etc says Jesus.

The crux of the story (apart from the raising of Lazarus) is Martha’s faith. She gradually realises and believes expressed in her moving confession of faith in verse 27. Yet even at the moment of the opening of the tomb her faith is not enough to believe that her brother, really will “come forth”. (verse 38)

Much could be made of the role reversal of the two women. Remember on a previous visit Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet and Martha rushing about cooking and then complaining only to be rebuked by Jesus to get her priorities right. Yet here as soon as Martha hears that Jesus is coming she rushes away out to meet him though “Mary stayed in the house.”

Perhaps for me the most wonderful part of this story is Jesus’ reaction. Verse 33. When Jesus saw them weeping and saw her weeping, “his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved.” The English translations of the original Greek text do not come near to expressing how deeply moved Jesus was.

The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead shows Jesus’ divine power over death itself, it also shows him as a wonderfully sensitive, caring and loving human being. He was moved by their grief but he grieved himself for he loved them. Their faith in him that Lazarus would not have died if he had been there touches him too and shows the depth of their friendship.

As John tells the story he so beautifully and cleverly reveals the true nature of Jesus as both human and divine. His humanity is revealed in the very real emotions he expresses.

“I am the resurrection and the life” says Jesus and then proves he has power over life and death itself as the son of God.



## Sermon Ideas

### OMG (an Idea I thought could be developed as a sermon)

You will have seen the advert on TV and on Billboards. A woman leaves her handbag on top of a taxi only to realise what she has done as the taxi speeds away! The Royal Bank of Scotland, of course, comes to the rescue with cash. I've done that twice! I once left my handbag on top of my car and on another occasion I left a large plastic baby changing box on top of my car. Why did I put it there? I haven't a clue. Fortunately my sister witnessed both events as she was waving me goodbye from her door and I got them both back. However the baby changing box was never the same again!

The adverts read "For those OMG moments". We all have these moments but OMG is not a phrase I use, ever (except see below)! I was brought up as a Baptist and at the rebellious age of 16 I remember the first time, and last time, I blasphemed to show off to my friends, never to forget it. I really did expect a thunderbolt of lightning to strike me dead!

I do use this very popular phrase OMG and the name of God - but only with reverence, hope, gratitude, despair at times and always with love. Yet so many people use the name of God all the time. I am personally astounded how often people say OMG in the normal run of things. Do they actually realise they are doing it and funnily many of them would profess to no faith and belief in that God at all, yet use God's name in vain. A bit of a hobby horse of mine! There I am off it.

It occurred to me though that the raising of Lazarus would be an OMG moment used in the real "religious" sense, though the Jews would not have used this phrase either!

What OMG moments have you had?

With reverence, the stars on a cloud free night sky at Ballantrae, South Ayrshire. There are so many it is awesome. O My God how great you are!

With gratitude, O My God my new grandchild is just beautiful. Thank you for her safe arrival.

With despair, O My God help me, help me, help me.

With hope, O My God, If only I could talk with her once more – I will!



With love, O My God, You love me so much you knew me before I was formed in my mother's womb. You love me so much you sent Jesus to be my saviour. O Lord my God how great you are!

### **Why?**

One of the difficult things to understand in this passage is that Jesus, knowing his friend was very close to death, deliberately stayed away for another two days. It beggars belief that he would not have reacted instantly and hurried to his friend's side.

On visiting a parishioner, I discovered him slumped on the floor, clearly having just had a stroke and I knew very well that the quicker they could get to hospital and the quicker they were treated the more certain were their chances of surviving. It is the same with other serious accidents and heart attacks, the quicker the person is treated, the quicker they get to hospital the better.

Not only that, it is inconceivable that Jesus would not hurry to comfort Mary and Martha whose hearts would be broken at the loss of their brother, even if he did not, or did not want to achieve the miracle of resurrecting Lazarus.

The reason as we read is so that "God would be glorified and the disciples would believe."

One episode of the original Star Trek series has Captain Kirk pitted against a megalomaniac computer, which he defeats with just one word... Why? The computer can't cope with this question and disintegrates thus Captain Kirk saves the whole of humanity!

In any tricky or heartbreaking situation, the question Why? is always on our lips. Why has this happened to me, why sickness, why loss of a job, why bereavement? Often, especially when grief is most raw we feel that God has abandoned us, that the heavens are silent. We desperately need God to intervene; we desperately need a Superhero to come to our rescue and when that doesn't happen we cry out from our anguish.

Is this passage telling us that this is so that God may be glorified, that like the disciples we might believe? I don't believe that, but it is a miraculous thing that when we are on the edge of giving up hope, when life seems at its worst and darkest, it is at that moment that God can touch our souls – so often through someone else. To trust and to wait is so very hard, but that is what we must do. For we know "that in all things God works for good with those who love him..." (Romans 8: 28).



## Prayers

### Collect

Almighty God,  
your Son came into the world  
to free us all from sin and death.  
Breathe upon us with the power of your Spirit,  
that we may be raised to new life in Christ,  
and serve you in holiness and righteousness  
all our days;  
through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord.

### Call to worship

We have come home to God,  
We have come home to listen,  
We have come home to learn.  
We have come home to worship.

### Opening prayer

Gracious and loving God, we come to you from the business of our lives to find your peace; we come bringing our sadness for your comfort, our tears, that you will dry them, our hopes and our dreams that you might make them a reality. We come to be renewed by your spirit, to have our faith strengthened and to hear your life giving word.

Once again inspire our failing faith, recharge our commitment, redirect our thoughts and actions into the way of Christ. Make this and every day a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus and the new life we find in him. Speak that we may know we are on holy ground. Touch us that we feel your presence transform us and send us out to touch others with you love, through Jesus Christ... Lord's Prayer.





### **Prayers of Intercession**

For the glories we see around us in this wonderful world we give you thanks; for the joy of loving and living, for the gift of life, precious and vulnerable though it may be, we give you thanks and praise. We thank you that we each are precious in your sight.

We thank you for Jesus and that through his resurrection a glorious future awaits us and that we are born again into a rich and full life with you here and now.

Help us to put that richness and fullness to good use.

For those experiencing injustice and persecution, for those defeated by fear of loss, for those affected by grief or illness for those despairing that their God will ever come to them, breathe new life by your spirit, bringing solace and peace and courage.

We thank you loving God, for the Communion of saints, for those who are with you; those who have passed through the shadow of death and sit with you in the place we call heaven.

May their memories and their faith inspire and comfort us, through you spirit we feel their closeness in the thin veil that separates us. For the hope we have, for the joy of knowing that love never ends but goes on for all eternity, we give you thanks and praise.

In the silence we bring before you those closest to our hearts and those who need a special mention this morning...

### **Prayers of local or national concern...**

With our offerings of money we offer our lives believing that your name will be glorified and our faith increased, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

### **Sending**

Go out into the world as the people of God in this place, and may the God who raised Jesus from the dead grant you grace,

The son who gave his life for you give you peace,

and the Spirit who is with you day by day, inspire you to greater service both now and forever more. Amen



## Time with Children

As an introduction to miracles I have often used scientific experiments (small miracles) i.e. dirty water adding bleach which cleans it. You can find these on the Internet. This site has Diet Coke volcano, vinegar and baking soda volcano which are messy but amazing. <http://www.sciencekids.co.nz/experiments.html>.

There is also a face cloth that you can buy which is folded up really tiny and when immersed in water it unfolds quite dramatically. Also, an Origami flower which unfolds in water.

There is also a plant that looks dead and miraculously comes to life when immersed in water.

## Musical Suggestions

CH4 596	Breathe on Me, Breath of God
CH4 557	O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go
CH4 404	I danced in the morning.
CH4 352	O for a thousand tongues to sing...
CH4 168	God weeps
CH4 552	O for a closer walk with God
CH4 261	Father eternal ruler of creation.
CH4 734	O Christ you wept
CH4 689	Just as the tide
CH4 133	Source and Sovereign



## Additional Resources

### Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

### Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



### Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

### Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

### Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Margaret Whyte for providing us with this Sunday's 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.*

