



Parramatta
Mission



uniting
church
in Australia
Synod of NSW & ACT

Lenten Devotions 2020

Week 5

Parramatta Mission

Uniting Church in Australia



Lent commenced on Ash Wednesday, 26th February, preparation the church for Easter. From Ash Wednesday to Easter is 40 days, not counting Sundays, and correlates with Jesus being in the wilderness for forty days after his baptism, tempted, yet found without sin. Christians the world over give attention during this time to their relationship with God, reflecting upon growth in faith, how the faith is expressed in relationship with others. This year the pastoral team are encouraging Lenten devotions through providing a daily set of Bible readings and reflections. A Bible reading is chosen for each day, and a member of the team will write a brief reflection for that day. You are encouraged to use these reflections as part of the daily devotions, using prayers of your choice. If you have other devotional material, you might like to either suspend, or augment that material with what is provided through the newsletter. The daily prayer guide from the Uniting Church is also included, for those who wish to take this up.

Reflections will be written by:

The Old Testament: Rev Dr Clive Pearson,

Psalm: Rev Dr Amelia Koh Butler,

Epistle: Rev Dr Manas Ghosh,

Gospel of John:

Rev Christine Bayless Kelly,

Gospel of Matthew: Rev Keith Hamilton

Monday, 23rd March:2020

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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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." ⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then 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.' ¹²Therefore 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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. (NSRV)

REFLECTION

Ezekiel 37 : 1-14

Every time I hear this passage read I hear an echo in my head of the 19th century spiritual: 'Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones (3X), Now hear the word of the Lord. Toe bone connected to the foot bone. Foot bone connected to the leg bone'. What we have here is a surprising vision of new life, a hope that lies beyond the imagery of death and lifelessness. At this point I find myself overtaken by the images of horror that came to world-wide notice in the aftermath of the Holocaust and later expressed in films like response to the atrocities committed in Cambodia: *The Killing Fields*. For much of the book of Ezekiel the message of the prophet had been harsh and unrelenting: the Babylonians would soon be at the gates of Jerusalem. The people of Israel were defeated and their leaders carried into exile. Over a period of more than 20 years the prophet received visions. In the beginning they were ones of judgement and imminent destruction, but now this grim scene in the valley lies before us: it is coming to life again. It is not a blind optimism. It is not a case of our best projections or a matter of hoping against hope. It is through the will of God that this hope emerges and the possibility of new life lived in faithfulness to the covenant God made with the people of Israel.

Prayer

Lead us through the dark times, God of Jesus Christ. Breathe new hope and energy into the limbs and bones of your people. Knit us together for Christ's sake.

Clive Pearson

Tuesday 24th March 2020

Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

2 Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

4 But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

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

6 my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

8 It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

REFLECTION

When you are your lowest point, who is able to respond? While friends and relatives may want to help, perhaps it is the Spirit of God who is able to open us to comfort and hope. Sometimes we do not have anything – no energy nor imagination – to be able even contemplate seeking or receiving help. Sometimes help and cope break through the fog of despair to remind us that God is the source of goodness and healing.

PRAYER

In Silence, allow God to work inside you...

Amelia Koh-Butler

Wednesday 25th March 2020

Romans 8:6-11

⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through  his Spirit that dwells in you

REFLECTION

Its the fifth Sunday in Lent and we are just one week away from the start of the Holy Week. We are aware of what we would be observing on the Friday in the Holy Week. Death. Death is not an easy subject to deal with, especially at this time when all medias are plastered with the news of death from corona virus from all over the world.

In this time of fear and death we hear from Paul about the wonderful gift that we have been given through faith in Christ – *“The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead.”* This Spirit – “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead” has profound impact upon our lives for it lift our minds from death – to life and peace.

As we look around the world at this moment it seems death wins out over life. But that's Friday of the Holy Week and we, the people of post resurrection know all too well that death was not the final word but resurrection on the Easter morning. So in the midst of panic, fear and death all around let us be convinced that the “Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead” is at work in us – the “Spirit of life and peace.”

Manas Ghosh

Thursday 26th March 2020
John 11: 1-16 Death or life?

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But 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." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Reflection

Jesus knew that his friend Lazarus was ill and yet he did not rush to his side. Even though he surely knew the pain, struggle and anticipatory grief Mary and Martha would have been going through, he did not hurry. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John it was Mary who had anointed Jesus' feet with oil and wiped them with her hair. There was a friendship between Jesus, Lazarus, Mary and Martha which speaks into the delaying tactics of Jesus. Even though he loved them he waited for 2 more days. Why? Perhaps there is a hint in verse 4- that 'this will not end in death'- and the correlation with 3 days. Perhaps there was something here to foretell of another death, 3 days and then a resurrection.

Christine Bayliss Kelly

Friday 27th March 2020

John 11: 17- 45 From Grief to Joy

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸When 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." ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The 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. ³²When 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." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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 four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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." ⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Reflection

This longer part of the reading has the interaction between Jesus, his disciples and the grieving sisters of Lazarus. When Martha goes to meet him there is a conversation about resurrection and what that means. Here Jesus asks her about her belief and there is a profound statement. ²⁷*She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."* This is an amazing statement of faith- said by a woman! This follows on from another two verses which is used so often to speak of eternal life. Another of Jesus' I AM statements is seen in verses 25 and 26. And into this place of grief, Jesus comes and sees his friend dead- and Jesus weeps (verse 35). Yet the power of God is such that the very laws of nature are overturned and Lazarus is raised back to life. Interestingly the name Lazarus is often used in wider society- yet for us, it is a strong leadup to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus himself.

Christine Bayliss Kelly

Saturday 28th March 2020

Matthew 7:13-20

13 Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad leading to destruction and many are those who go in through it; 14 for the gate is narrow and the way leading to life is narrow, and few are those who find it. 15 Beware of false prophets who come to you in clothes of sheep, but within are greedy wolves. 16 From their fruits you will know them. Are grapes gathered from thorn or figs from thistles? 17 So every good tree produces good fruit but the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor a corrupt tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire. 20 Therefore you will know them from their fruit.

(Translation by Keith Hamilton)

REFLECTION

There have been many occasions when I have been on a farm, driving along a track and come upon sets of gates that lead to two different paths. Which way? Which gate to take? This can be a metaphor for life when we come to a decision point. How do we make a decision of which way to go? Of course, we do that every day in minor matters like which brand of toilet paper, but the important decisions may not appear as significant until we have passed through the gate and am well down the path. The teaching from earlier in the sermon that includes such things as: 'love enemies,' 'do to others as you would have them do to you,' 'seek first the kingdom of God,' 'don't be anxious,' pray with humility, speak into this matter. Values are clarified when under stress; if we ditch the values when under pressure, they were never our values, and the values we favour under stress are our real values.

Keith Hamilton

Sunday 29th March 2020

Matthew 7:21-29

21 Jesus continued his sermon saying, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in the heavens. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and expelled demons and did many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me those who do works of lawlessness. 24 Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and does them shall be likened to a prudent man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain came down and the rivers came and the winds blew and fell against that house, and it did not fall; for it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them shall be likened to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain came down, and the rivers came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell, and great was the fall of it." 28 And it came to pass, when Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

(Translation by Keith Hamilton)

REFLECTION

And so it came to pass that the Sermon on the Mount came to an end. It began with the beatitudes and ends with the parable of the house on the sand or rock, and lots of water. The kingdom of heaven is an important theme in Matthew's Gospel. The Lord's Prayer, embedded in the Sermon on the Mount, prays for God's kingdom to come on earth. Affirmations and prayers are vacuous without action. Hearing the words and doing nothing is not hearing. Hearing the words and doing what Jesus teaches is to enter the gate of the kingdom of God. It is to build a life on solid ground, not on sand. Here is not a threat, but wisdom for life. We do not have to look too far to see the outcome of building one's life on faulty foundations. We probably can even point to some of our own life's experiences. It is worth reminding ourselves of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Reading Matthew 5 though to 7 can be a useful spiritual exercise.

Keith Hamilton

