



**Leigh Memorial Congregation
Parramatta Mission
Uniting Church in Australia
Lent 5
29 March 2020**

The gathering of the People of God

(In response to sharp rise in number of Corona virus infected people in NSW, and in compliance with Uniting Church of Australia NSW & ACT Synod's strong recommendation, the Church Council have decided to suspend all meetings and gatherings including Sunday worship. As a result, this is the first time in the 135 years of its history Leigh Memorial will not be open for services until further notice.

This is a full worship service including a reflection prepared by Rev Dr Manas Ghosh for this Sunday, 29.3.2020. for people to worship from the safety of their home. Prayers of the people are mainly focussed on corona virus, its effect on people and seeking God's grace to cope with it. The hymns/songs can be said as prayers if not possible for solo/family singing. Have a blessed worship!)

Greetings and Welcome:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Welcome to worship God in the cyber space which is infused with God's presence.

Call to Worship:

Coming from traditional place of worship
that we have enjoyed over many years,
**God bids us to celebrate this day,
in the cyber space
which is full of new possibilities.**

Coming with our breath taken away by panic and fear,
**the Holy Spirit breathes new life within us,
renewing our connection with God
and with one another.**

Coming to worship seeking a hope that will endure,
**Christ unbinds the fetters that hold us in death,
speaking to us words of hope and new life,
and building community for holy service.**

Hymn: Together in Song 106

(There is a powerful story behind this popular hymn which is quite relevant. It was written by a Lutheran Pastor named Martin Rinkart (1586-1649 CE) who lived in Eilenburg, Germany, and faithfully served his people throughout the troubling time of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648 CE) between the Catholics and the Protestants.

Since Eilenburg was a city surrounded by walls, the refugee population grew rapidly. The terrible war situation was compounded by the horrible plague of 1637 that claimed about six thousand lives. Rinkart conducted forty to fifty funerals a day. One of those being his own wife's. His parish was ravaged by war, plague, death and economic disaster. Amid the catastrophic social and personal loss, Rinkart penned this great hymn affirming his faith in the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.")

1. Now thank we all our God,
with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom the world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

2. O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us.
Lord keep us in your grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all harm
in this world and the next.

3. All praise and thanks to God
who reigns in highest heaven,
to Father and to son
and Spirit now be given:
one Lord in highest heaven:
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
who ever was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Prayer:

God of life, present and promised,
you are the One to whom we call:
for you are the One who hears,
and you are the One who brings us new life
in the midst of fear, despair and death
with your grace and love and power.

Lead us in our time of worship,
as we gather in our homes, nursing homes,
hospitals and places of self-isolation,
that we may hear your words of comfort, courage and hope;
be prepared to follow your lead
in places where life is at risk—
places where hope seems far away,
places where dreams die during sleep.

When we leave this worship space, O God,
help us live out our faith
in our families, among our friends and in our communities,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

We are in the fifth week of Lent. The Cross is just round the corner where Jesus gave his life for our salvation. How is our Lenten journey going? Can we spend a few moments in silence reflecting on this journey and sharing with Jesus the challenges, fears and despair we are facing in this journey so he can restore us and rejuvenate us for the rest of our journey.

(Time for silent confession)

Gracious and Patient God, we come before you with so many things which weigh us down. We would like an "easy" faith, one that doesn't cause us to look within ourselves, to identify those many ways in which we have forsaken you. But faith is never easy. It requires our very souls. Forgive us, God, for all those things which we have neglected to do that would have helped someone else to be closer to you. Heal our hearts from the wounds which have been inflicted upon us by the anger and misunderstandings which occur in relationships. Prepare our lives to be of service to you. In silence we wait. We long for your presence and your healing touch. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon and Declaration of Forgiveness:

God is merciful. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Feel the healing, loving power of God in your lives, for it is given to you through Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer: *(In the spirit of the Lord's Prayer feel free to pray in your own language)*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the times of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours for ever and ever. Amen.

Passing of the Peace: (You may hold your two hands gently for some moments and think of those people you would like to pass on the 'Peace of the Lord'.)
The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

The Service of the Word

Bible Readings:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Valley of Dry Bones

37 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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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."

7 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. 8 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. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 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.' 12 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. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 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."

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

John 11:1-14

The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,[a] “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 4 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.” 5 Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6 after having heard that Lazarus[b] was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” 8 The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 9 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. 10 But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” 11 After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.”

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!

Reflection:

We have two stories of death.

The first one from Ezekiel dates to 6th Century BCE when the then Superpower Babylon conquered Judah, demolished the city including the Jerusalem Temple, took the people captive to Babylon and forced them to live in ghettos in miserable conditions. Among the captives was a priest named Ezekiel. He knew firsthand what the exiles meant when they cried out in anguish, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry, bleached and brittle bones painfully but most accurately portray an exiled nation – despaired, dispirited and desolate – almost dead.

The second story is about Martha and Mary who lost their dear brother Lazarus. While Lazarus was unwell the sisters had sent an SOS message to their friend Jesus, who for some unknown reason delayed and Lazarus died. John reports that four days later when Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus was not only dead, but stinkingly dead, sealed in a tomb.

For the last three months these two tragic scenarios are being repeated every day as we have been watching helplessly the report of death from Corona virus coming from around the world. The number of death is growing exponentially. For many of this generation never have these two stories come so close to home.

The world is in the grip of Corona virus' fear. It is sapping the vitality of our life and wreaking havoc on human life, on commerce and economics. We are feeling like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision; like Lazarus we are entombed in our fears and anxieties.

Besides the Corona virus there are other valleys of dry bones right at this moment, like people in Syria, in earthquake ravaged Croatia, and our own people in bushfire ravaged places. Many of them are languishing in the midst of no life, if life means purpose, possibilities and hope. So what Ezekiel saw in a vision is a reality for so many people here and around the world right at this moment. It is our story. It is today's story. So let's see what these two stories have in store for us.

In the vision God asks Ezekiel what must seem like a trick question, "Can these bones live?" Considering his options Ezekiel's only faithful reply is, "God, you know."

Of course such a thing seems impossible. It would be impossible for the exiled to have any hope for a better day, a better future. But Ezekiel knew and we know that we are dealing with God here. This is the same God who led the people out of slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land.

But many ask if it is the same God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt why did he desert them in their hour of need and let them be taken away into captivity. Many of Ezekiel's contemporaries must have felt that if God had been there they would still be home and in possession of their promised heritage. And it is not just Ezekiel, Martha and Mary had the same question, "Lord if you were here my brother wouldn't have died. Where were you?"

Maybe people in Wuhan, well, you might say they are atheist, but people in Italy, Spain, UK, USA, Australia and many other places are asking the same question, "God where are you?" Some, like the sisters, even lament "Jesus, you are late."

Did God abandon his people? Was Jesus late?

Let me share with you the story of little Johnny. Johnny's parents strictly instructed him to get back home from playing every afternoon no later than 5pm. Johnny was good at following his parents' instruction.

But one day after the Daylight Saving time went into effect, he was late. When he finally came home, a few minutes before 6, his mother scolded him for being late. "You know you are to be home by five," she said, "and here it is nearly six."

Puzzled, little Johnny pointed out the window. "But the light," he protested, "it's the light that tells me when to come home."

Realizing what had happened, his mother smiled and gently explained, that the day before, the time had been changed, that everyone had reset their clocks, and now, the daylight lasted longer. Johnny's eyes narrowed. "Does God know about this?" he asked suspiciously.

In a childlike way, this little boy shared John's theological justification for Jesus' delay. Jesus wants us to know that with God daylight lasts longer than death.

And that's the first lesson of these stories, God does not go on vacation or abandon us when we suffer. We make mistakes. We drift away from God. We even abandon God. But God doesn't. God doesn't hide his face from us when we are afflicted, but God is right there, in the midst of our pain and suffering, sharing our burdens and offering us his love, comfort and strength. In the gospel story we hear the shortest but most profound verse in the Bible – "Jesus wept." Yes, God in Jesus weeps when we weep. God is weeping for every single victim of Corona virus. God is not an unmoved mover. God is right beside us.

The second lesson is, despair, depression, disease, even death – either figuratively or literally, are not the last word. The last word is God's power that can bring new life even out of death. God not only heard the cry of the exiled, he breathed new life into those dry, brittle bones and the exiled returned to their homeland and rebuilt their lives. Jesus called Lazarus from the dead into new life and Lazarus came out. God brought from death to life the Jesus of Nazareth. Through the risen Christ we too are promised of resurrection to eternal life. This promise is as real and powerful for us while we live on earth as it is a hope for us when we die. This power of resurrection empowers us to get over this crisis.

The third and the final lesson is, today God wants *us* to be his instruments of bringing new life to people around us. Just as God asked Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones, just as Jesus asked those un-named people to roll away the grave stone and unbind Lazarus' grave clothes, he asks *us* to bring the good news of Jesus' love and acceptance, comfort and strength, hope and peace to those who are entombed inside their despair and depression, illness and suffering, isolation and loneliness.

Friends, the Corona virus is wreaking havoc on people's lives, and in this time of crisis God is calling you and I to be the instruments of his love, compassion, kindness, friendship and practical help to those who are entombed in their suffering, fear, helplessness and isolation that they may feel the power of resurrection. And there are many ways we can help God. We can bring the good news of new life with words of hope, with loving deeds, through generosity, through prayer. There is something for everyone of us to do.

"Social distancing" has become the new normal. We need physical distance but not human isolation, especially for the most vulnerable. We must find new ways to be together, as community building is essential for communal health and the common good. Turning from physical contact with others must not cause us to turn away from each other, but rather turning to each other in better, deeper, and healthier ways. Every hand we don't shake must become a phone call we make. Every 1.5 meters of distance we put between ourselves and another must become a thought about how we could help that other if the need arise.

This is the time to BE the church to our neighbours, helping out in whatever ways we can in the name of Jesus. The healthier and fitter can run errands, mow lawns, take out garbage bins etc. for their older neighbours. One person can shop for several others and leave the food on doorsteps. We also need to continue our advocacy, demanding that federal, state, and local governments take responsibility to serve the common good by caring for the most needy and vulnerable.

There are many around us who are living a lifeless life, just like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision. Just like Lazarus they are entombed in their pain, suffering, problems and brokenness. Can these bones live? That's the question God asked Ezekiel. And that's the question God asks you and me as we continue our Lenten journey.

Offering and Dedication: (You may keep aside your weekly offerings and bring them to the church when its possible, or you can talk to one of our office staffs on 98912277 to arrange for a direct debit. Thanks.)

For all left by the side of society, for all whose strength has vanished, for all whose bones are brittle with despair, may our gifts bring hope and healing, peace and plenty, in your name and in your love. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayers of the People:'

Let us now join our voices with the never ceasing prayer of Jesus Christ for ourselves, our community and the whole world.

Loving God, the whole world is reeling under the threat of the deadly coronavirus which is causing unprecedented disruption to our normal life – public gatherings of large size including churches have been shut down; people are panic buying; medical professionals are racing to treat those infected and to developing a vaccine. This can be a time of great fear, despair and uncertainty. So today we especially pray for those who are infected with corona virus and affected by it.

Loving God, we pray for those who are suffering from corona virus or facing quarantine. May they feel your power of healing through the care of doctors and nurses. Take away the fear, anxiety, and feelings of isolation from people receiving treatment or under quarantine. Give them a sense of purpose in pursuing health and protecting others from exposure to the disease. Protect their families and friends and bring peace to all who love them.

O God, we pray for those who are at higher risk of developing the disease and more likely than others to become severely ill from this virus — the elderly and people with chronic health conditions. Protect them from harm and be their comfort in this time of uncertainty.

Loving God, we pray for those who are lonely, shut in and isolated that your company, your love may come to their life through our friendship and practical care.

O God, we pray for medical professionals, caregivers, researchers, and leaders responsible for decisions about fighting the new coronavirus. We pray for people making decisions that affect the lives and futures of our families, communities, countries, and the wider world. Inspire and invigorate people developing better tests to diagnose the virus, vaccines to prevent it, and protocols and communication to eliminate the disease's spread. May truth and empathy be the touchstones of people setting policies for our protection.

Loving God, we pray for those whose livelihood have been hampered by the effect of Corona virus – small business people, daily labourers, casual workers, victims of bushfire, drought stricken farmers, travel business related people just to mention a few. May their employers, the government and all of us may support these people at the time of this crisis.

As we endure this new normal in our lives, we pray earnestly for the heroic medical doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who are putting their lives on the line for helping the sufferers. May you give them strength and physical immunity during this time, so they can help push back against this ravaging virus.

We pray for the people of Croatia as they are suffering from the devastating earthquake. We pray for their leaders and aid workers that they may have your wisdom and strength to deal with this devastation.

We pray for our Uniting Church – its assembly, NSW and ACT Synod and its agencies and our Parramatta Nepean Presbytery. We pray for Parramatta Mission, our three congregations and the Korean Faith community that through our work at this time of grave difficulty we may bring Christ's hope to the communities.

We now take a few moments and silently pray for members of this church family who are unwell physically, emotionally and spiritually. May your healing touch be upon them that they may be made well and whole. For we ask all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Sending Forth of the People of God

Song: TiS 647*Refrain*

*Comfort, comfort all my people
with the comfort of my Word.
Speak it tender to my people:
all your sins are taken away.*

Though your tears be rivers running,
though your tears be an ocean full,
though you cry with the hurt of living:
comfort, comfort.

Every valley shall be lifted,
every mountain shall be low,
every rough place will be smoother:
comfort, comfort.

Refrain

Though your eyes see only darkness,
though your eyes can see no light,
though your eyes see pain and sorrow:
comfort, comfort.

Every night will have its morning,
every pain will have an end,
every burden will be lightened:
comfort, comfort.

*Refrain.***Words of Commissioning and Benediction:**

We are a people loved by God.

We will live as signs of this love.

We are a people blessed with hope.

We will live in light of this hope.

May the breath of God give you life;

May the compassion of Jesus Christ shape your life;

and may the power of the Holy Spirit stimulate your life.

Amen! May it be so!