



LENT 5A

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

421 STF – Empty, broken, here I stand, Kyrie eleison OR

163 STF – When listening prophets dare to speak

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

345 STF – And can it be OR

367 STF – When I was lost, you came and rescued me

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Hymn:

416 STF – There's a wideness in God's mercy OR

303 STF – I know that my Redeemer lives

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

370 STF – Breathe on me, Breath of God OR

318 STF – Christ, our King before creation

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

357 STF – Jesus – the name high over all OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

The Vine Services are compiled and produced by twelvebaskets.

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Call to worship

Come and meet us here, O Lord,
Help us to notice your presence in our midst,
In this holy time and space, and in every moment of our lives.
Come, Lord Jesus, by your Spirit we pray,
Amen.¹

Hymn:

421 STF – Empty, broken, here I stand, Kyrie eleison OR
163 STF – When listening prophets dare to speak

Opening Prayers

God of love and forgiveness,
We come before you today bringing all of who we are, all of who we have been and all of who we will be.
We bring our joys, our fears, our pains and our heartbreaks. We also bring all that we have done that we perhaps wish we had not done.
We bring all this to you, Lord, for we know your healing love washes us clean and refreshes us, makes us whole. In you, we are – and have always been – enough.
We ask for your forgiveness, we allow your love to bathe over us and we choose to walk with you as we continue on our journeys this day and always.
Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

[Prep: Some Golden Chocolate coins and some volunteers!]

Lent, leading to Easter week, was a really busy time for Jesus! We truly see the entirety of Jesus' ministry starting, ending, and being picked up by the disciples that leads to the thousands of years of the Church that we know now! Jesus taught in two key ways: Practical Example and Parables.

One of the most well known parables is the one about the Labourers in the Vineyard. Jesus had many ways of explaining what the Kingdom of God was like. To help with explaining this, I'll need a few volunteers!

[Have them line up in the order they came forward.]

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Hannah Baker

“God’s kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a pound a day, and went to work.

[Bring the first person forward and have them pretend to be digging.]

“Later, about nine o’clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went.

[Bring the next person forward and have them join the others pretending to dig.]

“He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o’clock. At five o’clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, ‘Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?’

[Bring the next person forward and have them join the others pretending to dig.]

“They said, ‘Because no one hired us.’

“He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

“When the day’s work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, ‘Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.’

[Hand out a single chocolate coin to each person in the line, starting with the last person first]

“Those hired at five o’clock came up and were each given a pound. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one pound. Taking the pound, they groused angrily to the manager, ‘These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.’

“He replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a pound, didn’t we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?’

“Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.”

What does parable mean for us? If we play a game where someone joins near the end do we all not win, and share in that celebration together? In our church do we not see all people as important to God: be they someone who grew up in the church, or joined last week? If this is how Jesus was saying the Kingdom of God is; how can we make this happen in our daily lives?

Let us pray.

Loving God,

may we be grateful for what we have, generous with our time and to those around us, and help us to be the kingdom builders in our daily lives.

Amen.³

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Annan-Hood

Hymn:

345 STF – And can it be OR

367 STF – When I was lost, you came and rescued me

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Hymn:

416 STF – There's a wideness in God's mercy OR

303 STF – I know that my Redeemer lives

Reflections on the readings

Reflect for a moment on the phrase 'In the midst of life we are in death'...

Perhaps these words are familiar to you? In the 16th Century they became part of the Church of England's burial service in the Book of Common Prayer, but they are much older than that. They are the opening words of a Latin Gregorian chant, possibly used first in a New Year's Eve service in the 1300s, but even that may have been quoting from a 10th Century battle song by a monk (Notker the Stammerer) in an abbey in Switzerland.

Ancient words, an ancient saying – 'Media vita in morte sumus'; 'In the midst of life we are in death'...

Perhaps as you reflect on these words, a particular time in your own life comes to mind... death is indeed an integral part of life; we all experience the death of friends and family members and we know too that we will all, one day, die. Perhaps we feel troubled by memories or fears of the future... take a moment now in quiet as we support one another in prayer and solidarity, for these words are true for us all... 'In the midst of life we are in death'.

[Take a brief pause, perhaps with appropriate music playing.]

The words are relevant to where we have reached in the church's calendar – today is the fifth Sunday of the season of Lent, so we are not far now from the death of Jesus on the cross. Today we enter 'Passiontide', the name given to these last two weeks of Lent when we focus even more closely on the suffering and death of Jesus as we follow his actions and words in the final weeks of his vibrant life. 'In the midst of life we are in death.'

The words are also called to mind by the readings set for today which include two of the best-known in the bible; from the Hebrew scriptures, the story of the valley of dry bones which somehow become living beings, and from the New Testament, John's record of the raising of Lazarus from death to life. 'In the midst of life we are in death' indeed.

Let's go briefly with the prophet Ezekiel to that visionary valley. Ezekiel was a priest and a prophet about six hundred years before Jesus, operating in and around Jerusalem, closely linked to the Temple. In chapter 37 of the book which bears his name, Ezekiel recounts a vision in which he is set down by the Spirit of the Lord in a valley full of bones, dry bones, so they have been there for a long time. In his vision God asks Ezekiel whether the bones can live and whilst his initial reaction – and ours perhaps – might be to say, 'No', he wisely replies, 'O Lord GOD, you know'. As we heard in the reading, God then tells him to prophesy to the bones, telling them that God will '*cause breath to enter you and you shall live*'. Ezekiel does as God commands and with a rattling noise, the bones come together,

with sinews and flesh, but no breath. So, God tells him to prophesy again to the ‘breath’ (or ‘wind’ or ‘spirit’) after which breath does indeed come into the bodies, ‘*and they lived and stood on their feet*’. What a vision! Not a little scary, I feel!

Ezekiel was prophesying at the time of the exile – the mass deportation of Israel to enemy territory, separated from their Temple and their worship - a time of unparalleled despair for the Jewish faith. So it is against that background that God uses this vision to teach the lesson that whilst Israel despairs of its future, saying ‘*our bones are dried up and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely*’ in fact, God has it in mind to bring new life. Death and life are always, inextricably, bound together.

The reading ends with a prophecy which sounds very close to what happened six centuries later in the story of Lazarus; God says ‘*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.

Jesus would have known the story of Ezekiel very well, perhaps these words were in his mind as he is taken to the tomb of a close friend, Lazarus. This is another story where life and death are woven together: Martha and Mary are alive and have questions for Jesus, both of them simply stating, ‘*If you had been here, my brother would not have died*’. The words are probably intended as a statement of faith and trust in Jesus, yet they also carry with them a poignant undertone of accusation and guilt... how many of us, faced with the news of the death of someone we loved, have not asked whether it could have been different? Whether if we had been there, or done something, or said something, the person would not have died – this is especially true when people we know and love end their own lives by suicide.

Jesus doesn’t respond directly to these words from his dear friends, although he does tell Martha, ‘*Your brother will rise again*’, leading to a brief conversation about the resurrection and what that might mean with Jesus then speaking the deeply significant words, ‘*I am the resurrection and the life*’.

We know that Jesus often visited and had hospitality from Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, so we understand that the death of Lazarus is a real source of grief to him too, and indeed, John records that he wept at the tomb. We know what happens next – Jesus orders that the tomb be opened and he calls Lazarus out. Once again, life and death are inextricably bound together.

Both these stories bring with them so many questions and both warrant much deeper reflection and study than we can do now, but I wonder if sometimes there is much to learn simply by sitting with the tension which is at the heart of both stories, the ever-present tension between death and life. Death and life are not two opposites to be separated out and kept apart, rather they are the threads of our very existence, woven together and always with us.

- As Lent draws towards its end, we have to embrace the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus and what they both mean for us;
- as we look at the world, we have to embrace the presence of life and death;
- as we look at the church, we may be tempted to react as Israel did in the exile and give up hope, but no, death is and always has been a part of life and we accept and learn from both.

Towards the start of the chapter from John's gospel, when Jesus and his disciples are discussing the illness and death of Lazarus, Thomas makes a very interesting remark. Once the disciples have understood that Lazarus is indeed dead and that Jesus intends to go to him now, even though that could be dangerous for him as the hostility against him from the Jewish authorities is now at a very high level, Thomas says '*Let us also go, that we may die with him*'.

How a man who can make such a suggestion as that was ever dubbed 'Doubting Thomas' is one of the great injustices of church history! It's an extraordinary expression of absolute trust in Jesus and in the path that Jesus is taking. In a sense, Thomas's words are the most challenging thing about this story because Thomas seems to recognise that 'In the midst of life we are in death'. That the whole matter of life and death is not straightforward, clear cut, black and white, but that there may be times when death is not an end but a beginning, not a defeat but a victory, not a reason for despair, but a reason for hope.

As we enter the final fortnight of Lent and approach the cross of Christ, can we say with Thomas, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'?

Some questions for reflection:

- What does the phrase, 'In the midst of life we are in death' mean for you? Are there difficult aspects to this idea which you need to share with others or contemplate quietly?
- It is often said that death is the great taboo of our society. Does it help to reflect on the interwovenness of death and life? What does the death of Jesus say about the place of death as part of life?
- Jesus clearly mourns the death of his friend, Lazarus. How important is it to take mourning and bereavement seriously? Do we do this as well as we could at church?
- Death cafés have become a feature of life recently; do you have any experience of this movement? (find out more at <https://deathcafe.com/>)⁴

Hymn:

370 STF – Breathe on me, Breath of God OR

318 STF – Christ, our King before creation

Prayers of intercession

God of life and death we bring our prayers in this season of Lent in the name of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, the living one who was dead but is alive for evermore.

We bring ourselves in prayer - our joys and sorrows, our triumphs and losses, our laughter and lament... (*a pause may be left here for silent prayer*). As we open our hearts before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

We bring our families and friends in prayer - all we know who are sick or in pain, who are anxious or depressed, weary or despairing... (*a pause may be left here for silent or spoken prayer*)... As we hold them before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

⁴ Reflection written by Jill Baker

We bring all who are facing death in prayer - those we know and those unknown to us in hospitals, care homes, situations of war and violence, praying too for those who support them... (*a pause may be left here for silent or spoken prayer*)... As we hold them before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

We bring our church in prayer - this congregation and other congregations in our circuit or ecumenical friends... (*a pause may be left here for silent or spoken prayer*). As we hold them before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

We bring our nation in prayer - the government, the health system, the education system, local leaders... (*a pause may be left here for silent or spoken prayer*). As we hold them before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

We bring our world in prayer - leaders of nations, people experiencing oppression and discrimination, all who work for peace and justice... (*a pause may be left here for silent or spoken prayer*). As we hold them before you, we pray for grace, for courage, for healing, for peace...

God of life and death we bring our prayers in this season of Lent in the name of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, the living one who was dead but is alive for evermore.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Lord of all life,

Thank you for the life that each of us is filled with this day.

Thank you for the gift of this day, and the gifts here given,

May you take each of our gifts and use them for your kingdom of justice and joy,

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

357 STF – Jesus – the name high over all OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

Until that moment,

Until we cast our crowns before God,

Lost in wonder, love and praise,

Until then, there is much work for us to do, in service of the Kingdom of grace,

Go out and serve the Lord,

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Jill Baker

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker