



Opening Prayer for Lent

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you found yourself in a situation which seemed bleak but was transformed. What made the difference?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 40:5 – 10

You have multiplied, O Lord my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.
**Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.**
Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required.
Then I said, 'Here I am;

in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

**I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.'**

I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;

see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.

I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;

I have not concealed your steadfast love

and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;

as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves,
and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,

let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,
and nothing in life or death or all creation
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.

Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Reading John 11:1 – 45

Sermon

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is an event which has inspired a lot of theological reflection down the years. It is central to how the story of Jesus is told within John's Gospel because it was the hostile reaction of some of the crowd that triggered the plot by the religious authorities to have him crucified. Of those seven signs and wonders found in the first twelve chapters of John's Gospel, it is amongst the most spectacular, and the dialogue preceding it contains one of the most famous of Jesus's 'I am' sayings, in which he declares himself to be "the resurrection and the life" (11:25). It also holds the shortest verse in the New Testament, which has generated much discussion amongst biblical commentators: Jesus wept (11:35). The reason is that the traditional view of God as both unchanging and impassable needed to be reconciled with this show of emotion by Jesus, and so it would become a key text in the development of the doctrine of the incarnation, affirming him as fully divine and fully human. Moreover, this scene has sparked various views of how Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, each reacted to Jesus' decision to delay coming to help them for two days, by which time Lazarus had died.

It's not surprising, therefore, that whole books have been written on this text, and in particular upon the relationships between Jesus and

the three siblings. For me, I have often been struck by the emotional reaction of Jesus to the tears of Mary and the professional mourners who surrounded her. It shows that Jesus was deeply affected by the death of one friend and the grief of others, and that compassion was the driving force behind his actions, even as John presents the lead-up to Lazarus being raised through a theological lens. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul asks where the sting of death is, given Christ has been raised up from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:55 – 57), but in that situation, Mary and Martha felt its sting very deeply, as it seems did Jesus himself. It offers a powerful reminder that we are not alone in our own losses and grief. At the height of the pandemic, much of my ministry was focused on funerals, which were especially hard to cope with given the restrictions on services and on how I could meet with the families. In the midst of the demands all of this placed upon me, returning to the story of Lazarus helped to sustain me, and keep me going. It reminded me that, even in the darkness of those times, God was there with me and understood what I felt, because in Jesus Christ, God too had known the sting of death.

It is interesting that Jesus' tears were met with mixed reactions from the onlookers, with some recognising the depth of his love for a man with whom he evidently had a great friendship (11:36), whilst others seemed to think him impotent to act despite his earlier works (11:37) in giving sight to a man blind from birth (9:1 – 7). One suspects that the latter group were the very same people who later sold Jesus out to the religious establishment of Jerusalem (11:46 – 57). For myself, I think there is something in setting aside both theological questions about the incarnation and the cynicism of those who were very quick to condemn, to focus instead on what this scene tells us about love.

Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, clearly loved and trusted Jesus and so that must have made his delay in coming to them really hard to bear, but by being honest with Jesus about their intense grief for their brother, they found the love of God at work. For his part, Jesus

wept as he was moved by the crying of his friends, but also because his overcoming death's sting once-and-for-all would lead him to the cross of Calvary. His tears were of borne of a deep love not just for the siblings but for everything and everyone God has made. Despite the hostility of some within the crowds, and the difficulties raised by John's presentation of events, this scene overflows with love.

So, as we reflect on the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, may we too be motivated by love in our words and actions, because the power of the love of God-in-Christ is that it simply goes on being there when it seems all hope is lost, and even in the toughest times, it means we are never alone. Thanks be to God. Amen

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Prayer walking can be a great way to practice looking for God in the area you live, especially in unexpected peoples and places.

Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,
we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those searching for light and hope right now,
especially in hospitals or hospices, and all caring for them.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those across the world who live in conflict zones,
and for refugees seeking sanctuary and life in other places.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those in positions of responsibility and authority,
and everyone carrying the burden of others' expectations.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those longing to see Jesus for themselves,
and all struggling to find God amid the turbulence of daily life.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell, sad, isolated, or bereaved,
and all finding it difficult to see any light at the end of tunnel.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ,
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross,
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Blessing

As you journey onwards in God's love,
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,
may you step forward boldly and act justly,
so that through you, all may know that they matter.
And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,
now and for ever. **Amen**