

## FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

21 March 2021

### Welcome

Welcome on the fifth Sunday in Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday and then Easter. But before we get to Easter there is Good Friday. We cannot get around Good Friday because we live in a Good Friday world in which Easter breaks in, again and again and again! God's love has the final word and God's covenant of love is written in our hearts "I am yours and you are mine." Let us open our hearts and minds as we come to learn, to be refreshed and renewed.....

### Hymn

As the deer pants for the water

### Opening Prayer

Creating God, loving Son, guiding Spirit, with springtime sun and the promise of new life, you awaken us and lift us up. We glorify your name for you are faithful to us through every season of the year and every season of life. We are grateful for your patience and persistence, drawing near to us even through the times we cannot draw near each other. Your promise of hope in Jesus Christ, drawing life out of the grip of death, means so much to us. Even as his cross looms on the horizon in this season of Lent, we praise you for Jesus' courage and compassion which bring renewal to us in the midst of our challenges. We praise you, O God, for the love that never lets us go. Amen.

### Scripture Reading

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 & John 12: 20-33

### Reflection

The context of the reading of Jeremiah is that of a Good Friday world. It is a moment in the history of the Hebrew people when things seemed at their worst. And there was no reason to hope or believe that things would get better any time soon. Jeremiah is prophesying to the people of Israel who lived in exile in Babylon. Years before the Babylonians had conquered their country, deposed their king and laid siege to Jerusalem as well as looted their place of worship, the temple. In exile, far away from home and with little hope for the future, the word from the prophet Jeremiah proclaims the new covenant God promises to the people. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." How wonderful

these words must have sounded to the exiles. God is promising a new beginning!

I think we know something of exile too. The church, and we as Christians, find ourselves relegated to the margins in our secular Western society. And it will be interesting to see what the new census will reveal about our numbers. Anyway, being more marginal may not necessarily be a bad thing as we have more freedom to be faithful and prophetic rather than aligning ourselves with political powers, as we did in the past. However, we may also regret that our voice is now like one crying in the wilderness. Will the government listen to the church leaders who have condemned the government intention to increase the UK nuclear weapon capacity? Will the government listen to the faith communities and charities raising their concern about the new anti-protest bill? Are our concerns getting a hearing? Long gone are the days when we were taken seriously and when we could feel more comfortable, respected and secure. And we are not alone. Many people of all faiths and none may feel dislocated in our society and world which has changed so much and continues to change at dazzling speed. Even if we ourselves may be living quite comfortable and privileged lives, of course with its usual ups and downs, we are acutely aware that we live in a society and world in which there is a huge gap between rich and poor, the well to do and those who are just scraping by. And this has been exposed again by the pandemic. We cannot but recognize the inequalities and see the consequences with our own eyes.....And that may also make us feel as if we are in exile, as we sit down by the rivers of Babylon, hanging our harps on the willows and weeping for the way things used to be or how things should be. But then God's word comes to us, promising a new start. God is not done with us yet. "The new covenant" God says "will not be like the covenant I made before" So what was wrong with the covenants before, the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with David...the covenant made with the people as they wandered in the desert, the covenant made through Moses at Mt Sinai? The problem was that all these new beginnings had a tendency of wearing off; people had a tendency of forgetting the terms and good purpose of the covenant. We needed Jesus to remind us of the terms and purpose of God's covenant: "You must love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and you must love your neighbour as yourself" Yet, how easy it is for us to forget...or to become lax about it, to become bored or restless. And so we turn away and break covenant with God. But God does not give up. "I will put my teaching within them and write it upon their hearts" God will write the covenant upon our hearts. In the place of exile, far away from their home and

temple, God comes to the people to transform their heart and soul. Staying true to the covenant is no longer a matter of following rules and regulations but is a matter of making room in our hearts for God. Again and again in the Bible the prophets declare that God desires mercy (loving kindness) not sacrifice (an offering to appease God). The most important gift we can make to God is the gift of our hearts, hearts that God's law of love of God and of neighbour are written upon. And that is really the reason that we worship each week, hopefully soon in our churches again: to be reminded again and again of the covenant God has written in our hearts and to learn to live accordingly. "You shall be my people and I will be your God. You are mine and I am yours" Just like the people of Israel we hear these words as words of promise. Despite our long history of unfaithfulness, our making and dancing around golden calves, our half-hearted attempts to make peace with justice, and our selfish tendencies, God still desires us to be God's people, to work with God in transforming the world to be what God intended it to be. A world in which we contribute to the flourishing of life, or life abundant, for all, not just the few. A world in which all God's people, of every gender, background, race, faith or none, feels secure and is free from poverty, injustice and oppression. No, surely God is not done with us yet...And so we look forward to a new day. And that new day comes every time we gather up courage and take a risk for the sake of that vision that is called God's kingdom of peace and justice. Jesus took that risk, ever faithful to God's writing on his heart. "Unless a grain of wheat dies" he said. No Easter without Good Friday but.....Easter is coming! Thanks be to God!

Hymn

I the Lord of sea and sky

Prayers

Steadfast God, in the midst of unending change and challenge, we give you thanks for your presence to sustain us. While we may find it hard to understand why things happen, we are grateful that you are with us. You understand our concerns and fears; you support and guide us; and you give us courage to face the unknown. We give thanks that you intend goodness for us; that your gift of faith is a solid rock which supports us; and that prayer gives us the hope you keep working in ways seen and unseen for goodness to prevail.

Loving God, in this time of uncertainty when there is much to be anxious about, we pray for the world you love. Send your healing Spirit to guide countries and communities as they continue to respond to the pandemic. Bless the work of medical researchers and health care workers in these stressful times. Bless the

plans to offer vaccine to all who want, in our country and all over the world. Send your healing Spirit to bring peace with justice to the troubled places in the world.....Bring care and comfort to those who have been hurt in conflict, wisdom to those who offer leadership in their communities, and courage to those who advocate for the most vulnerable. Send your healing Spirit to mend relationships between nations and within nations who find themselves in tension or turmoil. We pray for mutual understanding and respect to grow between people who look at each other with fear and suspicion. Open our hearts and minds to those whose situations and concerns we do not understand and bring your gift of reconciliation to us all. Send your healing Spirit to people we know and the earth you love. We remember before you friends and family in grief...relationships marked by tension...those facing difficulty at work or finding work...disagreements in our community and society...concerns about the environment we depend on....We pray for the continuing ministry of the church in our neighbourhoods and around the world. As we prepare to celebrate Easter and Christ's resurrection, help us plan safely and creatively. Send your healing Spirit to raise our hearts and our hopes with the promise of new life in Christ. Restore to us the joy of your salvation and sustain in us all a willing spirit. We pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying.....

### Offering

God of growth and new life, with our gifts we offer you our thanks and praise for the promise of spring and the promise of new life in Christ Jesus. Bless our gifts and through them, accomplish more than we can ask or imagine, as they bear fruit in the world you love, through Christ, our Lord.

### Hymn

Teach me to dance

### Blessing

Go in peace.....and may the love of God surround you, the grace of Jesus Christ uphold you and the Holy Spirit guide you on your way. Amen.