

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – March 29 2020**

Hello. My name is Bill Young and I am minister in the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches.

Worship in our churches is suspended at the moment because of the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic, so I am recording some thoughts on the weekly lectionary scripture readings to offer to and on behalf of the Group, via the Internet and social media. After the inaugural edition there were around a hundred visits to the podcast web-page over last weekend and the first few days of this week, which is great. Thank you for feedback which is of course always welcome. My contact details are no secret.

I will be persevering with the podcast on a weekly basis for now. At the end of this one there is a note about our plans for Easter Sunday morning.

### **Welcome to a podcast reflection for Sunday 29 March.**

As we prepare for a time of prayer and reflection we listen to a short piece of music.

*[Music: De Profundis, a medieval Gregorian chant from the 1994 album **Canto Gregoriano** by the Choir of the Benedictine Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos]*

Here is a version of

#### **Psalm 130<sup>ii</sup>**

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O God.  
Open your ears and give me a hearing.*

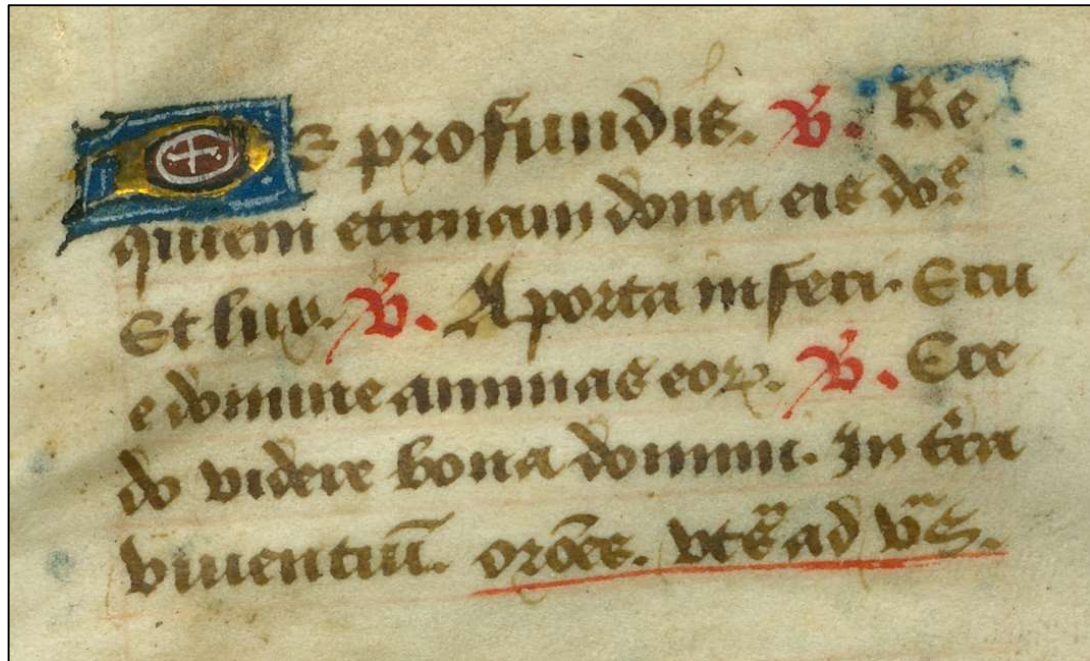
*If you, O God, took note of our sins,  
who could hold their head high?  
But you have chosen to forgive;  
and for this we revere you.*

*I wait for God, I wait in hope;  
my soul waits for my Maker  
more than those who wait for the morning,  
more than those who look for the dawn.*

*Hope in God, you faithful people,  
trust in God's constant love.  
God's power to liberate  
brings redemption from every sin.*

#### **Comment**

Every so often you see the first few words of this psalm rendered in Latin – I nearly said the *original* Latin! Not so original, of course, but it is the way in which the words and the sentiment of the psalm came across to Christians in early centuries of the Roman Church: *de profundis*. *De profundis* – *out of the depths*. You'll find these words at the beginning of a prayer in the Latin Mass for the departed. Our opening music in the podcast was a setting first sung by monks many hundreds of years ago.



The illustration on the web page and in the transcript of this podcast shows six lines in Latin on a piece of vellum I have, a leaf from a so-called 'book of hours', produced by monks in France around 1470. This was a reminder to the individual worshipper of the words of the mass, the first words of a prayer they would have memorised. 'De profundis' is followed by 'requiem eternam dona eis domine et lux' – lord, grant them eternal peace and light'.

Psalm 130 itself is a prayer from one who felt that he and his nation had sinned and as a result had sunk down to a low place. In our world there is a minority who in 2020 regard the coronavirus Covid-19 as some sort of judgement on a sinful planet. I disagree.

We should remember the time when Jesus himself was invited to see a disaster of his day as some sort of judgement. This is in Luke 13.1-9, when a tower, perhaps under construction or just badly built, had fallen on some people. He refused this interpretation, and instead used the event and a parable to illustrate God's openness to those who repent.

If there are lessons to learn from the way the current trouble originated or has spread, or the way people have reacted, let's learn those lessons. But let's not reinvent our loving and forgiving God as someone who will ever refuse us another chance to do better, if we truly try. That's not the sort of person (or even persons) that he is! That's not the God I believe in. I believe in the God who still shows us the 'constant love' in which the writer of Psalm 130 put his hope.

## Prayers

We pray...

Lord God our Father, out of the depths into which we have sunk, from a deep and dark-seeming place from which no one seems to know the way out, we call to you once again.

We call to you as people isolated for our own good and the good of the community. Help us to obey these new rules of community, even as we have tried to observe the long-established rules of behaviour which have their roots in your ancient commandments to your people.

We call to you as a local church unable to fulfil the whole of its mission in our traditional ways. Help us as we try out *new* ways. Show us what works and help us to address the needs of all and not just those with clever devices and new technology.

We call to you, Father, reassured that you are always there, that even when we cannot see you we may recognise your love in the service so many are giving during this difficult time.

In Jesus' words we gather our prayers together:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen*

### **Bible Reading**

John 11.1-44<sup>iii</sup>

Listen to this story from John's gospel in the period before Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover. In John's Gospel, chapter 11:

*Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.'*

*When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'*

*'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?'*

*Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the day-time will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.'*

*After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.' His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.*

*So then he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'*

*Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'*

*On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.*

*'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.'*  
*Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'*

*Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'*  
*Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'*  
*'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'*

*After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.'* When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

*When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'*  
*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked.*  
*'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.*

*Jesus wept.*  
*Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'*  
*But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'*

*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said.*

*'But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.'*

*Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?'*

*So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.'*  
*When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.*

*Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'*

Before we think about this amazing story, we will hear another psalm – this is a version of Psalm 121. The psalmist begins by wondering where on earth he is going to find help. He is answered by an affirmation of God's continuing and unsleeping presence – whether or not we realise that he is there.

[Those listening to the podcast will hear a version of the psalm written by John Bell of the Iona Community, 'Lifting my eyes up to the hills...'. Unfortunately our licensing arrangements do not allow us to publish the words online. Here is Psalm 121, as in the (Anglicised) New International Version of the Bible:

<sup>1</sup> *I lift up my eyes to the mountains –  
where does my help come from?*

<sup>2</sup> *My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

<sup>3</sup> *He will not let your foot slip –  
he who watches over you will not slumber;*  
<sup>4</sup> *indeed, he who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.*  
<sup>5</sup> *The Lord watches over you –  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;*  
<sup>6</sup> *the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.*  
<sup>7</sup> *The Lord will keep you from all harm –  
he will watch over your life;*  
<sup>8</sup> *the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
both now and for evermore.]*

## **The Raising of Lazarus, 2020**

John 11.25-26 is familiar as words of assurance from our funeral services...

Jesus said:

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

Now to the man or woman who just occasionally comes to church, and perhaps most often for the baptisms, weddings and funerals that punctuate human life in normal times, those words sound like a significant and public pronouncement, a public manifesto statement made perhaps to a crowd, a summing up by Jesus of his own purpose, shouted from the rooftops.

But no, we are shown in today's quite long scripture passage how these words are spoken 'one to one', Jesus to Martha.

Now there is some doubt over whether we can reliably believe that there was a single family such as we see described here. Martha and Mary appear in another Gospel – in Luke – with no mention of Lazarus, and in a setting that could be many miles from this village of Bethany. But if you will excuse me, I am going to take things at face value for these remarks, and we can grapple if we wish with the textual problems some other time.

So let's say that Martha, her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus were friends of Jesus. I sometimes wonder how Jesus managed for friends. Moving around from place to place would make it difficult for him. Having attained a certain celebrity might have made it difficult for him to differentiate those who were genuinely friendly from those who were seeking some of the fame for themselves. And of course having the spotlight on you means you may be reluctant to subject your friends to the same exposure, and perhaps to *danger* where the opposition of the Jewish authorities was concerned. But Martha and her family seem very familiar to Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, in the passage I've referred to, we have the short description of how Jesus is invited to intervene in a family squabble.

*"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

Every family has different personalities in it; and in that passage Jesus endorses the right of the dreamers and the practical ones each to have their own role.

We are constantly surprised, though that's not quite the right word, by the different ways our own children have turned out. Our Tasha trained to be a vet and started practising in the summer nearly seven years ago. I remember a couple of years during her studies when for her the run up to Easter meant a stint helping a farmer with his lambing, spending all night watching out for the next ewe to give birth, lending a hand, making sure the lambs were thriving afterwards before moving on to the next one. You can't get more practical than that.

Charles on the other hand (while not a dreamer) is an artist and not a scientist; we thought he was heading for a career in architecture, and he has two degrees in the subject, but now he is making money from his model-making skills. He can produce pictures and sketches where you can recognize what or who he is drawing – I'm more of an abstract man myself, unless I'm allowed to use a ruler or better still a computer.

So now and then we look at both our children and reflect how different they are from us and from each other – we wonder where they get it from. I wonder if Mary and Martha's parents had similar thoughts?

But at a higher level than this we are all alike. We like many of the same things and we react in similar ways to events.

So it was with Martha and Mary. In today's reading, when we hear again of this little family group, and how Lazarus the brother and presumably the breadwinner has first fallen ill and has then died, both Martha and Mary have their own opportunity to express their faith.

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Do you believe this?*

Martha replies, *"Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

When Mary meets Jesus, her expression of faith is bound up in what also amounts to a reproach:

*When 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."*

Lazarus himself has a non-speaking role. We see him in this passage, emerging from the tomb wrapped in the bandages with which they prepared his body. We see him again in a pen portrait of a meal that the family put on for Jesus, described at the beginning of the next chapter.

Again he doesn't talk, he is just described as being present while his sister Mary pours perfume on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair.

By this time it seems the Jewish authorities are not so much trying to discredit Jesus or correct him as have him done away with because through the resurrection of Lazarus he has made himself un-discreditable. Who can argue with a man who can raise another from the dead? In front of witnesses, too. There is mention in John 12

of a parallel plot to do away with Lazarus himself – for the top Jews very much an opportunity to ...'bury bad news'.

This episode brings things to even more of a crisis point than Jesus had already reached. It is as if he is trying to build up an unstoppable momentum that has to propel him to and through the events of Holy Week. Next Sunday we will mark Palm Sunday, the entry into Jerusalem. This was an encounter with Jerusalem and in particular its religious leaders that the beginning of the passage that Erica read has the disciples trying very hard to avoid.

Before we finish, we should remind ourselves that there is a verse in this passage you may know is remembered as the shortest verse in the Bible. John 11.35 – *Jesus wept*. What was the purpose of these tears?

Let me digress.

Every now and then when I listen to some of my music collection I turn to one or two CDs I have which are compilations of opera or operetta overtures. I have some Gilbert and Sullivan overtures, where I believe a goodly proportion were cobbled together by someone else and not by Sullivan himself. Then there are some Wagner overtures, supremely impressive music that proves if nothing else that you don't have to be a likeable person to produce likeable sounds. I have a few others, but all of them depend on bringing together themes and tunes that will occur later in the opera. They are an appetite whetter, or a sampler that gives the audience something to look forward to, perhaps serving notice that despite some passages of less grand music there will still be a stirring theme along in due course!

To me this whole passage, whether or not it is historical, serves as a sort of overture to the Easter story – the story of Holy Week and Easter. The journey into danger. The mixed reaction to the journey. The doubts. The low and then the high. But most of all the way the Spirit moves Jesus, not to run triumphantly rough-shod over every obstacle in the way, but to suffer.

So Jesus wept. Jesus wept because of human frailty, his own and that of others. Jesus wept because he cared and this action arose not out of a desire to make a show but a desire to show God's love. Jesus wept, many would argue, because his intervention in the world had become necessary.

For some, Lazarus is a symbol of the Jewish people, ill to the point of death. Some look even to the image of the grave bindings as representative of the self-imposed strait-jacket of the Law, appropriate but somehow ineffective.

The overture to the drama of Easter is itself dramatic. We may identify with Mary or Martha, two different characters caught up in the revelation of Jesus' power. We may wonder that the disciples, close as they were to the Master, nevertheless doubted whether they would survive the journey to Jerusalem. We may wonder at the emotional response of Jesus, apparently diverted from his main task.

But it is in the nature of overtures to attract and intrigue us, and whatever else, our reaction must be to look forward to hearing more, and seeing all of these themes come out once more as we travel onward to renew our acquaintance with Easter. May God bless us in that journey, difficult as the path may be this year.

### **Prayers for others**

We pray, again:

Lord, as Jesus visited Martha and Mary in their time of distress, when their lives were in turmoil and the future suddenly dark, visit us now. Shed light into dark times and reassure us that your care is constant and your love is infinite.

We pray for all of your creation, all of the people who make up the human family. For all are at risk now. Each nation is suddenly introverted and trying to find policies and strategies that will work. May the current health and future prospects of each individual be the objective of those in power, and may all look for a fair sharing of resources in the interests of all, not for personal or party advantage.

We pray for those whose profession and calling is to care, knowing that their risks are many and severe. We pray for those who strive to maintain the supply and delivery of the things we need. Equipment for our hospitals, medication for those dependent on it. Sufficient food for all. Maintenance of our services that mean we can still turn on lights, turn on taps, depend on news and even entertainment in an uninterrupted stream.

Lord we know there are many in the world at yet greater risk, where poverty and want, homelessness and conflict each continue to inflict harm. Forgive us when we become frustrated and bored at enforced isolation, limits to our movement.

Give strength and courage to those who are most under stress in this national and international effort. Give wisdom to those guiding and deciding next steps. And give patience and insight to those who must stand by. Help us to show our own love for one another through our words and actions in these days.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, whose words shone light into dark places.

Amen

### **Closing Music**

Do stay listening for news of Easter morning. But first, I have turned to an ancient blessing to finish this podcast, set to music by John Rutter. The so-called Aaronic blessing, found in the book of Numbers in chapter 6:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you  
and be gracious unto you.*

*The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you  
and give you peace*

Amen

*[Music: 'The Lord bless you and keep you', from the album **The John Rutter Collection**, by the Cambridge Singers and the City of London Sinfonia, conducted by the composer]*



## Easter Morning

On Easter Morning we will operate a telephone conference in order to share in a short Group act of worship,

This will be at 11am and probably last 15 to 20 minutes.

You can join by calling the number 0330 606 0403. When you are asked for it, enter the following access code on your phone pad: 442786#.

If you are able, please provide yourself with something to eat and drink as communion is shared. It doesn't matter if this is not bread and wine! It is the sharing that is most important.

Please note, this phone number is **not** 'premium rate' and that the call will cost no more than a normal call of the same length to a UK number.

Thank you; keep at home if you can, and keep safe.

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<sup>i</sup> All recorded music in this podcast is made available under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> This version of Psalm 130 is published in the Iona Abbey Worship Book, published in 2017 by Wild Goose Publishing, 21 Carlton Ct, Glasgow G5 9JP

<sup>iii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition