

**Anglican Church of Australia
Diocese of Adelaide
Parish of Coromandel Valley**

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

29 March 2020

I am Martin Bleby—I am an assistant priest in the parish of Coromandel Valley in South Australia. I am responsible for the services at St John's Church Coromandel Valley and All Hallows' Church in Blackwood on Sunday 29 March 2020.



Our churches are now closed as public spaces to slow the spread of the corona virus covid-19. So I am at home, and you are at home, and we are doing church in a different way. As we belong to Jesus Christ, then we belong with each other. So, though separated physically, we can still meet in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray to prepare for this time, as we join together:

**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.**

Let's hear from the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John, chapter 11, from verse 1:

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

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" 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. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to

him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So 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?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

'Lazarus was ill'—an illness from which he died. Over 21,000 people in the world have died from the coronavirus covid-19. Thirteen so far in Australia (Friday 27 March), and nearly 3,000 with the disease in this country. And rising. So this is very topical. The South Australian Premier has said on more than one occasion, 'This is a matter of life and death'. Life, and death, are the very issues that this reading from John 11 is dealing with. Though, interestingly, the Bible puts them the other way round: death, and then life. As we find in this reading: Lazarus was ill, and died, and then came alive again.

The message that came to Jesus was, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill' (John 11:3). Being loved by Jesus did not stop Lazarus from catching the disease. And it did not stop him from dying. It might have been so. When Jesus got there, Martha said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (John 11:21). Might we be tempted to say the same thing about the covid-19 virus—that God isn't here when we need Him? Jesus had healed many people from such illnesses. But on this occasion Jesus deliberately stayed away after he received the news—for two whole days. By which time Lazarus had died. Admittedly Jesus was risking his own life in going to Bethany—just over the hill from Jerusalem—the Judean authorities had recently tried to stone him to death (see John 11:8; 8:59). But that was not the reason Jesus was staying away. No doubt Jesus was following the direct instructions of God his heavenly Father. The reason Jesus gave later was so that we 'would see the glory of God' (John 11:40). Just as when Jesus and his disciples had come across a man born blind, Jesus had said, 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' (John 9:3). It appears that Jesus did not heal Lazarus on this occasion because he knew that God was doing something bigger and more important than that.

How are we to think of God in connection with the covid-19 pandemic? I can understand why many faithful Christians who know the goodness of God want to dissociate God from anything nasty. They might say, 'God would never do anything like that'. Equally I find, as far as the Bible is concerned, in both the Old and New Testaments, God is directly involved and fully in control of everything like that. If our good God is not in charge of these things, then I wonder who might be? The devil? Blind chance? Or—God forbid—the human race? (I think this is one time when

we might realise we are not in control.) I know who I would rather have in charge of all these things: the good, strong God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As far as the Bible is concerned, disease and death are not natural. They are part of the disorder of a world in rebellion against God (see Genesis 3; Romans 5:12–21; Revelation 21:1–5; 22:1–5). So I find it most heartening to see God, over all these things, and in all these things, and through all these things, doing whatever it takes, in this sinful and disordered world, to work God’s bigger and better saving purpose for the whole of God’s good creation.

How does the Bible depict God in relation to plague and pestilence? Here is one very striking picture, from the prophet Habakkuk:

His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand,
where his power lay hidden.
Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind.
He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble (Habakkuk 3:3–6).

What did we hear from Jesus? ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ (John 11:40). Even in the midst of death? If we are going to have enough resilience not only to survive but also to thrive through this crisis, we may need to see God in a bigger way than just as a comfort blanket for the helpless. God is that. But God is also, as we see here, striding across the earth, with plague and pestilence swirling around His feet, doing whatever it takes to work His bigger purpose of good towards us. Just as we see Jesus striding towards Jerusalem, to do what needs to be done (see John 11:7; compare Luke 9:51; Mark 10:32–34).

Making ‘the nations tremble’—is that what God is doing right now? It is a crucial time for us all. There’s a warning in the New Testament book of the Revelation, when people afflicted by plagues ‘cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory’ (Revelation 16:9). May we all, through this, come to a place of strong and wise humility and maturity.

So what is God’s bigger purpose of good? It’s a purpose, not of disease and death, but of life. Not just life as we know it, but eternal life with God, starting right here and now, and going on into eternity (see John 5:24; 17:3). Where ultimately ‘Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more’ (Revelation 21:4). What did we say about how the Bible puts it? Not life and death, and then that’s it; but death, and then life! As we find in the Old Testament reading set for today from Ezekiel 37. Israel as a nation was as good as dead. They were saying, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely’ (Ezekiel 37:11). But God says: ‘I will cause breath [*or* spirit] to enter you, and you shall live . . . and you shall know that I am the LORD’ (Ezekiel 37:5–6). And that’s what happened. Psalm 104 says to God about all the creatures God has made:

when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

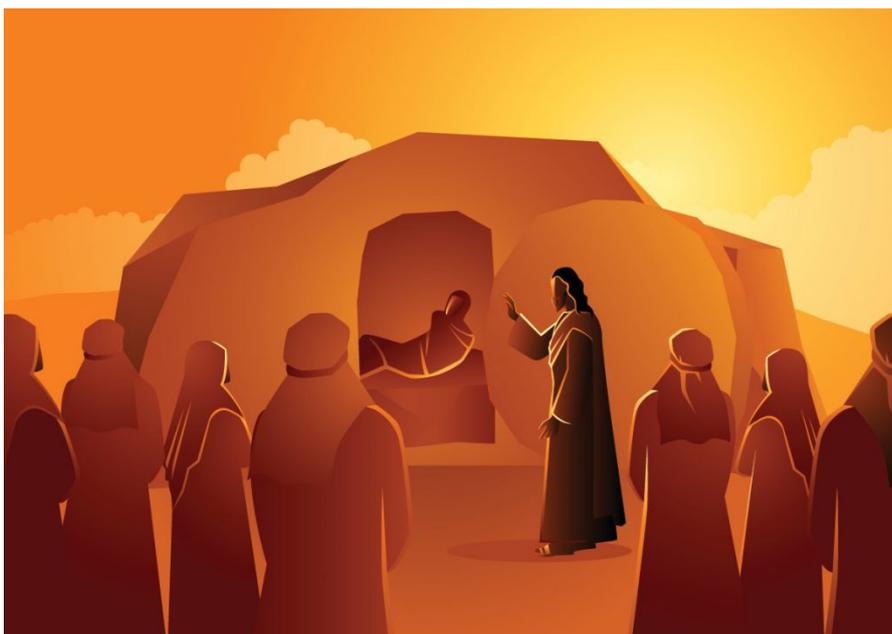
But that’s not the end of it. It then goes on to say:

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever (Psalm 104:29–30)

There it is—life, and the renewal of the whole creation, on the other side of death! The book of Deuteronomy: God does not say, ‘I give life, and I take it away’—though that is true enough. Rather, God says—note the order: ‘I kill and I make alive’ (Deuteronomy 32:39). Confronting as this may be for many of us, listen to what it is saying: making alive comes the other side of death—death is defeated—however death came into the world, in God’s good purpose for the whole creation, death gives way to life: God says, ‘I make alive!’

So by the time Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, there was in Israel a belief that God would do this in the end. Jesus said to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” We say the same thing in the Nicene creed: ‘We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come’. Whatever time that will be. Jesus says to Martha, That time is now: ‘I am the resurrection and the life’—the power of life, in God, is present now, personally, in Jesus! That’s why we begin every funeral service with these words, with the dead body alongside us: “‘I am the resurrection and the life”, says the Lord’. So Jesus goes on to say: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”—life eternal, with God, the other side of death, starting now. And Jesus says to Martha, as he might well say to us, ‘Do you believe this?’ (John 11:23–26).

But as Jesus gets closer to Lazarus’ tomb, Martha’s sister Mary and all the others are weeping, as if Lazarus’ death is the end of everything. And Jesus is ‘greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved’—very strong words. And then we are told, ‘Jesus began to weep’. Some there took this as a measure of how much Jesus loved Lazarus—which of course he did. Some say Jesus was grieving over the unbelief of those weeping around him. Which no doubt he was. But maybe there was more to it even than that. As Jesus came to the actual tomb, again he was ‘greatly disturbed’. Maybe it was because Jesus knew that in a few days it would be him in the tomb—in the place where Lazarus was, in the place where all of us go—so identifying with us, in great love, as to take death, our death, into himself, along with all the sin and disorder that causes it, and defeat it there, with all the power of God’s life-giving love. And Jesus knows that it is only by the power of that strong love, that is going to take him down into that death, that he can say, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ (John 11:33, 35–38, 43). That’s what Jesus was striding towards Jerusalem to do. That’s what God is doing striding across the earth today, in the midst of the plague and pestilence that is swirling around His feet. ‘Lazarus, come out!’



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God said to Ezekiel, 'I will cause breath to enter you'—I will put my spirit in you—'and you shall live' (Ezekiel 37:5; compare 36:27). Now that Jesus has come, and has gone down into death and come out into life, Paul can say to us all, in the New Testament reading set for today, 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you' (Romans 8:11). Corona virus is real. Death is real—it was for Jesus and it will be for us. In all that, what is most real is God's strong life-giving love.

There's a song called the Russian Contakion of the Departed, which blends in a wonderful way the deep grief and the joyful hope that is characteristic of the Christian experience. I'm going to have it at my funeral. It goes like this;

Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints:
where sorrow and pain are no more; neither sighing,
but life everlasting.
You only are immortal, the Creator and Maker of us:
and we are mortal, formed of the earth,
and unto earth shall we return:
for so you did ordain, when you created me, saying,
Dust you are, and unto dust shall you return.
All we go down to the dust;
and, weeping o'er the grave, we make our song:
alleluya, alleluya, alleluya.

English Hymnal 744

What is our song? Not 'Woe is me', but 'Alleluya'—praise God!

Let's say together the prayer for this week:

**We thank you, heavenly Father,
that you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
we pray that
as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his presence abiding in us he may raise us to joys eternal;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.**

We're going to have a further time of prayer now. With regard to covid-19, let's pray for the elderly, and the vulnerable, and the lonely, and their families, and especially for those exposed without the safeguards we have: for their care and protection. Let us pray for calm in our community, as we give thanks and pray for many acts of kindness. We pray for our governments: for wisdom and care for all human life. We pray for health practitioners: for courage, and for their protection. We pray for our hospitals, that they may be safe places of healing. We pray for businesses, and for all who are losing their jobs: for their provision and survival. We pray for churches: for our unity, and for gospel focus. We pray for families and children and their closeness, especially for children home from school. We pray for schools, and for universities, that they may be sustained.

**Almighty and All-loving God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we pray to you through Christ the Healer
for those who suffer from the Coronavirus Covid-19
in Australia and across the world.**

**We pray too for all who reach out to those who mourn the loss
of each and every person who has died as a result of contracting the disease.
Give wisdom to policymakers,
skill to healthcare professionals and researchers,
comfort to everyone in distress
and a sense of calm to us all in these days of uncertainty and distress.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord
who showed compassion to the outcast,
acceptance to the rejected
and love to those to whom no love was shown.
Amen.**

Archbishop Michael Jackson, Dublin & Glendalough

Speaking of turning to God in repentance, there is a call in the Anglican Communion at this time for 'a period of prayer and repentance'. Here is a prayer written by Moon Hing, the Bishop of West Malaysia. We can use it today as our prayer of confession—for ourselves, for our church, and for our world:

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Sovereign Lord of the universe, Creator of humankind, we, your unfaithful children, are truly sorry for our sins and the lives that we have lived. We sincerely believe and confess in our hearts that only through the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary, can we obtain Your forgiveness. We repent that: In thought, word or deed, we have committed serious offences against You and our neighbours; In laziness, despair and lust for power, we have provoked hatred, division and hurt within our communities; In greed, deceit and indifference, we have caused serious damage, unnecessary conflict and aggravated destruction to our refugee and migrant brothers and sisters; In selfishness, insensitivity and bias, we have encouraged and emboldened those who inflict hurt, pain and sorrow on our loved ones and families; In the name of religion, doctrine and even of Christ himself, we have wounded believers and pursuers of holiness and faith; In stubbornness, pride and arrogance, we have caused division and strife within Your church and among Your children; Mercifully send Your Holy Spirit – the Spirit of order and comfort – and cleanse us from all unrighteousness; restore in us true faith in Christ which brings truth, peace and harmony; and help us to walk together with our brothers and sisters in the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ to the glory of Your name. **Amen.**

Hear these words of assurance:

If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

I John 2.1-2

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3.16

Jesus said: Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11.28

God pardons those who humbly repent, and truly believe the gospel.
Therefore we have peace with God, through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

That's as much as we are going to do together for now. How are we going now as isolation sets in—for who knows how long? One thing Vivien and I are finding, as everything gets cancelled,

it's not so easy to know what day it is. One thing you may find helpful is to say Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, from page 383 in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, with different forms for each day of the week. It can be downloaded as free app: epray daily—that also gives you the psalms and readings set for each time.

If you want other daily readings, have a look at the website martinbleby.com, especially 'God's Holy Love—Audio' from the menu. It's got 36 weeks of six-minute daily readings and comments—should be enough to see us through this time!

Let's keep in touch and let each other know how we are going.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
take care, stay well, look out for each other;
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**

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