

From Rev Dr Kate Bruce, by email

Fifth Week of Easter

What follows is a pilgrimage through Easter season. As a padre and a priest, I am writing from the perspective of Christian faith. If that is not your tradition – I invite you to come with me anyway, and see where it takes you. I am working with the bible readings set for morning prayer in my tradition and seeing how they might speak into life right now. It's about the journey and the ideas and where you go with that. I include a prayer at the end of each section. Read it, ponder it, pray it or skip it. You might agree or disagree with my ideas – what matters is the ideas they spark in you. I hope it's a useful resource for you.

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Today is May 10th Lock-down seems to have been going on a lifetime! I feel as though I'm losing track of the days. But imagine for a moment that the lock-down experience has been going on for 5 years. Imagine that this experience of restriction has been happening far from home – in a strange land where you have been taken against your will by an invading enemy. The Old Testament set for today, in Morning Prayer, speaks to people in just that situation.

The people of God have been in exile in Babylon for 5 years. Five years of longing for normality. Five years of longing for the old familiar ways, people and places. Everything has gone pear shaped... and they must have been wondering where God had gone.

Enter the prophet Ezekiel. Five years into the exile he has a vision. In the way of all prophets – it is a bit weird, bit macabre, but brilliantly hopeful. He has a vision of a valley full of dry bones. As I am writing this I'm listening to the Delta Rhythm Boys singing the old spiritual 'Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones.' It's making me smile.

Ezekiel, in his vision valley, standing amongst heaps of bones is asked a question, 'Mortal. Can these bones live?' Most of us would say, 'No. Bones is bones. End of.' But the prophet is wiser, 'O Lord God you know.' The question is – in a situation of profound despair – is there any hope? What happens in the vision of the valley of the dry bones is an unequivocal answer to that question. In a bizarre dance the bones begin to move: click, clack rattle. They come together, In a reversal of the process of death, sinew, flesh and skin grow back, and the valley is now full of bodies. The bodies have no life in them. The prophet is commanded to call the breath of God into them – and they stand on their feet. A multitude of living beings.

Just in case the metaphor isn't clear enough, the prophet is told that the bones represent the whole house of Israel who have been in despair. They are being told that their exile will not last forever. There is hope. So today – ponder Ezekiel's words, play yourself the Delta Rhythm Boys – voices from the past speaking hope into the future.

A prayer for today
Give us a vision of hope, O God,
as we struggle in our unknown.
Give us new faith in You;
radical trust in You:
the reverser of death;
the un-doer of despair.

The source of all life.
O God, give us a vision of hope. Amen.

Monday of the Fifth week of Easter

Busyness... whilst I realise the change in the rhythm of life over recent weeks has exponentially increased the pressure on many people, it has also really lobbed a spanner into the spokes of busyness for some of us.

For many of us workaholics, having our foot to the floor gives a sense of meaning and purpose, but I wonder if we are being offered a new insight in our present times. Of the work we do – what matters, and what is less important?

In the New Testament reading set for morning prayer – we see Jesus hard at work. His work is important, serious and needed. People bring their sick to him – and he heals them. Word has spread and people are flocking to him. Each one matters. Each person is a name, not a number – and they desperately need the help of this healer. And then, he has gone. He disappears. It's not as if the work has finished. The work of healing will never end, yet in the early hours he slips away to a deserted place. I imagine he was shattered. He needed to stop and be. We know from the Gospel that he frequently withdrew to the wilderness to pray.

I'm interested in the way Jesus isn't driven by the work he has to do. So often our busyness is driven by a sense of guilt, inadequacy and the need to prove ourselves. In Jesus we see someone able to walk away from the metaphorical in tray. His life is in balance. He withdraws to pray. What exactly does that mean? Prayer is attending to God, being open to the Other who sees and know us. I wonder as he went to the wilderness whether he spent time noticing the details of the natural world; bringing the tiredness and tension of his body to God; closing his eyes and resting, perhaps sleeping. Whatever he did – it wasn't work. In order to sustain the tasks of his ministry, even the Son of God needed to take a break.

Perhaps we have a chance to reflect on our work patterns. Have we been so unrelenting busy that we have forgotten the importance of a balanced rhythm in life? Of the importance of stepping away to be, to attend to God, to listen to ourselves.

A prayer for today

God save us from our busyness:
the drivenness of productivity;
the treadmill of worthiness;
the hamster wheel of self-importance.
Draw us again to the still waters,
the desert places,
the quiet spaces
where you gaze upon us
and we dare to gaze back.
Amen.

Tuesday of the Fifth week of Easter

Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits, wrote the Spiritual Exercises which are still popular today. In them, amongst other things, he advocates the use of imagination in bible reading – trying to place yourself in the scene and observe what is happening. Luke 5.1-11 is a great passage to read with the eye of the imagination wide open. There's such a lot going on.

I can just picture Simon and the other fishermen, picking lake debris out of their linen nets, utterly brassed off - given that an entire night's work has yielded not so much as a sprat. Meanwhile, Jesus has borrowed a boat and is speaking from it to the crowds gathered on the shore. Next thing he asks Simon to go back out to the deep water and lower the now clean nets back in. I wonder if the fishermen were tempted to tell Jesus to do one. He's a wandering teacher – what does he know about fishing? They'd been up all night – nothing – and during the day any fish would be far down in the deeps, if indeed there were any about. What's the point in getting the nets dirty for nothing?

Simon obeys in spite of the impossibility of there being any fish, 'Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' Is this grudging? Or is it because he has already seen something special about Jesus. The nets go back in and next thing they are knee deep in a silver tide of fish. This is it. They've hit the jackpot; they've won the lottery. You'd think Peter would be overjoyed. But he isn't. He's face down in a pile of fish, on his knees, 'Go away from me, Lord', he says. For I am a sinful man!' That's a strong reaction. We might expect something like, 'Wow, amazing. How did you know the fish were there? Can you always come out with us when we go fishing in the future?' But we don't get that. Rather, Simon sees something in Jesus which shows up all his failings – and which sees him on his knees. This is not a mere children's story about a miraculous haul of fish. What is it that has triggered this response? What has Simon seen?

In the Old Testament – water is the symbol of chaos, and only God has power over water. Jesus brought fish from the water where there were none. Simon recognises that this wandering teacher is far, far more than he seems. This realisation changes their lives. The fishermen walk away from the wealth of the fish, leaving everything, they followed him. They leave the jackpot behind. This story is a theophany – meaning a revelation of God. Simon sees in Jesus something that changes all his priorities and sets his feet in a new direction. He instantly reappraises what matters, leaves the old job and commits himself to following Jesus.

Do we write off these ancient stories? We read them once but they didn't have much impact... Now might be the time to go back to them, let down your nets again. Why not re-read this story in Luke 5 with the eyes of your imagination wide open? Let the story draw you in and help you to see afresh.

A prayer for today.

Holy God

you revealed yourself to Simon

through the abundance of fish;

reveal your self to us.

Open the eyes of our imagination,

so that we can see what really matters.

Forgive us our sin,
and lead us from our old ways
into a new journey with you. Amen

Wednesday of the Fifth week of Easter

I wonder if you remember when AIDS first became known about. Back in the 1980s many people were afraid of the illness and sufferers were stigmatised. A poll in the Los Angeles Times in 1985 found that 50% of respondents were in favour of quarantining people with AIDS. There was widespread fear about whether you could catch the disease from door handles, or loo seats, or handshaking. It was against this backdrop that Princess Diana shook the hand of an AIDS patient when opening the UK's first specialist unit for people with HIV and AIDS in 1987. That picture sent a powerful signal to a watching world. With a healing gesture the Princess demonstrated compassion and communicated acceptance.

In the New Testament reading set for Morning Prayer today, we see a man described as 'covered in leprosy' approaching Jesus. The words 'covered in leprosy' underscore the fact that the man's unacceptability was written all over him, imprinted on his skin. People believed the disease could be spread by touch. The man was shunned and feared, pushed out of society, labelled unclean, living on the margins. 'We don't want your lot around here.' Lepers were outcast. Stay away.

The man approaches Jesus, stating 'if you choose you can make me clean,' He's expressing great faith and taking a huge risk. What if he is turned away, further humiliated? But Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said 'I do choose.' With that the man was healed. Jesus touched him. He could have healed him from half a mile away – but he comes in close. His touch signals to onlookers the acceptability of the man. I wonder what it must have felt like to be that man – to feel the warmth of human connection, after so long.

Touch is so important in human relating. Healthy touch is affirming and affectionate. At the moment so many are denied this due to social distancing. Pity the leper then, denied it for a lifetime, until Jesus touched him.

Who are the lepers today? Who are the people pushed aside, living on the margins? I think of people who live rough, who can't easily wash body or clothing – who are pushed aside and avoided, treated as less than fully human, treated with distaste. These are the people who have experienced social distancing for years. Jesus touched the leper. How can we reach out to those who have been pushed beyond the boundaries, to bring them back in?

A prayer for today
Your touch brings us back to life again.
You touched the leper
and an outsider was brought home;
we remember today's lepers;
those we readily socially distance from:
touch our hearts
to feel compassion;
to recognise shared humanity,

and, even in a time of lock-down,
especially in a time of lock-down,
to reach out in love.
Amen

Thursday of the Fifth week of Easter

There's an old Victorian plaque in a stairwell in a hospital in Harrogate that always caught my eye when I used to visit there when I was a curate. It gives the names of all the people who had donated to the hospital, and the amount they gave. One word always jumped out of the list of benefactors: 'Anon'.

What's got me onto this thought? Today is St Matthias Day, when we remember the 13th Apostle, the one elected to replace Judas. He gets a brief mention in the Book of Acts as one who had been with Jesus from his Baptism to his Ascension. Praying for God to choose between Matthias and Joseph, the disciples draw lots to replace Judas and Matthias is it. And that's it. For some reason we aren't even given that reading for morning prayer. We don't know Matthias' story – what he did, how he lived and died. That is unknown to us. But it doesn't mean he didn't have a story, or a particular role, just that no-one thought to write about him. He's not one of the famous saints. He's a bit...anon.

Why has fame become so important in our culture? Followers on Instagram, likes on a post – why do these things matter? Perhaps there is a link being made between the idea of being unknown and being a nobody? It raises the question of what we value, and who we consider to be important.

Think of all the people who are unknown to you and I but without whose efforts we'd be in trouble. I don't know the names of the people who clean the hospital wards at my local hospital, or of the refuse collectors, or the ambulance drivers. I don't know the story of the people who work in the local hospice or care homes. The shelf stackers, the post sorters, and transport workers - they are largely unknown to me, but I depend on them. The people who do all the unseen work our society relies on. Who empties the dog waste bins? What's the name of the person or people who dug the grave at the last funeral you went to and filled it back in when everyone had left? They are not famous. Fame is irrelevant here. Faithfulness is what matters.

Fittingly, St Matthias is the patron saint of carpenters, tailors, and those who care for addicts. When I think of St Matthias, I think of people who are present but in the background. It's worth pondering that those who seem to be in the background of our lives might, from a different perspective be right on the front line. Happy St Matthias Day.

A prayer for today

Dear God
remembering the silent presence of St Matthias,
we give thanks for the work of those unknown to us,
who impact our lives in countless ways.
Often unseen, un-thanked and underpaid.
In our current crisis open our eyes to see
the countless connections between us.
Restore to us a holy vision of society;
interdependent, interconnected -

where worth is not measured in clicks and likes
but in mutual care, appreciation and love.
Amen

Friday of the Fifth week of Easter

Do you notice, in this season of lock-down, that your mood fluctuates? One day there is energy for gardening, cupboard cleaning and cooking, and running and a million other things, another day everything feels pointless, tiring and unending? Some days have been a joyful, others like walking through treacle? The treacly days resemble ground-hog day.

I was pondering this today, whilst feeling the pull of the treacle and it seemed as though a highlighter pen had been used on the psalm set for today – Psalm 138. The psalmist addresses God: 'On the day that I called to you, you answered me, and put new strength in my soul.' 'New strength in my soul.' I don't know about you, but I could do with a bit of that today.

So, what's the plan?

The psalmist begins by stating 'I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart.' Put another way, I will orientate myself to notice the good, rather than dwell on my troubles. So - step one of the treacle extraction plan – look to the good, and cultivate gratitude. I remember once, in a bit of a treacly patch, years ago, making my way to work. I was in Durham at the time and my walk to work took me along a wooded track down to Prebends bridge, over the River Wear. I was weighed down with work hassle – and the treacle was rising. What captured me that day was a sudden realisation of how many varieties of green there are. I stopped and tried to count them– and gave up. Somehow gratitude for green lifted me up – and because of green, the day got a whole lot better.

Back with the psalmist, 'I will bow before you and praise your name because of your love and faithfulness.'

Step-two of the treacle extraction plan – ponder what we know of the character of God – goodness, faithfulness, kindness – none of that has changed. Gaze on that truth and allow that truth to gaze right back at you.

Back with the psalmist – 'In the day that I called to you, you answered me.'

Step-three of the treacle extraction plan. Speak to God. Ask for help. Look up. Why is it that when the treacle is rising we often forget to pray?

Gratitude, contemplation of the nature of God, and talking to God from the treacle. A three-step extraction plan from the psalmist. Some days are just cruddy. But new strength comes and the treacle tide goes out.

A prayer for today

Loving God,

Help us to keep it simple,
on the rough days.

Give us the psalmist's wisdom:

Gratitude for the green;

Remembrance of who you are;

Communication with you.

Grants us new strength to face this day.
Amen

Saturday of the Fifth week of Easter

Picture the scene – great crowds of people jostling against each other – 50 odd days into lock-down that feels like a very uncomfortable idea. Rest assured this crowd gathered long ago. In the mass of people some are sick in body, some are sick at heart. Some are curious, interested, and others feel threatened and have come to keep an eye on the rabble rouser at the heart of things.

The new testament reading focuses on Jesus reaching out and healing people with the power of his touch. No one is excluded. No one deemed too unclean. He healed all of them – by reaching out and connecting.

When he speaks, he says that the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the hated are blessed, but woe will come to the rich, the full, those who laugh and all who receive human acclaim. What does he mean? He offers hope to those at the end of their rope. Vulnerability becomes a doorway to hope, whilst self-sufficiency is a trap door into a pit. Remember in the crowd are the people who berated him for healing a leper on the Sabbath – people who placed religious law above human compassion. Here is the target of his harsh words. Complacent, self-satisfied, smug power hoarders are in his sights. Those who will not recognise their flaws, vulnerability and arrogance are in for a shock. Meanwhile he speaks hope to those with few resources, and great sorrow.

This is hard to read. Am I the rich one, full, laughing, smug in my self-sufficiency... if so, I should expect the trapdoor to give, sooner or later, or am I willing to name my vulnerability and discover new hope?

Picture yourself in the crowd that surges around the still point of Christ the centre. Why are you here? Do we recognise our need of God – or are we here to keep an eye on the spectacle, but God at arm's length?

50 odd days into lock down might be a good time to look at who we are before the God who reaches out and connects. Are we so wedded to our self-sufficiency that we turn away, or are we learning how great is our need and vulnerability?

God of grace
show us who we are,
teach us to be generous with what we have,
and honest about our poverty of spirit.
Draw close to us,
as we draw close to you,
and heal us with your touch.
Amen.