

(Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45)

Today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, marks the beginning of Passiontide: the final two weeks before Easter. What used to be known as Passion Sunday marks a shift of focus in our journey through Lent. We move from the desert to the cross, from discipline to suffering. We all know from our own experience that it is hard to see any purpose in suffering. This is especially true now, in these ‘unprecedented times’ that we are all experiencing, together with our whole community, our nation, our world. But the suffering which Jesus bore between his arrest in the garden and his death on the cross we call his ‘redemptive suffering’. When we refer to the Passion of Christ this is what we mean: he suffered for our sake, to redeem us. That was the purpose of his suffering and it is expressed beautifully in the famous old hymn: ‘It is a thing most wonderful... that God’s own Son should come from heaven, and die to save a child like me’.

And then he rose from the dead. The God of love and power can turn any defeat into victory – and nothing can separate us from that love and that power. Nothing. Christ’s resurrection will of course be the subject of our Easter celebrations in two week’s time, but actually this is what we celebrate *every* Sunday. Indeed, I was taught that the core purpose of any sermon is first and foremost to proclaim the resurrection of Christ.

How we need to hear again that message today. So, on this ‘Passion Sunday’, I make no apology for reminding us that we are an ‘Easter people’.

Today’s gospel reading is the compelling story of the raising of Lazarus. This is regarded as one of the so-called ‘Signs’ in John’s gospel, events such as Jesus turning water into wine or walking on the water, which all point towards his identity as the Son of God. The raising of Lazarus is also the context for one of Jesus’ ‘I am’ statements, sayings in which he declares his divinity. ‘I am the resurrection and the life’, he says to Martha, one of Lazarus’ sisters. And the raising of Lazarus points towards Jesus’ own resurrection; it points towards Easter.

So no matter how deep our suffering – imposed upon us by others, visited upon us as now by chance, or self-inflicted – God has shown that he can redeem any situation. As we enter Passiontide, we affirm this: our heart-felt Christian hope.

Now one of my favourite Bible verses comes from our New Testament reading today, from Romans chapter 8 – a chapter best read as a whole. To paraphrase St Paul in verse 11, ‘The Spirit of the Father, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead, gives life to the people of God’.

Looking around us today, and seeing the wonderful examples of dedicated service by health professionals, of commitment from all those on whom the continued wellbeing of society and community life depend, of care and compassion shown by neighbours

and extended families (just like our own church family), do we not see with the eye of faith that ‘Spirit of the Father’ helping us all to adapt and ‘keep on keeping on’?

For me, this is illustrated so powerfully in Masaccio’s fifteenth century fresco of the Holy Trinity [<http://www.italianrenaissance.org/masaccios-holy-trinity/>] . Here we see Christ on the cross, symbolically supported – held up – by the Father, with the Spirit (symbolised by a dove) between them.

May we by the power of that same Spirit support each other through the suffering of these challenging times.

May that suffering somehow be redemptive for our community, and society as a whole, once we are through these times.

And may we never forget that, in the words of St Paul, ‘neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’.

Thanks be to God. Amen.