

Reflective Worship – Sunday 3rd May

Songs, reading and Sermon

Dance and Sing

*Dance and sing, All the earth,
Gracious is the hand that tends you:
Love and Care ev'rywhere,
God on purpose send you.*

Shooting star and sunset shape
the drama of creation;
Lightning flash and moonbeam
share a common derivation.
Dance and sing..

Deserts stretch and torrents roar
in contrast and confusion;
Treetops shake and mountains soar
and nothing is illusion.
Dance and sing..

All that flies and swims and crawls
displays an animation
None can emulate or change
for each has its own station.
Dance and sing..

Brother man and sister woman,
born of dust and passion,
Praise the one who calls you friends
and makes you in his fashion.
Dance and sing..

Kiss of life and touch of death
suggest our imperfection:
Crib and womb and cross and tomb
cry out for resurrection.
Dance and sing..

Deep Silence

Deep silence, deep stillness, within me, and around;
Deep silence, deep stillness, around me, and within
'Cross the starlight, echoes resounding,
Voice of silence at the heart of it all
'Cross the starlight, echoes are fading,
Filled with silence, from the heart of it all

Words and music: Alison Eve Cudby
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Breath of the Four Winds

O can these dry bones live? O will these branches green?
Discarded and forgotten, longing, praying for relief.
O come, breath of the four winds, North and South and East and West,
Blow upon these ruined places your life-giving breath.

O come and blow, thou east wind, your kiss the breath of life,
As dawn creeps o'er the roof tops and the pigeons start their cry.
Gentle stirring, small and fragile just like the start of spring;
Hope is rising, like the morning, life to these bones to bring.

O come and blow, thou west wind, your kiss the spring of life,
Let cool refreshing rains touch fields wasted, parched and dry.
Let the floods rise as a river, to the ocean we will go.
From the source let us draw deeply this drink from which life flows.

O come and blow, thou south wind, your kiss the fire of love,
With passion light the flame, that burns abundant from above.
Consume all that within us must fall into the dark,
And then we may catch a glimpse of this life-giving spark.

O come and blow, thou north wind, on this clay from which we're made.
In the dark earth, buried deeply, the forgotten seed is laid.
Let this tomb become a womb, weave these bones with blood and skin,
Bless the nurturing of darkness and light comes seeping in.

O can these dry bones live? O will these branches green?
Yes indeed, for love's last breath was borne upon a broken tree.
Now she blossoms in her harvest of eternal love
O come breath of the four winds, breathe the kiss of heav'n above.

Words and music: Alison Eve Cudby
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Melody: French traditional: "Or nous dites Marie"
Words: Alison Eve, after Ezekiel 36:33-36 and 37:1-14,
and Nicola Slee, "And can these dry bones live."

Ezra 3:1-13

When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening. And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day, and after that the regular burnt-offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill-offering to the Lord. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt-offerings to the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia.

In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upwards, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord. And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,
'For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel.'

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

On the threshold

Have you ever been in one of those in between times? Where one stage of your life is finished, and another is about to begin but hasn't quite started. You're on the threshold of something new; one thing, one way of life is in the past and another in the future. The present moment in which you find yourself is neither one thing nor the other.

It could be that you are in between jobs;

It maybe when you were pregnant and waiting to begin your new and challenging life as a parent;

or maybe in sadder times the days between the death of a loved one and their funeral – not quite being in the position to begin finding out what life without them might be like, but no longer having them with you.

Such times; such spaces in our lives are known as liminal spaces. On the threshold of something different, but not quite there.

Such times, although they can be very painful and difficult, are often times when we can learn a lot about ourselves, when we can grow in who we are and how we live, when we can be energised and blessed.

And, of course, what we as individuals, as churches, as a nation and as a world are going through right now is just such an experience, just such a liminal space – but on a mega scale. The pandemic has brought an abrupt end to the old way of being and doing. We don't know what the new will be like – we can only guess that it will be vastly different. We are betwixt and between. Which is one of the reasons why I suspect we are all finding life so hard; not sure what our mood will be; not sure if we will have an ultra productive day or just sit and stare at the weeds taking over the garden, not sure of anything.

And so, just thinking about our faith and the life of the churches in Shirley parish for a moment, what can we learn from this liminal time? Can we begin to see or imagine what the new future might be and how might we prepare ourselves for it?

The bible reading from Ezra is the set Old Testament reading for today. It tells the story of worship beginning again in Jerusalem after the exile.

In 587BC the temple built by Solomon was destroyed, and the people were taken into exile in Babylon. Life as they knew it had come to an abrupt end. All was lost.

The prophet Jeremiah urged the exiles to settle down, to build house, to make Babylon their home. They would be in it for the long haul. Some did, I guess, but many just waited - waited for normal life to begin again, waited for a return from the exile; waited.

And in the book of Ezra, some 50 years later, we see the beginning of the return.

We see the people starting to rebuild the temple. The temple was of course the spiritual centre of the life of the nation. It very much defined who they were. Without the temple, how could they worship God? This was the great conundrum of the exile. As the psalmist says (or was it Boney M?) “how can we sing the Lords song in a strange land”.

Now, back in Jerusalem, the first thing was to worship the Lord and that meant the rebuilding of the temple.

And its interesting to see the reaction of the people.

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Tears of sadness and shouts of joy.

Those who remembered what life used to be like could see that this new temple would not be like the old. And they wept for the loss of the old.

The younger ones who couldn’t remember the past were simply filled with joy that there was a new future. That God could be praised in this new temple.

I wondered, as I wrote this, whether there were similar mixed emotions in Coventry after the war when the new Cathedral – so totally different from the old – was built. Weeping and rejoicing. Weeping at what was lost, but also rejoicing at new possibilities and opportunities.

This liminal time of lockdown will come to an end. Eventually.

There will be a future when we can gather together again in our church buildings; when we can come together in some way (maybe socially distanced) to worship God together. But it won’t be the same as it was back in March.

And it won’t be the same because we will have all been changed in some way by the experience of liminality. We will have learned some things about ourselves, our faith and how we express that faith.

As an example of what I am talking about, Here are three things that I am learning about church and faith (note things I am still learning – its an ongoing process!)

First, as I wrote about in the May magazine, I am learning that the church is the people not the building, nor what we do on Sunday mornings. Of course, I knew this already but what we have been through and seen has written this out in bold and underlined it in red for me. As the banner outside the building says, the building may be closed but the church is alive and active.

Second, I am seeing, and many people are telling me, that pastoral support – loving and caring and praying and looking out for each other - is stronger now than it ever has been. We may not be able to have coffee with each other, or give our friends a hug during the peace, or even see them face to face, but we are spending more time with each other over the phone and having much more deep and meaningful conversations with each other. We are allowing ourselves to be vulnerable in a way we simply haven't done before, and we are supporting each other in prayer and practical ways.

And third, the worship we are offering over the internet, over the phone and on paper is allowing many more people to join in than was ever possible on a Sunday morning. People who are too infirm to come to the church building, people who can't make it on a Sunday morning because of work or other commitments, partners of regular worshippers, people who just want to see what it's like, but don't wish to be seen by others to be doing that (for whatever reason).

The important thing about the future is that we take with us the lessons we are learning, the ways we are growing and the things that are bringing us blessing. That they become part of the new future. That all those things are structured into whatever we build when we come out the other side.

Just like the lessons of peace and reconciliation were built into the very fabric of the new Coventry Cathedral.

I don't know what the new way of being church will be like. I have some ideas, but as I said we are still learning and growing and being blessed, so I cannot know.

What I would like to do – and encourage you to do as well – is to have an open mind. To recognise that this liminal time, this break in the normality of everyday life, this discontinuity in the way of being is going to have a marked and radical effect on the future – for us as individuals, as a church, as a nation and across the globe.

And over the next few months I would encourage you to take the opportunity to look at the life of the churches in Shirley parish and think deeply about who we are and what we do. And dream too of what the new church rising from the ashes of the pandemic might look like.

If you want to talk about this, if you have thoughts you would like to share and discuss then we will be holding a virtual discussion group on Wednesday evening at 7:30pm over Zoom – a way of meeting together over the internet. If you are interested, you will find the link to the meeting on the email. It's also possible to phone in – give me a ring and I'll let you have the details. If you're not sure how to use zoom but would like to join in please let me know.