

Sunday 29 March 2020 - online worship from Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand – for the fifty Sunday of Lent

It can be accessed from the Knox Church YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYksSjG0If00NeogNIGs7A>.

or from the Knox Church website – <https://knoxchurch.net/>

Reflection

Thank you Rachel for that reading, and thank you Calla for that wonderful music. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen. Now to a reflection on the gospel.

Imagine going into your kitchen and finding the lid has blown off your pressure cooker or your food processor and the contents are splattered everywhere – ceiling, walls, floor, even the light shades – it happened and I can remember. Your well-ordered, tidy and clean kitchen has changed colour. Its an utter mess, and that food in a crevice you didn't notice will begin to smell one day.

The gospel reading today has that feel to it. Its all over the place; what one person calls the wildest story in all of scripture. It's like a Breughel painting, a montage of encounters.

The sound of people wailing and weeping. The smell of a body four days dead. Sisters grieving because their brother has died. An angry family demanding treatment – now! And Martha accusing Jesus of neglecting his friend at the moment of his greatest need. Then Lazarus comes forth still bound in his burial clothes. Here is a family – Martha, Mary and Lazarus - with a close family friend Jesus, being utterly raw in the face of death and its power.

And what of Jesus? We start with a casual Jesus – “This illness does not lead to death”, he says, as if it doesn't matter. Then he heads away from Lazarus to Judea – a kind of self-isolating from grief perhaps. Then he uses concepts no one will ever fully comprehend – “I am the resurrection and the life”. But then when he sees Mary weeping, he responds by being “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”. In the Greek, the word means angry. Jesus is angry at the pain and grief death causes his beloved friends. This is not a story about people on an even keel, or Jesus on an even keel. This is a roller coaster.

Maybe a little like what we are going through. I've noticed that both our neighbours have been chopping a lot of firewood – maybe to work out cabin fever? We like having the children home ... and they will be with us for four weeks. We like being with each other, but then we are needing to negotiate each other's space again. And if we are alone, how long can we stand it? And we are worried about our family, and our elderly parents. And there hangs over us all, especially those who feel vulnerable, the dark cloud of coronavirus. What a time it is.

David Kessler in the Harvard Business Review suggests that what we are experiencing is grief, because we feel the world has changed. While we believe this is temporary, it doesn't necessarily feel like that, that from now on things will be different. We said it after the

Christchurch earthquake and the mosque murders and now we say it again. The end of normalcy; the economic toll; the loss of connection. Kessler says we're also feeling anticipatory grief - that feeling we get about the future when we're uncertain. Usually it centres on death. There is a storm coming. There's something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but we can't see it. The breaking of a sense of safety.

To our grief, Jesus brings compassion. To our weeping, Jesus brings his weeping. To our roller coaster emotions, Jesus brings understanding. To our reactivity and impatience, Jesus brings the sharing of our rawness. Unfailing companionship. And in Jesus, the presence of God, and with the presence of God, the assurance that we are held, firm and unfailing. Underneath are the everlasting arms.

But coronavirus brings something more, the threat of sickness and the possibility of death. Mark Achtmeier says that "death erases our most important relationships and sweeps away our proudest achievements in its grim tide of forgetfulness and nonbeing". We can try to escape or deny that sense of futility and anonymity, but at times like this, it creeps back. It creeps back and can play tricks with us, unnerving us, disabling us.

In the midst of this messiness, Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life." Present tense. Amid anxiety and fear and grief and tenseness and even death itself, Jesus says that he is the power of life who cannot be closed off or shut down. His life in God and our life in Christ is irrepressible. His passion for life with us never ends. And when our fear creeps in, we can gently exclaim - Christ is the resurrection and the life. Not saving us from death, but saving us from the power of death and thereby the fear of death. In our union with Christ in God, our life in God can never be taken from us. God never lets us go.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net