

Jesus is with us ...

... 'Keep, O keep us at thy side'

A reflection given on 29th March 2020, in the Online Communion Service by the Associate Vicar, the Revd. Wendy Wale, in her home

John 11-1-45

I have to admit, having watched Jonathan last week, I was looking forward to filming in the Minster, sat in one of the oldest elements of the building: the stone presidential chair. Instead, I'm sat here in my lounge on a much comfier, but much less significant sofa. However, my disappointment pales into insignificance compared to those who had planned weddings, birthdays, anniversaries or holidays for the coming weeks and months. I spoke to a friend last night. She was due to take her mom and son to New York as a special once in a lifetime trip. Her mom is now socially isolated and she continues to teach, enabling other key workers to stay on the front line.

We are living in unprecedented times when everyone's story has been interrupted, plans abandoned. New rhythms are beginning to emerge: rhythms of once a day exercise; queuing to shop; depending on others to shop; of seeing people on a screen instead of in real life; contemplating several months without our usual meetings with friends and family.

The news brings fresh stories each day of those around our globe who are suffering and dying from COVID-19. And many are living in fear for themselves or their loved ones. Our Gospel reading today marks the start of a time in the Christian calendar known as Passiontide, the start of sharing Jesus' journey towards the cross. It was a time when many people like Martha and Mary are deeply disappointed with Jesus. People had hoped for an escape from pain and misery, released from the brutal Roman occupation and a chance for freedom and power. "Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died." How many times have we cried out to God in times of great pain or suffering, "Where are you?"

When we look at the images on our screen or contemplate the spread of the Corona virus in refugee camps or overcrowded communities already trapped in poverty: "If only you had been here, Jesus, surely it would be different." Passiontide reminds us

that Jesus has been there. He is here now. When Jesus saw her weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. Jesus began to weep. At the point of sickness, death, grief, disappointment, confusion or anger, Jesus is there with us: broken with us; deeply moved; present in all our emotions; not rushing to provide answers to impossible questions; his tears joining with ours. Of course, the story of Lazarus doesn't end there. Our story doesn't end here: but we can't rush to Easter or resurrection; we can't bypass the road to Calvary; the pain of Gethsemane; the agony of the cross.

The hymn that Robert recorded for this Sunday reflects this painful Lenten journey, ending with the beautiful words:

*'Keep, O keep us Saviour dear,
Ever constant by thy side,
That with thee we may appear
At the eternal Eastertide'*

We may have to wait a long time for Easter to be fully celebrated this year, but let us be people who daily celebrate the eternal Easter tide. The assurance that Jesus is with us at all times, in all places, and in all situations. So we cling to hope and offer that hope as we are able: through a phone call; a letter; or Internet communication; or perhaps by continuing our daily work, albeit remotely; caring for children, the elderly, the sick; our families; running our businesses; serving in the food industry, the emergency services or the provision of essential supplies.

Let us sit with others in their grief and pain and allow them to do the same for us. Let us be people who stay at home and follow the advice of our leaders. Let us above all, be people who weep and pray, knowing that Jesus is right by our side.

Reading Texts

John 11:1-45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ 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." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." ²⁸ 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." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus began to weep. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ 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." ⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.