

Worship at Home, March 22nd 2026 (Fifth Sunday in Lent)

A short act of worship for use in people's homes prepared by Jon Skeet.

Introduction

Hello, and welcome to Worship at Home for Sunday March 22nd. I'm Jon Skeet, and I usually worship at Tilehurst Methodist Church. My wife Holly will be joining us to read our Bible passage later in the service.

It's good to share worship with you today, as we celebrate the fifth Sunday in Lent – also known as the first Sunday of the Passion. I will also be leading this act of worship for Church of the Living Stream in the morning. I'll physically be in Cambridge, leading worship from a hotel room, so it's even more of a "remote" service than usual – but the theme of this service is the *presence* of God, and we know we can rely on that presence wherever we are.

Our call to worship this morning is from Psalm 130.

Call to worship: Psalm 130:1-4

¹ Lord, I cry out to you
because I'm suffering so deeply.

² Lord, listen to me.
Pay attention to my cry for your mercy.

³ Lord, suppose you kept a close watch on sins.
Lord, who then wouldn't be found guilty?

⁴ But you forgive.
So we can serve you with respect.

Hymn: STF 20 Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy one, is here

1 Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here ;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear :
in him no sin is found —
we stand on holy ground.
Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here.

2 Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around ;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned :

how awesome is the sight —
our radiant King of light !
Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around.

3 Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place ;
he comes to cleanse and heal,
to minister his grace :
no work too hard for him —
in faith receive from him.
Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place.

David J. Evans (b. 1957)

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Prayers

We offer our prayers of adoration and confession.

Lord of the universe, we worship and adore you. You created everything – our world, each creature, each person – and we rejoice that you remain present with us, always. We tremble in the presence of such power, but we know that *your* power is rooted in love. We glorify your name, proclaim you as our King, and lay our lives in service before you.

Amen.

But even as we praise you, we know that we have let you down. Lord, we are sorry for times when we have hurt others, through deliberate actions or through failing to follow your call to show love and compassion. For any time that our presence has caused distress instead of comfort. For times that we're not even aware of – any time we have not lived up to your example of perfect love.

We are sorry, and ask your forgiveness. As we turn back to you, we rejoice in the promise of grace extended to us by Jesus – that our sins are forgiven.

Amen.

Reading: John 11:1-27

Lazarus Dies

11 ¹A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village where Mary and her sister Martha lived. ²Mary would later pour perfume on the Lord. She would also wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. It was her brother Lazarus who was sick in bed. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus. "Lord," they told him, "the one you love is sick."

⁴When Jesus heard this, he said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory. God's Son will receive glory because of it." ⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So after he heard Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days. ⁷And then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short time ago the Jews there tried to kill you with stones. Are you still going back?"

⁹Jesus answered, "Aren't there 12 hours of daylight? Anyone who walks during the day won't trip and fall. They can see because of this world's light. ¹⁰But when they walk at night, they'll trip and fall. They have no light."

¹¹After he said this, Jesus went on speaking to them. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep," he said. "But I am going there to wake him up."

¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he's sleeping, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking about the death of Lazarus. But his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your benefit, I am glad I was not there. Now you will believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶Then Thomas, who was also called Didymus, spoke to the rest of the disciples. "Let us go also," he said. "Then we can die with Jesus."

Jesus Comforts the Sisters of Lazarus

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found out that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁹Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary. They had come to comfort them because their brother was dead. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. But Mary stayed at home.

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "I wish you had been here! Then my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you anything you ask for."

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again. This will happen when people are raised from the dead on the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if they die. ²⁶And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷"Yes, Lord," she replied. "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that you are the one who is supposed to come into the world."

Hymn: STF 141 Abide with me

1 Abide with me ; fast falls the
eventide ;
the darkness deepens ; Lord, with
me abide ;
when other helpers fail, and
comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with
me.

2 Swift to its close ebbs out life's
little day ;
earth's joys grow dim, its glories
pass away ;
change and decay in all around I
see ;
O thou who changest not, abide
with me !

3 I need thy presence every passing
hour ;
what but thy grace can foil the
tempter's power ?

Who, like thyself, my guide and stay
can be ?

Through cloud and sunshine, O
abide with me.

4 I fear no foe, with thee at hand to
bless ;
ills have no weight, and tears no
bitterness ;

where is death's sting ? Where,
grave, thy victory ?

I triumph still, if thou abide with
me.

5 Hold thou thy cross before my
closing eyes ;

shine through the gloom, and point
me to the skies ;

heaven's morning breaks, and
earth's vain shadows flee ;

in life, in death, O Lord, abide with
me !

Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847)

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Sermon

Introduction

Today is the first Sunday of the Passion. I was surprised when I opened the lectionary to find a Gospel reading which doesn't cover the Passion. We've only heard the first 27 verses of the lectionary reading – it goes as far as verse 45, but even that doesn't really get into the Passion. Instead, it ends abruptly with "Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary saw what Jesus did. So they believed in him."

Perhaps the people who arranged the lectionary *wanted* an abrupt ending. One of the feelings I get during each week of Lent is that of momentum. We are on a journey with Jesus, and on each Sunday we know we're not there yet.

But even with *just* this Gospel reading, 45 verses is a very long reading. Call me a spoilsport, but I didn't want to get as far as Lazarus actually being raised. Instead, I want us to spend some time with two of the people in the early part of the reading: Martha and Thomas. These are "minor characters" in the Gospels, but I love them both and feel that in some ways we can relate to them more than other individual followers of Jesus.

Thomas

Thomas is only mentioned by name in Matthew, Mark and Luke – but he appears three times in John's Gospel. Today's reading contains the first appearance, where he encourages the other disciples to join Jesus in his travel to see Lazarus: "Let us go also. Then we can die with Jesus." It's quite a bizarre thing to say, in my view.

In John chapter 14, Jesus is talking about preparing a place in the Kingdom for the disciples. He says: "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas replies "Lord, we don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way?"

Finally, in John chapter 20, we have the most famous appearance of Thomas, which gives him the title of "Doubting Thomas". When the other disciples tell Thomas of the appearance of Jesus, he is skeptical. But in the presence of Christ, his response is simple: "My Lord and my God!"

I don't know whether when John was writing the Gospel he *wanted* Thomas to come across as a bit of a fool to start with, but that's how he strikes me. It's as if John's saying: "Even *this* guy gets it eventually: Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. If *he* can understand that, so can you!"

Martha

The other person I want to highlight is Martha. This is the only appearance of Martha in John's Gospel, but she also comes up in Luke – again, with her sister Mary. In Luke, she complains to Jesus that she's been doing all the work of hosting everyone, while Mary is just sitting and listening to Jesus. As someone who is rarely at a church service without some kind of job to do, I really feel for Martha when Jesus tells her that Mary has chosen the better option.

In our passage today, the initial rebuke is from Martha: “if you’d been here, Lazarus would not have died.” I can only imagine that also came with a bit of “We sent a message asking you to come ages ago. Why are you only just showing up now?”

But the conversation isn’t really about Lazarus – at least not in the way John tells it. It’s about Martha’s declaration of faith: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God. I believe that you are the one who is supposed to come into the world.”

Remember that Martha has just lost her brother. She’s grieving. She’s angry and desperate. Even in her grief, the presence of Jesus is transformative. I find hope and inspiration in that – precisely because I can relate to Martha as she appears in Luke’s Gospel.

Jesus

If we had continued further into the passage, we’d have seen a similar encounter with Mary, the sister of Martha. We’d have heard the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept.”

There is something about the presence of Jesus – the presence of God – which comes through powerfully in this passage. Often if we see people of power and prestige, it feels like there’s at least a two-tier system: the important people with important jobs to do, and then everyone else. What comes across here is that Jesus wasn’t like that; God isn’t like that.

The presence of God is active in a way that goes beyond “just being there”. It is somehow intrinsically tied with empathy and compassion. To be in the presence of God is to be known and understood, cared for and inspired. Of course, in the season of Lent we particularly think about the presence of God as relating to Jesus – but if you find it easier to consider God’s presence in terms of the Spirit, you’ll get no argument from me.

Conclusion

Even if Lazarus had not been raised, the presence of Jesus transformed the situation. That’s what I take from today’s passage, and what brings me hope and comfort in the darkest times of life. I don’t expect God to intervene to make everything in my life easy and lovely. What I am assured of is that God is with me in both grief and joy. What I *hope* is that the Spirit may move within my life – within all our lives – that we may be part of the expression of God’s presence for other people. In a world that is so interconnected but can feel so isolated, may we feel and act on the compassion for others, the compassion God shows for us.

As we continue through this season of reflection and self-examination, may we feel the presence of God helping us to embed God’s love more deeply in our lives. May God be with us, guiding us through the anger of the Passion, the grief of Good Friday, the celebration of Palm Sunday and the overwhelming joy of the resurrection.

Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

We offer our prayers for God’s people and the world. You may wish to pause to offer your own prayers for people and situations you know of. I’m very aware that I’m writing and recording these prayers on March 14th, and that the world could look quite different – for better or worse – by next Sunday.

Lord, we pray for your church. As we approach the end of Lent, may we feel your presence more deeply in our hearts. Bind us together with other Christians in this holy season, and let us be united in showing your love in the world.

Lord, we pray for the nations. We watch the news, full of war, injustice and hurt, and we are tempted to despair – but instead, we raise our prayers to you. Bless the leaders of all nations, granting them wisdom, compassion and inspiration. May they find ways to lead their nations into positions of peace, recognising each other as neighbours to work with instead of enemies to fight and compete with. May your presence be felt in the lives of all those who are suffering through conflict, poverty and natural disaster.

Lord, we pray for your creation. As wars in the Middle East remind us how dependent we are on the fossil fuels that are killing the planet, we pray for your inspiration and judgement, that we may find better ways of valuing this abundant planet, and of caring for life in all its richness.

Lord, we pray for each other. For those we know who are ill, and those who care for them. For those who are struggling in other ways – through stress, financial hardship, loneliness, difficult family and social relationships, or bereavement. May they feel the strength and comfort of your love in their lives.

All of these prayers we ask in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may wish to say out loud the Lord's Prayer in a version or translation you prefer.

Hymn: STF 370 Breathe on me, Breath of God

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|---|--|
| 1 Breathe on me, Breath of God ;
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do. | 3 Breathe on me, Breath of God,
till I am wholly thine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine. |
| 2 Breathe on me, Breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with thee I will one will,
to do and to endure. | 4 Breathe on me, Breath of God ;
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity. |

Edwin Hatch (1835–1889)

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Blessing

May each of us feel the presence and compassion of God in our lives, take comfort in it when in sad times, and take inspiration from it in good times. And may the blessing of God the Creator, God the Sustainer and God the Redeemer be with each of us, now and for ever. Amen.

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