

'Who's that sitting in my chair?' is not going to happen for a while at St John's is it? But for many of you that habit means that I know exactly where you usually sit and in my mind I cast my eye around and greet you with a smile. So please cast your eye around and smile back – smiles are good for us. God welcomes you into his presence with a smile.

Methodism was born in song they say and for many Methodists past and present the hymn book is a prayer book, a praise book and often lets us sing our theology. So, because you are unlikely to have a copy of *Singing the Faith* to hand, you will find all the words printed here. If you know the tune then please throw care to the winds, fill your lungs and sing with all your heart.

Our first hymn is *Father I place into your hands...*[519]. I've chosen this hymn because, with the coronavirus around us, we come with some very real concerns on our minds and it's right that we bring those to God right away. Each verse ends with a declaration of trust that God is with us in every aspect of our lives.

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| 1 | Father, I place into your hands
The things I cannot do.
Father, I place into Your hands
The things that I've been through.
Father, I place into Your hands
The way that I should go,
For I know I always can trust You. | 3 | Father, we love to see Your face,
We love to hear Your voice.
Father, we love to sing Your praise
And in Your name rejoice.
Father, we love to walk with You
And in Your presence rest,
For we know we always can trust You. |
| 2 | Father, I place into Your hands
My friends and family.
Father, I place into Your hands
The things that trouble me.
Father, I place into Your hands
The person I would be,
For I know I always can trust You. | 4 | Father, I want to be with You
And do the things You do.
Father, I want to speak the words
That You are speaking too.
Father, I want to love the ones
That You will draw to You,
For I know that I am one with You. |

Jenny Hewer (born 1945)

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That hymn has also been a prayer that will have spoken for you. Now take a few moments of quiet to just be with God. You may want to say things but words are not needed. It's OK just to be quiet. *Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.*

You may like to bring your prayer time to a close by saying the Lord's Prayer.

Our Bible reading, set for today in our lectionary, is Ezekiel 37: 1-14, The Valley of Dry Bones. If you have a Bible to hand please find the passage but don't read it just yet.

Ezekiel was the son of a temple priest in Jerusalem and destined to be a priest himself. When he was still a young man Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and he, like so many others, was marched 1,000 miles into exile. It would be just like the victors to make sure the people went past the remains of their defeated army at the start of their two month walk.

Fast-forward a few years now. Ezekiel has settled, *by the waters of Babylon* says the song. He is a priest without a temple but his house has become a place of worship. Once a year the people gather for a vigil as the sun goes down. They sing a lament for times past. Years ago in Scotland and as the sun went down I heard the sound of bagpipes coming across the water. It was hauntingly beautiful and brought Ezekiel to my mind.

It's time to sing again and what could be more fitting than *Dem Bones*? Even if it's only in your imagination get on your feet, shake the limbs and *Sing for God's glory!*

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Now hear the word of the Lord.

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
Now hear the word of the Lord.

Sing the chorus here

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.
Now hear the word of the Lord

Sing the chorus again

Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.
Now hear the word of the Lord.

So please hear the word of the Lord as you read from your Bible, Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Ezekiel begins by saying that, *He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord.* The Spirit of the Lord looms large in this passage. It's in the four winds and finally there is God's promise to his people, *I will put my Spirit in you.*

So it's very appropriate that we ask the Spirit of the Lord for help and we do so in our next hymn. The tune is the Skye Boat Song, *Carry the lad that's born to be King, over the sea to Skye.*

*Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
Gentle as is the dove,
Teach us the truth and help us believe,
Show us the Saviour's love.*

1 You spoke to men, long, long ago,
Gave us the written Word;
We read it still, needing its truth
Through it God's voice is heard.

Chorus

2 Without your help, we fail our Lord,
We cannot live His way,
We need Your power, we need
Your strength,
Following Christ each day.

Chorus

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Sermon:

Ezekiel tells us, *He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in a valley full of bones.* As I read these words I thought of the beginning of Jesus ministry as we heard it earlier in Lent. First there was his baptism where the Spirit was seen as a dove and then, immediately, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. There the stones looked like bread, a ravine invited Jesus to throw himself off and from those heights east of Jerusalem the incredible view offered him the chance to rule the world. The things around him became metaphors of opportunity, temptations that had to be faced down.

My first thought for us to hold on to is that, although your world may have shrunk this last week, you are still surrounded by the kind of things that became metaphors for Jesus and sparked Godly thoughts in him. So look around and maybe the pot plant on the window sill, the spices in your cupboard or any one of a host of things can, with the help of the Spirit, become metaphors that carry a thought from God for you.

In Ezekiel 37 the prophet is taken, by the Spirit, back to his younger days but with the eyes of the older man. The bones were 'very dry' and God asked him, *can these bones live?* Then in his amazing vision Ezekiel saw the bodies reassembled but they were all still dead. Note that Ezekiel himself had a part to play in all this. He was told to *prophesy to the breath...to come from the four winds*. Doing as he was told they came to life, a vast army of them. Then the vision was over and the reality behind the metaphor became clear, *these bones are the house of Israel*. Ezekiel's next job was to prophesy to the people and tell them of God's plans. The promise was that they would settle in their own land again, rebuilding their homes and their lives, *they and their children and their children's children* [Ezekiel 37:25]. We find the promise also in chapter 36, verse 26, *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you*. The question is, did it happen? Well there came along a new king, Cyrus, who had a different idea of how an empire should work. In fact Cyrus did an amazing thing that you can read about in the book of Ezra. Not only did he send the people back to their homeland but he also gave back to them the temple treasure to go with them to Jerusalem. It wasn't easy for the people but it was a new beginning under God that became part of the foundation story of the Jewish nation.

This brings me to my second thought for us to hold on to. Living with the coronavirus is like living in exile. Like Ezekiel and the people around him we will become prone to anger and frustration. We may quite rightly raise a wailing lament for what has been lost. Sadness may become our lot and tears may fall. None of this is out of place. The Gospel passage set for today is the story of Jesus and his good friend, the brother of Mary and Martha – Lazarus. In that story we get the shortest of sentences as the news of Lazarus' death reaches our Lord, *Jesus wept*. We should take comfort from the fact that, whatever mood comes over us, Jesus has almost certainly been there too. He is a knowing companion on our journey of life.

Having said that, we will get through this. The promise God made through Ezekiel also comes to us, the house of St John's Methodist Church, *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you*.

Our next hymn picks up that thought and invites you to get some much needed exercise whilst you sing it so please get on your feet and move as you sing.

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| 1 | <p>The Spirit lives to set us free,
walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
walk, walk in the light.
<i>Walk in the light, walk in the light,
walk in the light, walk in the light of the Lord</i></p> | 4 | <p>We know his death was not the end,
walk, walk in the light.
He gave his Spirit to be our friend,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus</p> |
| 2 | <p>Jesus promised life to all,
walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by his call,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus</p> | 5 | <p>By Jesus' love our wounds are healed,
walk, walk in the light.
The Father's kindness is revealed,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus</p> |
| 3 | <p>He died in pain on Calvary,
walk, walk in the light,
to save the lost like you and me,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus</p> | 6 | <p>The Spirit lives in you and me,
walk, walk in the light.
His light will shine for all to see,
walk, walk in the light.
Chorus</p> |

Damian Lundy (1940-1997)

This short prayer of intercession comes from a book, *Landscapes of Light* with prayers by David Adam, one time vicar of Holy Island, Lindisfarne. Each prayer is superimposed on a photograph taken on the island by Rev Robert Cooper. Both prayer and image often speak to me. I came across this one a few days ago and have returned to it almost daily because I find it so relevant.

Jesus you are the light of the world
A light that no darkness can quench

Upon your church
Wrestling with the darkness of evil
Battling against doubt
Let your light shine

Upon the world governments
Facing gloom and despair
Battling against disaster
Let your light shine

Upon those that live in the shadows
Caught up in sorrow and strife
Struggling against oblivion
Let your light shine

Our final song expresses our hopes for those around us in the wider world as we face things together.

Let there be love shared among us,
Let there be love in our eyes;
May now Your love sweep this nation,
Cause us, O Lord, to arise.
Give us a fresh understanding
Of brotherly love that is real;
Let there be love shared among us,
Let there be love.

Dave Bilbrough
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You need your imagination as we close. Bring to your mind lots of people from our church and share with them The Grace:

The Grace of our Lord Jesus
The love of God
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all evermore

Amen