Passion Sunday
streamed live to the Tidenham Parish Church Facebook group

Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we enter into the final section of Lent: known as Passiontide. At the beginning of Lent we focus on the sinfulness of the world and the promise of forgiveness held out in Christ. Now, in these final two weeks before Easter we focus more and more closely upon the cross. We recognise again the instrument of our salvation, and the way in which it is that God has wrought the atonement, the way in which we find our way home to Him.

And so in our readings, in the texts of our worship, and also in some cases in the decoration of our worship spaces, more and more predominantly the cross finds central place. Interestingly in some traditions crosses are veiled for these last two weeks of Lent (and indeed you can see the behind me the cross on my altar is now veiled in purple). This might seem paradoxical: why would we veil the symbol upon which we are focusing. Well, because for some people that visual reminder that we can't yet quite see the truth, the reality of how much God loves us is helpful. Only on Good Friday will the cross finally be unveiled, and we stare into the eyes of the one who has redeemed us.

And I think there are three points I'd like to draw out from our readings today. Both of them are quite long readings. These readings have been set for Passion Sunday, the fifth Sunday of Lent, for centuries. The story of Lazarus has been given to us by the church as a foreshadowing, tracing of the death and resurrection of Jesus, a hint and a guess of what is to come on Easter night.

The first thing is the honesty of the pain in this story. Mary and Martha, who we learn elsewhere in Scripture are so different from each other in many ways, bothsay exactly the same thing to Christ: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Notice that: both sisters say that to Jesus. A cry from the heart. Bereavement, mourning, perhaps some resentment that Jesus didn't come sooner? Is there blame here? Certainly there is pain, searching for an explanation, justification. Here is humanity in grief. All that bundle of emotions that we recognise from our own sorrows and trials. When I re-read the passage from Ezekiel this week the line that struck me was verse 11: "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." How true those words feel today. How honestly they speak into self-isolation, social distancing, Christians locked out of their churches, altars abandoned, families scattered. "We are cut off completely." Even as we learn new ways of doing things, as we download Zoom, Skype, Facebook and all the other gifts of God's creativity, we feel the pain of separation, and we feel abandoned and alone. The first people who I know well began to be diagnosed with coronavirus since last time we worshipped together. Fear, anxiety, and search for answers. These things are real, and we need to own them.

The second thing that I notice is where we find Christ. Verses 34 to 36 of today's gospel: "Jesus said, where have you laid Lazarus? They said to him, “Lord, come and see. Jesus began to weep”. So the Jews said, “see how he loved him”. Faced by the mortality of his friend, and the mourning of this community, Jesus weeps. Supposedly the shortest verse in the entire Bible: "Jesus wept." Here is God who knows where we are. Here is a God who has been where we are. Here is a God who knows about fear, loss, grief, anger, heartbreak. Here is a God who has
been everywhere that we can go, even the very depths. Because, after all, when we look at Jesus we see what God is like, and when we look at Jesus today we see him crying. So we know that he is not only with us, but has been here before.

And then finally, we notice that Lazarus has been dead four days. One day more than tradition suggested it takes for the spirit to leave the body. That is there to remind us that death is not the end. There is going to be a resurrection. None of the received wisdom, the carefully compiled religious codes, or the great stone at the mouth of the tomb are going to keep the sunlight out. Self-isolation leads to daylight. The tightest grave clothes can never contain the light, the hope, the life and the love of the resurrected Christ. The locked doors of our churches are going to be thrown open again. The locked doors of our homes are going to be thrown open again. The locked doors of our hearts are going to be thrown open again, because the man who has been everywhere that we are forced to go has a voice that rings through the heaviest stone, "unbind him, and let him go."

Amen.