



God trusts you
Reverend Judith Wigglesworth
Lent 5, 2 April 2017
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

*Lord God, open our hearts and minds
to see new life through your Word this day.*

Standing here today there's a bit of déjà vu! It reminds me of preaching in mid-August last year, the week after we had the news about our buildings. Here we are now, a week after the news that Ellie will become Assistant Bishop in June. As there was, back in August, there is probably a range of emotions that you've felt in the past week or so: celebration and excitement for Ellie, thanksgiving and appreciation for her ministry, perhaps some pride that you have had a part to play in equipping Ellie for this calling. And then there's probably some shock – first the building, now the vicar! – and probably some anxiety and worry – how will things be sorted? What will happen next? Inevitably, thoughts turn to what it will all mean for us, for our St Alban's community.

Today we also continue our pilgrimage through Lent. We are coming closer to the end of our Lenten journey, and next week we will enter Holy Week as we celebrate Palm Sunday. In our preaching during Lent we have heard about some Lenten disciplines: fasting, prayer, and contemplation, which can help us connect with God in a deeper way. Today I'd like to explore the concept of giving – but I'd like to use the word "surrender" instead.

Perhaps at first the theme of surrender is not that obvious from today's readings. The stories from Ezekiel and John's gospel are two graphic stories

of new life. Why are they placed intentionally within our Lenten journey? We're not there yet! Today I'd like to help you see the sense of surrender that I've discovered in these stories, and help you to perceive, through them, a sense of surrender in our story – the story of the St Alban's community.

First, let's look at Ezekiel. The very first words of that reading tell us that Ezekiel was not alone: God's hand was upon him, God led him and carried him by the Spirit. God led Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones, and Ezekiel did as God asked him. First, he had to "pass among them" – he had to immerse himself in the reality of the dryness and lifelessness of the dry bones. Then, as instructed, he prophesied to the bones, articulating God's promise of new life. In all of this, Ezekiel surrendered himself to God's request. God then used this image, this vision, this experience to reassure both Ezekiel and the people of Israel, that God would put God's Spirit in them and restore them. Ezekiel's surrender to God meant a powerful picture of God's promise of renewal could be revealed to the people of Israel.

The story of Lazarus is another powerful story of new life in a situation that seems utterly hopeless. Not only has Lazarus died, but Jesus dawdles and doesn't get there for four days! Mary and Martha are both annoyed – they both point out to Jesus that their brother would not have died had Jesus got there sooner. So, where's the surrender in this story? First, I see a sense that Jesus surrendered to the reality of God's promise. Jesus' initial reaction when he heard the news that Lazarus was ill was to say: "This illness is not to end in death; through it God's glory is to be revealed and the Son of God glorified". Therefore, though he loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for two days after hearing of Lazarus's illness.

Perhaps Jesus wanted Mary and Martha to surrender to the reality of death - Lazarus' death - knowing that the ultimate outcome would glorify God. Jesus also surrendered himself to the reality of death as he wept alongside Mary. He then surrendered himself and the whole situation to God by praying in thanksgiving and anticipation to God **before** he called Lazarus out of the tomb. "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me". Jesus prayed in anticipation that God, the ultimate source of new

life, would reveal that new life for all to see, giving the glory to God. And indeed, Lazarus came out of the tomb.

Two stories of death. Two stories of surrender. Two stories of new life. Both Ezekiel and Jesus placed themselves completely into God's hands – they surrendered their actions and words to the unfolding of God's grace.

Lent is a time when we are invited to encounter death, to surrender to God, and to be ready to encounter new life. Lent is a time we give ourselves over to a belief that "God provides". And right now in the midst of more change, we are called more than ever to give ourselves unreservedly to the God who unreservedly provides: a God in whom we trust and who trusts us.

Do you remember these bookmarks we made that read "Keep calm and trust God". Ellie urged us to trust God in the midst of the uncertainty around our buildings, and to lean into that uncertainty with God. Now Ellie has trusted God in this new calling on her life. And we likewise are urged to trust God in a new season here.

But there's also another way of looking at trust: **God trusts you.**

Earlier in today's worship Ellie offered these words of absolution:

God forgives you.

Forgive others.

Forgive yourself.

What happens if we substitute the word "trust"?

God trusts you.

Trust others.

Trust yourself.

At first I pondered:

Trust God

Trust others

Trust yourself.

But the more I played with those words, the more I felt compelled to share with you the concept that God trusts you. God trusted humanity the

moment he gave us free will. Jesus trusted the disciples the moment he said “follow me”. Jesus trusted the 72 the moment he sent them out. And God trusts us to say yes to journeying ahead into more change. We can’t do that if we immerse ourselves in anxiety and fear, and focus on the loss of what was. With God there are always next steps: the end of something is only an ending if we believe that God doesn’t do beginnings.

God trusts us. God trusts that we will be open to these new beginnings. God trusts that we will embrace the reality of change and call upon the wisdom and the gifts that Ellie has helped us discover in ourselves in the last few years.

God calls us to trust each other and to work creatively with each other into our “what next”. It means being with one another, making opportunities to talk, to ponder, to explore, to pray together. It means believing the best of one another, being open to other’s opinions and walking in one in another’s shoes.

God calls each of us to trust ourselves: to believe that we will never stop being the body of Christ in this place: to trust in the faith that God is continuing to grow within us; to remind ourselves that living in Christ means being motivated by love, not fear.

As Paul said to the Christians in Rome “You live by the spirit, since God’s Spirit dwells in you”. God spirit already dwells in you – Jesus has already made his home within your heart and has no plans to leave. Trust yourselves that you will continue to be the light and life of Christ in this place and in this community. At the end of today’s worship, stand tall as we “stand up and bless the Lord”.

God trusts you.

Trust each other.

Trust yourself.

Amen.