

**Prelude:** Andante from Voluntary in G by Maurice Greene, a seventeenth century composer. Played by Alan Buchan on the Laggan organ

**Words of welcome:** We take time from every other activity of our lives to concentrate on God in worship because we trust him. Through all of life's challenges and changes, God promises to be with us and help us and so we give to God our worship and place our faith in him. We start the service by singing or listening to a version of Psalm 95

**Hymn:** Safe in the shadow of the Lord (55)

**Prayer:**

We trust you, Lord God. We place our lives into your hands and trust you, which is the highest expression of worship that we can give. We trust you with the things that fill us with delight and the things that worry and confuse us. We trust you with our hurts and our healing, with all that we love and is most dear to us, and with the things that we could do without. We trust you with all this unpredictable life that you have given to us.

Forgive us when we forget to live out the trust we have in you. You know that sometimes we may question you but forgive us when we turn away and ignore you. Keep us always turned towards you, working on our trust of you. And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

**Reading:** Ezekiel 37:1-10

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. The bones which seem to be and are dead and lifeless but which with God's breath on them become again the living breathing army that they once were. It is a vision that has inspired God's people many times over the millennia since Ezekiel first recorded it. It reminds us that nothing is dead and done with if God wills it otherwise. Nothing, including the church of his people, or including you and me. God's gift to us is always life: full and unpredictable life. But you notice that Ezekiel's vision, which is given him to make a point, ends with the newly formed army on its feet, and doesn't continue from there when we might discover that though they looked like an army they were in fact all different, and would act and react in different ways..

Jesus called the fishermen to fish for people, and as they followed him, they learned that fishing for people was all about giving them life. Before we read about one of their first lessons, we sing to ask God's Spirit to speak to us and help us to live in Christ's way.

**Hymn:** Spirit of God unseen as the wind (600)

**Reading:** Mark 1:35-45

The problem with people is that they have minds of their own! We make plans – we make plans in the church and we make plans in the family and we make plans in other areas of life

and we expect everyone to fall in with our plans and act and react in the way our plans ask of them, and then we find that sometimes they don't!

Jesus found that too. Jesus was at the beginning of the public ministry, feeling his way forward. He had called his first disciples to follow him and gratifyingly, they had come (I wonder if there were others he called to who we know nothing of, because they decided not to follow?) He had spoken in the synagogue and healed the poor possessed man. And later he had healed others. He had chosen not to take the shortcut of allowing what was evil to speak the truth about who he was, wanting people to watch him and listen to him and draw their own conclusions.

Next day he got up early to lay his doings and plans before God in prayer. When we are following Jesus if there is one thing we should learn it is that we need to pray. Jesus himself wanted to talk things over with his Father in heaven, and if he had that need, then we certainly do. I am sure that Jesus would want to think over the day that was past in God's presence, seeking to learn from it what God was teaching and to get God's perspective on what had been done and where it should lead. And then he would look forward to the day or two to come and seek God's guidance on his plans there too.

We sometimes think that because Jesus was God's Son he knew everything and had it all worked out perfectly. But if that were the case he would not have entered fully into our human existence and experience, because life is not like that. Part of human life is learning to live with uncertainty, and it is feeling our way forward with God. So part of the wonder of the incarnation is that the Son of God gave up his divinity, gave up what set him apart from his creation, and took on our limitations. And this is why it is possible for us to follow him; because he did in fact struggle with our struggles and live with our uncertainties.

Jesus went off with his small band of learners, not to go back to the places he had been the day before, where they were already looking for him, but to take the good news of God's kingdom to other places. That was what he thought the plan and pattern would be. But part of that plan was to heal and restore fullness of life to those who needed it. Because God's kingdom is about life, just as God has always been about life from the dawn of creation.

And then there was this man with his dread skin disease. And he knelt before Jesus and gave him the choice, to heal or not to heal. That's not how other people had put it to Jesus. They had simply come to him and asked for what they needed – healing of body or of soul. But this man was someone who had his own way of approaching life and seeking what he needed. He was not one of the crowd, not then when he was ill, and so, why should Jesus expect him to be like one of the crowd when he was healed?

People: they have minds of their own!

Jesus asked the healed man not to tell anyone about how he got his healing. Jesus was working on a plan to go around from place to place, showing the kingdom of God in word and in deed and letting people draw their own conclusions. He didn't want a publicity machine. He didn't want the kind of attention that would put a stop to his plan. But this individual free-thinker was not going to be told what to do. He told everyone. He did it out of gratitude, no doubt. He did it because he wanted others who needed similar help to know that there was someone who could give it to them. He would have the best of intentions and probably never even realised that he was doing what he had been asked not to do.

And the result was that Jesus had to make a change of plan and stay in the country rather than going on from place to place.

Changing plans is a part of what it means to follow Jesus. The fishermen who were watching had to learn that catching people would be different than catching fish. When you go fishing the idea is to kill the fish, to bring them lifeless and pretty much uniform to market. But God's kingdom is all about giving life, making life fuller and better, and so less

uniform and less predictable. That is part of the glory of humanity: that people can always surprise you. And as more life is given them, as they enter the life of God's kingdom, or the life of God's kingdom enters them – enters us – the result should be more surprises! Living people have minds of their own.

Surprises can be good and fun, but they do make planning difficult. The former leper meant well but his actions had the consequence of changing how Jesus worked. Just like us, Jesus was aiming at a moving target. Life does not stand still. During this summer, as we have lived with the lifting of lockdown and the ceaseless changing of advice and regulations, we have learned again that life does not stand still – and these months have been a bit like a speeded up film on that front. The usual gradual changes of life have become a kaleidoscope, a pattern that moves so quickly that you can never quite pin it down. It makes planning difficult. But it is just what Jesus faced in his three years or so of ministry.

If you read the Gospels looking for the patterns in what he was doing and where and why you will find that he never could settle to just the one plan. His hand was forced over and over, by individuals as we read today, or by petty officials wanting to curtail him, so that he would have to move on, by those who loved him almost too well and those who hated him and wanted to stop him.

These days, as a church we are having to think and re-think about what we do and how and why. It can be frustrating, especially if we are too wedded to our former plans. But it is what Jesus also had to do, and if we are following him, why should we expect any different?

But whether we can go from place to place or are stuck in the open countryside; whether we can meet in in large gatherings and in formal buildings, or just in ones and twos with space between us; whether we follow in prioritising prayer, as we ought, or in seeking to show love to our neighbours, as we also ought; the message we have to bring, in word and deed, in our lives lived with God, is still that the kingdom of God has come near.

**Hymn:** There's a Spirit in the air (616)

Just before we turn to prayer, I would like to remind you that for now – it may change in the next few weeks - we are holding prayer services in St. Bride's on Mondays at 6.30 and Thursdays at 7.30 and that these are for people from all our churches. They are not long gatherings, because you have to sit where you're told and wear a mask, but those who have been coming have appreciated the time to come together in a different way than we have been used to do on a Sunday. If you haven't been and would like to, do let me know. This week our prayers will be about the future of our churches.

**Prayer:**

Lord God, in Jesus your Son you give us life, your life, flowing and free, and you invite us to become more, to grow into the fullness of life that you intended for us when you planned and made us. Help us to grow into your love.

You came to bring life to the world, not only to those who trust in you. So help us to learn to live in love and generosity to all. Give us the grace both to give when we can and to receive when others want to give to us. Help us grow into your love.

We pray today for those around us who are sad, or worried or despairing. We pray for those who are losing memories or abilities and who feel that this year is stealing time from them. We ask that you would help us to know and to share the joy of your presence in whatever difficulties we face. Help us to grow into your love.

We pray for the world, for the people who are infected and affected by this virus which has changed life so radically. We pray for the people of India and Brazil, and for our

friends in the Czech Republic; we pray for the many people whose reaction to troubles is to retreat from caring for those they cannot see. Help us to grow into your love.

We ask your blessing on all those we love, all those for whom we are concerned just now. And we pray your blessing on all who will listen to this service, wherever they may be. Hear all our prayers for Jesus' sake, Amen.

The life of God is found in many ways, as we are reminded as we sing the hymn

**Hymn:** Christ is alive, let Christians sing (416)

**Benediction:**

Live in trust of God and in the fullness of his life:

And the blessing of God almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Be with you now and always. Amen.

**Postlude:** part of a Scherzo by Joseph Rheinberger played by John Crombie