3 May 2020: Sunday Worship
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Genesis 7, Acts 2:42–end, John 10:1–10
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘Breathing’

“I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance.” John 10.10 – made a bit more personal. In this way, Jesus’s words are addressed not to the disciples but to us (who are today’s disciples).

This week I heard of the death of two elderly, but long-term friends of the family. One I didn’t meet very often. The other I did because he was himself a priest in the Church of England. And his passing was a loss to me. Not the loss that grieves and feels bereft. I wasn’t that close to him. Bereavement belongs to his more immediate family and friends. But a loss to me nevertheless, though I haven’t thought of him in years. He was a large, personable man; a man with presence; a man full of humour. To think of him as no longer alive, no longer breathing, no longer here among us, brings with it the permanence, in this life, of his absence. In some tiny way he lived in me. As memory, yes, but more than that: our lives had crossed and his had impacted mine, however slight. The memory remains. It’s a record of the impact. But he does not remain. He is one of a number who over this time and because of this virus does not remain.

Each evening, in my social distancing, I tune into the News and, like so many others, wait to find out the official numbers of those who have died. And I’m aware of some jarring here, because outside, in the field next to my house, the ewes have just finished lambing and the cows have just finished calving. The cuckoos are going crazy. Life in all its springtime fullness is flourishing, abundant. But only for a time. For everything there is only a time. And it’s a time, even in Christ and among his flock, open to dangers. The parable in John’s Gospel speaks of thieves and bandits who set out to destroy. And that’s true in the field next door. In the Scottish Highlands, predators (beautiful eagles, osprey, kestrels, and even ravens) fly low across the fields, watchful for any weakness in the new born. But most of the lambs stick close, attentive to their mother’s bleating. In a very natural way, the young hear and know caring and respond to it. They are kept safe by
that attentiveness, just like us in our attentiveness to Christ: we know the voice, we know the caring, and we respond to it in faith – trusting that however fraught the time is with dangers we are loved and cared for. Though, of course, the eagles and the osprey, the kestrels and the ravens have to eat. And that’s where the comparison breaks down. But the point is that Christ doesn’t take us out of the world. Our discipleship and following, our attentiveness to His voice and entrustment, comes through Christ giving us to the world. And the world contains many forces that endanger us. We can get sucked into our fears of being alive and the threats to our remaining alive. There is a learning to be had. This is hard to grasp because outside of faith it can’t be turned into straightforward human reason: but there is an endurance and a perseverance and life “in abundance”. And there is also the blunt fact that it is only for a time. And it is in only being for the time that what we have, in breathing, life and a gift, a precious gift; and a loss for others when it stops.

I’m an asthmatic. I know the panic that rises when you can’t breathe properly. Of all the symptoms this virus might bring the inability to breathe is the one I dread and relate to. The relationship between breathing and living is written into me on any number of levels. Life comes with breathing. Adam may have come from dust, but dust must breathe if it is to live and move. Life, even in abundance, has to start somewhere. And that is breathing. So, I want to end this reflection with a poem that kind of sums up my own thoughts, at this time, on that statement by Jesus: “I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance.”

**Breathing Still**

Tides and blown sand furrow rock,
Whittling at weakness,
But they persist while
The buzzard swoops to kill
And the curlew wails its solitude.
I will stay – time and ley lines allowing –
Visit the rocks, stride the sands,
Gaze at the heft and tow of the tides,
Brace the bullying wind,
Embrace finitude.
I pace out the labouring, longing
Not knowing much divinity.
Touched by the intimate goodness of small things.
Loving a little. Breathing still.

R.I.P. Revd. Canon John Rogan