

John 11:17-45
Fifth Sunday in Lent

29.03.20

Fully alive

It is a decisive moment in John's Gospel. Dark clouds have been gathering round Jesus for a while, as resistance to him grows from the religious establishment, and Jesus has withdrawn to a deserted place to lie low. But then a message reaches him: his dear friend Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, is ill and they ask him to come to Bethany, the town just outside Jerusalem where they live, to heal him. Jesus, however, delays for two days, but then resolves to go – much to the disquiet of his disciples who fear for their safety. By the time he gets to Bethany, however, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. And we can understand the anger and the reproach of Mary and Martha: why didn't you come sooner? If only you'd been here...

There then follows this astounding miracle, as Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the tomb, and out he steps, stumbling into the light of day, bound by his graveclothes, and Jesus tells Mary and Martha to unbind him. And why this miracle is so decisive is that if we had read on we would have found that it is this action that finally seals Jesus' fate and signs his death warrant. Lazarus' raising is the final straw, provoking Jesus' enemies to move against him.

Now, one disappointing feature of this story, for me, is that we don't hear any more about Lazarus. He disappears from the narrative: he has played his part in the drama and now we must move on. But hold on a minute, I'm curious! This guy was dead for four days, what was that like? Some Jews believed that for three days the spirit of the deceased hovered over the corpse, awaiting its full release. But Lazarus is a four day man, and we can't help wondering, what has he experienced? What have his eyes seen?

The English playwright Dorothy Sayers wrote a series of plays about Jesus called 'The Man Born to be King', in one of which she portrays Lazarus at table with local villagers after his rising. And they of course are fascinated. 'Do tell me, Lazarus – I hope I'm not being impertinent – but what does it *feel* like to be dead?' To which Lazarus replies, 'This life is like weaving at the back of the loom. All you see is the crossing of threads. In *that* life you go to the front and see the wonder of the pattern'. So has Lazarus indeed seen something of the wonder of God's pattern that is yet hidden from us but which will one day be revealed? Or again, the playwright Eugene O'Neill wrote a play entitled 'Lazarus Laughed'. In that play, as Lazarus' grave cloths are unwound, he begins to laugh - a soft, gentle laugh. Lazarus laughs because he is echoing God's eternal laughter which he has heard in death. And now he no longer fears death, and the house where he lives becomes known as 'The House of Laughter', and soon there is singing and dancing resounding from it. And people in the village soon catch on and they begin living more generously and humanely with one another. And of course eventually the authorities, the powers that be, cannot stand it. They are intimidated by this loosening of the deathly grip by which they rule, and Lazarus is arrested and taken before the emperor. But Lazarus has lost his fear and nothing, even death, can silence his laughter. It's as if something of heaven's glory has been stolen and carried back as contraband and now brings joy, enriching life here.

So, following Eugene O'Neill and his laughing Lazarus, the question I want to consider today is the effect on Lazarus' life of being raised this way. Lazarus, of course, must one day die again, as O'Neill recognised. His raising is not strictly resurrection, which is to eternal life, when death is no more. For Lazarus it's more a case of resuscitation until death catches up with him once again, for good. But meanwhile, what difference would it have made to the way he lived? And what difference might it make to you were you, like Lazarus, to die and then to be brought back? Might you be inclined to laugh a little more? And what else?

Well, I'm going to make a suggestion – of how I think it would affect me, if I were Lazarus. Quite simply, I think it might make me appreciate life more. After all, there is nothing like having something you love taken from you and then given back. You cease to take that thing for granted. You recognise it as a gift, a blessing, and in the revealing of the fragility and contingency of everything perhaps you might grasp what you love a little more firmly and with a little more

gratitude. Imagine, God forbid, losing your sight and then having it restored. Just imagine the new delight you would find not only in beauty, in the sunlight and the sunset and the glories of the changing seasons – but even in the ordinary and the mundane which would take on a new splendour as you see everyday things afresh and with new appreciation.

I was struck by something I read by a man dying of AIDS, as he describes the stage he got to beyond anger and fear and despair. He described it as entering a new door, and sensing that everything is all right in the universe, and realising how we are connected. He wrote, ‘I sensed that life was chaotic yet beautiful. I felt like singing and dancing. I felt like going up to people and grabbing them and saying, ‘You are wonderful. You really are bloody wonderful.’ That man was dying and yet this was the effect on him of gradually losing his hold on life, of what he took for granted, and grasping it afresh. And how much more might those sentiments overwhelm us as we stepped out of the tomb, like Lazarus. Suddenly the world is wonderful.

If only we could die, and live again. If only we could share Lazarus’ experience – how we would be changed! Well, I’d like to suggest to you that we can share Lazarus’ experience. In fact I would suggest to you that Lazarus stands as a kind of symbol of the Christian life. After all, think if it this way. Lazarus has died and been raised to life. But so have we! Isn’t that what baptism is all about? Isn’t baptism a dying, a being put to death so that we might be raised to new life with Christ. And in ancient baptismal ceremonies candidates stripped naked, removing their clothes, before entering the waters – rising from the water and putting on new, festal garments. And maybe we glimpse that in the unbinding of Lazarus’ old grave cloths, and I wonder what he put on outside that tomb in Bethany. And of course in baptism we are reborn – born again – to begin a new life with Christ, just as that tomb in Bethany became a womb from which Lazarus emerges blinking in the light. And he greets the world unbound, freed for a new appreciation of life’s goodness. And we Christians are Lazarus: his is the life of the baptised. We have died – with Christ! As the great Scottish preacher George MacLeod put it, ‘so far as we are concerned the undertaker has been and gone!’ And we rise and receive the world back, with unbound hands, and with new gratitude and appreciation.

That leads me to one last point, and to one striking feature of John’s Gospel: it is surely the most sensual of the gospels. So right near the beginning there is a miracle of turning water into wine, and the comment is made that this best tasting wine has been saved until last. And later, when Jesus controversially tells his disciples that unless they eat of his flesh they cannot have life, the word for eat there is a very strong one: it’s literally, ‘unless you chew my flesh, masticate my flesh’. This is a sensual, savoured eating. And in John’s record of a man healed of blindness there is a description of Jesus making mud with saliva and spreading it on his eyes: it is all very tactile, and there then follows a long discourse on sight. And here in our story, as Jesus prepares to raise Lazarus, Martha, knowing he has been dead for four days, exclaims that there is a stench – we are drawn into the story by the smell that hangs over it. And after Jesus’ resurrection he encounters Thomas who has doubted that Jesus has risen and Jesus invites Thomas to ‘put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hands and put it in my side.’ In other words, touch me! Well, all this is in keeping with the beginning of John’s gospel which speaks of God’s Word through whom God created all things, which became flesh in Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh and the Christian life of the baptised is lived in the flesh and is a celebration of the flesh and the senses. One of the early church fathers, St Irenaeus of Lyon, bequeathed to the church an oft-quoted saying which is usually translated from Latin as ‘the glory of God is a human being fully alive’, and while it is disputed whether that is quite the right translation it is a great saying anyway. To have died and risen with Christ is to be more fully alive, more attuned, more sensitive to the world and to creation in all its wonder and glory and also all its pain and its groaning. And that is a word, surely, for this season of Spring when the world is coming to life again, lit by sunlight and drenched with showers and the trees are bursting with blossom and the world is a riot of colour and touch and smell. And how sad to be confined to our homes and to be locked in but perhaps there is a window or door somewhere through which we can look out on a world in the grip of spring and new life.

The story of Lazarus speaks of a life lost but then received back. It's the life of the baptised. And surely this is a text for the corona crisis that we are currently living through. So much that is taken for granted has been taken away: physical contact, touch, company, community. So much that we count as normal has been shown to be easily lost. May that teach us to appreciate all the more what we have been given. May it teach us to live life as those who have been given it back, sharing fully in life's joys and life's pain as those who glorify God by being fully alive. If the church could live like that, who knows? It might even become the House of Laughter. Amen.

O holy and loving God,
We praise and bless you the God of light and the God of life.
In the beginning you called light out of darkness,
and you breathed life into us,
and you raised us up from the dust
and made us to be free.
We come to worship you,
we come and bow before your great power
that defies death and over-rules the darkness
and sets us free.
And we come in need of you for we are a people
stalked by death in all its guises,
a people who carry on us the smell of the tomb.
Our lives are invaded by darkness
and we find ourselves bound and tied,
part of a world wrapped and trapped in the cords of death.
And we come as part of that world, confessing our sins
as we cry Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy...

Lord Jesus Christ, come to us,
unbind us, loose us and set us free.
Speak to us the words of grace and forgiveness that release us
And summon us back into light and into life.
For we pray in Jesus name...