



Sermon preached by Revd Dr Lance Stone on 26th March 2023

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Readings: John 11:17-45; Romans 8:6-11

Lazarus reborn

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have been gathering round Jesus for a while, as resistance to him grows from the religious establishment, and Jesus has withdrawn to a deserted place to lie low. And it is there that news of his friend Lazarus' sickness comes to him, and the request to heal him. Jesus delays, however, deliberately, and by the time he gets to Lazarus he 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. And here we encounter that shortest and yet most iconic of verses in the entire Bible: Jesus wept. Indeed we are told that Jesus was 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' – and he wept. And we might wonder why he was so upset. After all, he knew that he was going to raise Lazarus up. Earlier on in the chapter Jesus has told his disciples that Lazarus is only sleeping and that he is going to wake him up. So why the anguish? Why Jesus' deep distress if he knew that all was going to be well? Well, there is one suggestion that has been made by some commentators, which is that Jesus' turmoil is because here at this tomb he is confronted not only with Lazarus' death but also with his own death – something that happens in the other Gospels in the Garden of Gethsemane. John's account of Jesus in Gethsemane, further on in the narrative, has nothing of Jesus' anguish that we find in the other gospels. John has nothing of his wrestling in prayer, of him sweating blood, his pleading that the cup pass from his lips – because in John all that happens here in front of Lazarus' tomb as he comes face to face with the full consequences of raising his friend.

So the raising Lazarus spells deep distress and death for Jesus. Our focus this morning, however, is not the effect of this incident for Jesus, but rather the effect on Lazarus – how it might have changed his life. We don't hear much more about Lazarus after this – just that reference in the following chapter to him sitting at table with Jesus, as we heard earlier. But when I hear this story I find myself wondering what it must have been like for Lazarus to lose his life, to have it taken from him – only to receive it back. How would that have impacted him? How would it impact you? Imagine for a moment Lazarus' dying. Evidently it was from illness, so Lazarus experienced all that comes with a terminal illness. Did he know the pain of having to release his hold on life? Did he look at his beloved sisters Mary and Martha and feel in his heart the sorrow of having to let go? As his life ebbed away, did his mind return wistfully to former days, happy times when he was fit and well, and to moments of great joy and blessing? Well, who knows? But eventually the end had come as it must come for us all. It's all gone - and then he was given it back! Not for good, of course. Lazarus would have died again. His was not strictly resurrection but resuscitation. But in the time given back to him, how would he have changed? How would he have lived differently from before?

The American 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. And the reason Lazarus laughs is 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', as soon there is singing and dancing resounding from it. And Lazarus' laughter is infectious as 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.

Besides that, however, besides the laughter, maybe there would have been other consequences. Maybe Lazarus would have seen the world with fresh eyes and savoured the world more fully. I wonder if that meal with Jesus that we read about in the next chapter might have tasted better and indeed received with greater gratitude. Having something precious taken from us, only to receive it back, can surely change us. It might make us take life less for granted. We might cherish life more as gift, as blessing. Indeed we might be grasped by a deeper awareness of the fragility and contingency of everything - and so perhaps we might grasp what we 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 moonlight and the glories of the changing seasons - but even in the ordinary and the mundane, with the everyday taking on a new vitality as you see the world afresh and with new appreciation. It's the lesson we might have learnt from Covid. So much that was taken for granted was taken away: physical contact, touch, company, community. So much that we count as normal was shown to be so easily lost, and if only that might teach us to appreciate all the more what we have been given when it is given back.

Maybe that's a lesson nature tries to teach us. Think of the seasons. Year in, year out, the natural world around us is slowly drained of life. And of course Autumn has its splendour with its magnificent hues of copper and scarlet and gold - it's almost as if creation is making a gesture of defiance before it yields its colour to winter. But slowly death descends... and then every year it is all given back as the world is made new. And if that's a lesson of nature, maybe it's one that the church has taken up and adopted in the period of Lent, which is why it is good to consider this passage in this season. Of course there is more to Lent than just giving things up, but it's an important practice nevertheless. The lessons of Covid are so easily lost: we are slow to learn and so quick to forget. But when the year is punctuated, annually, year in and year out, by a period of renunciation it can serve as a reminder and so help us to embrace the rest of the year more fully and more gratefully.

If only we could share Lazarus' experience - if only we could die, and then live again - if only we could be reborn! Well, here is a thought: maybe as Christians we can, and in fact we do. Because I would suggest to you that Lazarus stands as a kind of symbol of the Christian life: if Lazarus has died and been raised back to life, so have we! Isn't that what baptism is all about? Isn't baptism a dying, a letting go, 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 - something colourful and festal, I hope! Lazarus becomes a symbol of the baptised, of being reborn to begin a new life with Christ, just as that tomb in Bethany became a womb from which Lazarus emerges blinking in the light. We, the baptised, are Lazarus people, greeting the world with fresh eyes, with a sense of life being given back to us, freed for a new appreciation of its goodness and wonder. The great Scottish preacher George MacLeod put it so well: 'so far as we are concerned the undertaker has been and gone!' We are dead and buried, and we rise with Lazarus, receiving the world back, with unbound hands, and with new gratitude and appreciation of life as gift.

For Jesus, what happened at that tomb in Bethany brought great anguish. It meant tears and turmoil as he faced what was coming to him. For Lazarus it meant a life lost, but then returned to him. This is the life of the baptised. May we learn to live life as those who have been given it back. If the church could live like that, who knows? It might even become the House of Laughter. Amen.