

Sermon for 5th May 2019 (Third Sunday of Easter)

Is. 38. 9-20; Ps. 86; John 11. 27-44

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Lazarus, come out.” What a remarkable command for Jesus to cry out in a loud voice, and what an amazing result! Of all Jesus’s miracles, this presents us with the biggest problem. The other three gospels record two different people being raised from the dead, Jairus’s daughter and the widow’s son at Nain, but those were immediate. In the case of Lazarus, he had been in the tomb for four days, at which stage his body had begun to putrefy. Consider also that none of the other gospel writers refer to this story, although surely they must have been aware of the happening, coming as it did not long before Jesus entered Jerusalem at the start of Holy Week. In my searches I have not been able to find any satisfactory answer to this problem, nor did William Barclay whose book on John’s gospel I have found immensely helpful while preparing this sermon. As John related, Jesus had been told that Lazarus was ill, through a message sent by Martha and Mary, but had decided to stay where he was for another couple of days. Then he announced to his disciples that it was time to move on into Judea, though his disciples tried to deter him by reminding him that the last time he was there the Jews had tried to arrest him. By now, Jesus was aware that Lazarus had died and knew well that in the heat of that country the burial would take place within a couple of days - as it still does in countries which have high temperatures. But he also knew that he had a job to do, namely to glorify God.

So, as John records earlier in chapter 11, Jesus set out from beyond the River Jordan on a two or three day journey to Bethany (near Jerusalem) where Lazarus and his sisters lived. Martha went out to meet Jesus before he arrived. After gently reproaching him for not having got to them sooner, so that he might have healed Lazarus before he died, Martha went on to declare her complete faith in Jesus and her belief in what had become by that time orthodox Jewish belief (except for the Sadducees) in the life to come. Jesus then made that pronouncement which probably is the kernel of John’s story: **“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”** What exactly did he mean? Clearly Jesus was not thinking in terms of physical life, for we know that people are dying every day. There are two ways in which we can see what Jesus was getting at: first in terms of the death of sin in this mortal life. Some people, hardened criminals for instance, can become so ensnared by their activities that it seems impossible that they might have a change of heart; but there have been cases, for example where a murderer had been handed a bible on death row and read it through to the story of the crucifixion and Christ’s words **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”**. He was instantly converted, had a change of heart and ‘lived again’, even though as a convicted murderer he later went to the gallows. And what about the second criminal who was crucified alongside Jesus? Having just heard those same words of forgiveness from

Jesus, he said: ***“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*** And again, perhaps the prime example of all we heard about in our epistle reading this morning - Saul of Tarsus, renowned persecutor of the first Christian Jews, who became Paul the apostle to the Gentiles.

Secondly, Jesus was thinking of the life to come, eternal life in God’s new heaven and earth. Through him we know that we are journeying not to the sunset, but to the sunrise; we know, as the writer Mary Webb put it, that death is a gate on the skyline. In the most real sense, we are not on our way to death but on our way to life. How does this happen? It happens when we believe in Jesus Christ, when we accept all that Jesus said as true and stake our lives on that in perfect trust. We enter into a new relationship with God, for we become absolutely sure that He is love and that He is above all a redeeming God, so that the fear of death vanishes. We also enter into a new relationship with life, when we accept Jesus’s way, take his commands as our laws, and realise that he is there to help us to live as he has commanded. Life is clothed with a new loveliness and new strength, so that we cannot conceive of it ending incomplete. Life is raised from sin’s death and becomes so rich that it cannot die but must find in death only the transition to a higher life.

With these thoughts in mind, let us move on to our reading tonight where Jesus arrived at the tomb. First we have the shortest verse in the bible, ***“Jesus wept.”*** This is followed shortly by a Greek word difficult to translate, but which William Barclay suggests must in the context mean that such deep emotion seized Jesus that an involuntary groan was wrung from his heart. That revealed not only Jesus’s own human reaction, but surely also that the God in whom we believe cares. Then Jesus uttered that command ***“Lazarus, come out.”*** and in doing so showed to the crowd around him the glory of God as Lazarus appeared from the tomb. To the many onlookers who believed in him as a result, Jesus surely was ***“the resurrection and the life”***.

Perhaps this event, the raising of Lazarus to life, was not only a foreshadowing of Jesus’s own resurrection in the near future, but may also have been behind Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the crowds hailing him as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. But, as John goes on to relate in the following passage, some of the onlookers at Bethany went straight to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So, seemingly, this also was the trigger that prompted the Sanhedrin to arrange for his arrest through the treachery of Judas and for his trial before Pilate, so that they could do away with this, to them, dangerous preacher who threatened their cosy relationship with the Roman authorities. In the meantime, let us remain comforted and reassured by those words of Jesus to Martha: ***“I am the resurrection and the life.”***

Amen.