

Sermon for Sunday 26 March 2023 – The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

We've heard this morning a very long gospel reading from St John, telling us the story of the death and the raising of Lazarus. It's not a coincidence that we have this reading this morning. In St John's Gospel, the miracles that Jesus performs are described as signs. Signs that reveal to us John's understanding of who Jesus is. So the raising of Lazarus is a sign that shows us that Christ is God with us; Christ empowered to perform on earth the works of the Father. And as we journey through these next two weeks to Easter, we will find that Jesus takes on to himself the full human experience of what it means to share with us the experience of suffering, loss, grief and death. Then, after these things, his ultimate victory over death and the newness of life.

So St John tells us that Lazarus is ill. Jesus was staying down near the River Jordan, near the place where he was baptised. So he's on retreat, if you like, he's praying there spiritually in the wilderness, anticipating his final journey up from the Jordan Valley through the mountains to Jerusalem. And while he's there by the River Jordan, praying, the message comes from Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus, that their brother Lazarus is seriously ill. St John tells us that one of the sisters, Mary, was the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. So we can understand that these are two sisters who have a deep faith in Jesus. They've placed their faith in Him, they've worshipped Him, they love Him deeply, they trust Him and they believe in Him with every fabric of their being. So surely, now, in their moment of need, Jesus will come to them. But no, Jesus ignores their plea for two more days.

Now, Jesus had a good reason for doing so. His prayers have convinced him that his final journey to Jerusalem is to complete the work that his Father has given him. And Bethany is on the way. And he knows, Jesus believes, that this will not lead to Lazarus's ultimate untimely death, but will be an opportunity to prepare the disciples for what will take place in Holy Week. God will be glorified through the experience of loss, sacrifice and tears, because they're not the end, they are stages on the way that leads to life. But while Jesus knows that in his heart, because during his prayers, his Father has shown him that, the sisters do not know that. So we can appreciate that the sisters would have been deeply confused and upset.

So Bethany lies on the road from the Jordan Valley to Jerusalem, and the name Bethany means 'community of the poor', something like that. 'City of the poor'. So it's a simple place; even today, if we were to go to Bethany, we would find that not much had changed. It's a place of boarded-up shops, rather ugly concrete buildings, burnt-out cars by the side of the road, litter and burger bars. So the place of the poor. Now, in St Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus, are you really the

Messiah or are we to expect somebody else? And in that story, Jesus replies, go and report to John what you've seen and heard in the ministry of Jesus; the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed are those who take no offence at me.

So all those are the evidence of the kingdom of heaven breaking into this earth. And in the story of the raising of Lazarus in Bethany, we see all those signs coming true. Bethany is a poor place and there Jesus will preach to them about the kingdom of heaven. There Lazarus, who is dead, will be raised up. So John is telling us that here the kingdom of heaven is breaking in in this poor place on the road to the cross, the passion tide will be the path that not only brings tears, but ultimately life.

So when Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus is dead and has been in his tomb for four days. And we can imagine the sense of hurt, bewilderment, betrayal felt by the sisters Martha and Mary. And when they're told that Jesus has arrived, Mary cannot bring herself to leave her house, such is her sense of disappointment.

But her sister Martha is a bit more of a different character. She's a bolder character and she comes marching down the street to speak her mind. That little word 'if' carries a lot of weight, doesn't it? Imagine, we've all said many times, 'if only'. If only I'd stayed at home that day, or if only the ambulance had come a bit quicker, or if only I'd remember to put the cat out, whatever it might be. We've all said that sort of thing, 'if only'. So Martha comes marching up to Jesus and she said, Lord, if only you'd been here, my brother would not have died. Perhaps we've all felt as Martha does, spiritually poor. Why, Jesus? Did you not answer my prayer?

If only you had been what I thought you were, whatever it is wouldn't have happened. Where were you when I needed you? I trusted you, I worshipped you. Now this has happened and why? If you'd been here, my prayers would have been answered. If you really are the Son of God, you could have stopped this, but you didn't. I wonder if we've felt like that at times? But Martha has the strength of faith to follow up her challenge, if, with a desperate statement of faith, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.

Jesus tells her, I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? And there's the question, I guess, for us all - do you believe this? I am the resurrection and the life, do you believe this? Despite the wounds, despite the loss, despite the hurts that we carry, do you believe this? In Mark's Gospel, in chapter nine, there's an episode where a father desperately prays to Jesus on behalf of his sick son. And Jesus says to him, all things are possible to him that believes. And the father straight away replies, Lord, I believe, help then my unbelief. So perhaps we can relate to that statement too.

I believe. Help my unbelief. We want to believe. Help my unbelief. So Martha replies, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

Well, then the other sister, Mary comes before Jesus with a broken heart and weeping. She's a very different sort of character to her sister Mary, a gentler soul, and so falling at the feet of Jesus, she, like her sister, says the same words - if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. And when Jesus sees this dear woman, this kind, generous, caring woman, weeping, the one who'd wiped his feet with her hair, when he sees her distress, he's deeply moved. The King James Bible puts it like this - 'when Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping, which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and Jesus wept'.

The climax of the story is that Jesus leads the sisters, the disciples, and a large crowd of mourners and onlookers to the grave. And there he prays to his father as the stone is rolled away. Can you imagine being in the crowd at that moment? What would that have been like, that sense of expectation? Everybody gathering round and the stone is rolled away. What on earth is going to happen next? Jesus cries out, 'Lazarus, come out.' The dead man stumbles into the light; he's wrapped in grave clothes, strips of cloth that bind him tight. Well, I find the command 'Lazarus, come out' to be the most compelling words in the Bible. Death has trapped Lazarus in the tomb, in the dark. He was probably a poor man, from a poor village, doesn't seem to have been married, doesn't have any children. He lives with his sisters. Life has not been kind to him, therefore. And now he's died an untimely death.

And those wounds of disappointment, lost opportunity, maybe physical ailments, unfulfilled potential, all those things hold him in the grave, in the dark, bound tightly by the grave clothes that trap him there. And when Jesus commands, 'Lazarus, come out', he calls Lazarus, out of the dark, out of death, into light and into life. And so as Lazarus stumbles into the light, he's stripped of those cloths that tie him so tightly, and he's set free to walk boldly into fuller life, resurrection life. Life received as a gift from God. The beginning of eternal life in this world and in the next.

And so in this story, we see that the kingdom of heaven breaks into this world as we receive life from Christ. Set free from the things that bind us, things that tell us that we're restricted, that we failed, that we're trapped in the dark, that there is no life, that there is no love. We're set free from those things and set free to leave them in the grave, set free to live.

Well, we note in the story that the temple authorities, the scribes and the Pharisees, find no joy in these things. They're jealous, they're fearful, they're self important, they feel threatened, so they take offence at Jesus. They will use the raising of Lazarus as one of the charges to lay against Jesus that will send Jesus to his own tomb. And there are still many voices in the world that would say the same thing. And so ultimately, this story requires us to ask, where do you stand - with Jesus? Or with the Pharisees? We know that Mary and Martha believed in Jesus and we can imagine how did they feel when they went home together with their brother to their home, their tears replaced by laughter, their sense of loss replaced by the fullness of life. And we can imagine the Pharisees and the scribes heading back to Jerusalem, grumbling and complaining with long faces about this dreadful thing that's happened.

So Jesus says, do you believe this? Do we believe this? Where would we choose to stand? Jesus said to Martha, '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. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.' And maybe Thomas helps us at this point as we enter into passiontide and the journey to the cross, Thomas, who says to the other disciples, let us go, that we may die with him, and therefore ultimately also be raised with him. In Jesus name. Amen.