



Revd Ro's Reflection on Fifth Sunday of Lent

Year A

Romans 8.6-11

John 11.1-45

Passiontide begins on Sunday, throughout Lent our focus has been on the cross and Jesus' journey to Calvary; today we begin to follow his last two weeks on earth. Our gospel reading tells of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus' last miracle. If we think of the other accounts of Jesus raising people to life we have Jairus' daughter which appears in each of the synoptic gospels and the widow of Nain's son which is in Luke 7.

Today's gospel reading is unique in that it appears only in St. John's gospel and John does not mention the other two. This is the only time in his gospel that Jesus' shows his power over death by raising someone to life. Its position is vitally important in that it prefigures the resurrection. This is in no way like the resurrection; Lazarus is a human being and he will die again. Jesus at his resurrection conquers death forever and is alive now and always.

As we begin our account Jesus is at the end of his ministry, he is in great danger, just prior to our passage we have these words.

³¹ 'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. ³²Jesus replied, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?' ³³ The Jews answered, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.' (John 10)

These are perilous times for Jesus but he knows the path he is destined to tread and that he will soon make his final journey to Jerusalem where he will be killed. He turns to the Jews now and fearlessly tells them clearly who he is. The time for parables and oblique comments is over.

³⁷ 'If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. ³⁸ But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.'

He stands before them, their long awaited Messiah but bigotry, sin and foolishness blind them to his true identity. That is the tragedy, so very few of the Jews recognise Jesus and follow him. Instead of

listening to his word and seeing the Anointed One they try to arrest him but he escapes from them and crosses the Jordan to where John had been baptising

⁴¹ 'Many came to him, and they were saying, 'John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.' ⁴² And many believed in him there.' (John 10)

Jesus is a marked man now, the powers that be see him as a danger and a threat; they can't afford to have people flocking to him that will spell the end of their power. Caiaphas the chief priest says these ominous words at the end of chapter 11,

⁵⁰ 'You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'

And so

⁵⁷ 'Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.'

Actually, how prophetic the words of Caiaphas are, Jesus' death will save all those in the world who confess his name and believe in him. He is not just the saviour for the Jews but all humanity as St. John has already said. Looking back at these passages we can understand the reply of the disciples when Jesus says he intends to go to Judea,

⁸ 'The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'

The account of the raising of Lazarus is a beautiful one for many reasons. Firstly it shows Jesus' friends, it involves a family whom he cared for deeply, in that it is a very intimate story.

¹¹ 'Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.'

The little town of Bethany lies a couple of miles from Jerusalem and very near to the Mount of Olives. Jesus is often referred to as staying in Bethany rather than in Jerusalem when he travelled to the city for festivals. It is here that Jesus' feet are anointed with costly perfume. This incident is referred to by John in our reading,

² 'Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair;'

In chapter 12 John gives a full account of the incident.

'Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure Spikenard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.'

Mary's extravagant action is that of a woman trying to express her worship for the Messiah who had restored her brother to life. Mary has always been the one who was devoted to Jesus and hung on his every word as she recognised him as her Lord; we see this clearly in the story of Martha and Mary.

⁴¹ 'But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;

⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' Luke 10.

Now the sisters need Jesus' help and it is important to look at what they say, they feel they do not need to ask him to come, the news itself will be enough to bring Jesus to them.

³ 'So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'

The apostle John is often referred to as the disciple Jesus 'loved' and here Lazarus is referred to in the same way. Jesus has great affection and friendship for him. So often we see Jesus performing

signs or teaching or arguing his case with the powerful sects, now we see his human affection and love. The account is, if you like, in one respect a beautiful personal scene; in another it is totally supernatural as it shows Jesus' power over death itself. In a way it is like God himself, High King of Heaven yet close as our own breathing.

Jesus' reaction is not strange to us two millennia later and knowing the outcome, but his words must have mystified the disciples. They would have taken it to mean literally Lazarus will be fine, he'll get better. They couldn't comprehend what Jesus meant.

⁴ 'But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.'

So Jesus remains where he is, the sisters, expecting him at any minute, must have been beside themselves with worry. The delay of two days meant that Lazarus would die, Jesus is well aware of it and he knows what will happen at Lazarus' tomb. It is for the glory of God and to show God's power through Jesus, 'the Son of God'. Notice the language Jesus uses now; he is quite specific about who he is.

⁵ 'Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'

Jesus' love for the family is made quite clear and emphasised several times, but he is doing God's will and that comes first. It is like the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where he prays that the cup may pass from him but then says, 'Not my will but yours be done.' That is it in a nutshell. Jesus is on a mission and God the Father is his guide. The disciples are astounded that he is going back as he has just escaped from the Jews as we have seen.

Jesus' answer about walking in light and darkness must have meant little to them, 'Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.'

He is referring to himself as 'light of the world;' and those who live in him and walk in his way are guided by his light; it is those who still live in darkness who are lost. His words are reminiscent of the way he talks to Nicodemus and the woman at the well, he speaks in metaphors but they are unable to follow him and see only literally. So it is with the disciples,

'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'

This takes us back to Jesus' explanation that the delay was to glorify God and the Son of God because of what would happen. The sentence that follows is so easily overlooked but it is so important. The disciples think Jesus is mad to walk back into the lion's den, yet one of them says, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' This isn't the same as Peter's offer to die with him which, when tested, fails. This is really carried out; he is encouraging them to go with Jesus even if it means death. He is ready to give his life for Jesus. Who is it? It is the twin who is called Thomas. I have always felt so sorry for Thomas the realist, stuck with the tag 'doubting Thomas' for all eternity.

Thomas is brave and he is loyal, willing to risk it all for Jesus. When faced with the Lord in the upper room he hails him as, 'My Lord and my God.' Very few others call Jesus God.

John is very specific in this account as he so often is, Lazarus had been dead for four days, it was a hot country, and he was already bound in cloths and in the tomb. It is Martha who meets Jesus, Mary is at home. It is also interesting to see Martha's behaviour, since her ticking off in the earlier account. It is noticeable that it is Martha who takes the leading role in this story.

20 'When Martha heard that Jesus was coming; she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.

²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

We have to think of the enormity of this death. Lazarus was young, not an old man. He is the breadwinner. Once he is dead the sisters could have faced destitution. Martha knows Jesus' power; she believes Jesus could have saved her brother. She must be accusing Jesus here. 'Why on earth did you let the man you cared for and us down, why did you let him die? There must be something of this in her tone. Yet in the very next sentence she speaks these amazing words. It is one thing to heal someone, it is quite another to restore a life. Only God can do that – and that of course is the point. Her words are a huge statement of faith in Jesus' power.

²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'

It is a mistake to think that beliefs in Jesus' time were uniform. They weren't, any more than now. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are sometimes lumped together but they shouldn't be. Their beliefs were miles apart. The Pharisees were a solely religious group; they were content with any political government which allowed them to carry out the ceremonial law. They believed in a resurrection. On the last day the dead would rise with new bodies to an ideal world, God's new world, a world without pain and grief. Most Jews would have believed this, indeed we can see this in Martha's words to Jesus, ²⁴ 'Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' The Sadducees were far fewer, but very wealthy and therefore powerful. Priests and aristocrats were usually Sadducees. So mainly they collaborated with Rome. They didn't want to lose either wealth or power. They didn't want anyone rocking the boat and so they didn't want Jesus. It was dangerous for Jesus now, of course it was but Jesus knows what has to be. As we think about this passage it is vital to know too that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection from the dead, while the Sadducees said there was no resurrection of the body.

Jesus' next words to Martha are stunning; they are also the opening words of the funeral service to this day, the promise of new life with God.

²⁵ 'Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

Martha hails Jesus as 'The Son of God', what a confession of faith. Martha, like Thomas, hails Jesus as God. There is no doubt at all in her mind, she has absolute faith in his power and indeed who he is. She calls her sister and as Jesus stands before her we have some of the most moving words in the gospels.

³² 'When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where

have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’

This is the only time that Jesus cries openly as he shows his great love and compassion in his grief and for theirs. Jesus understands what it is to grieve and we are never alone in grief, our Lord is with us just as he was at the tomb of Lazarus. He is the resurrection and the life, that is his promise to us just as much as it was to the sisters. The account of the raising of Lazarus is graphic, it is meant to be, He has been dead for days and in a hot country that meant one thing,

³⁹ ‘Jesus said Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’

This is about faith; there is nothing beyond the power of God, the giver of life. Notice how Jesus, as always, does not do this in his own power but through the power of God. All the miracles are ‘signs’ that point to God, this is the greatest of them all. We can imagine the scene, not only the sisters but all the townspeople standing around in amazement and wonder, and no doubt fear.

‘And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’

Prayer is central to this account as it is central to Jesus’ entire life. Jesus calls to the dead man knowing that God’s power will work through him.

⁴⁴ ‘The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’

The people must have been awestruck and so should we be. Jesus is the saviour of the world so those words ‘unbind him and set him free’ are so symbolic. That is what Jesus does for all who turn to him; he unbinds us from our sins and sets us free. Our reading ends with these words

⁴⁵ ‘Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.’

Indeed they did and of course they turned to him. The fact that they did was the most dangerous thing, the sentence ends with these words,

⁴⁶ ‘But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.’

If Jesus was a marked man before he certainly is now. They even tried to kill Lazarus to wipe out what Jesus had done. It is important during the wonderful entry into Jerusalem which we celebrate next Sunday, that as we hear the hosannas; we remember that Jesus was entering the bear pit. We know it is his last week on earth but we also know that Easter Day follows Good Friday and that from his death will come life, not just like Lazarus’ but eternal life with our Saviour.

We have been looking at Romans as our epistle readings lately but we have jumped now to chapter eight. Paul’s epistles are carefully crafted arguments where one point follows on from another. It is not easy if we suddenly land in the middle of a chapter entirely out of context as our reading does. It’s sensible then to quote the beginning of chapter 8.

^{8.1} ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.’

This fits in perfectly with the gospel reading, Paul makes it clear in chapter 6 and going on to 7 that the law, given on Sinai and the Torah are the word of God given to his people, the law is their guide in life, it is right and good. But, it is not so simple, sin is present in the world; sin which destroys people and God's world. The law in itself can never achieve salvation. Sin is present in all of us and only in Jesus can we be set free. Jesus died to set us free from sin and death. The law was only a guide but it cannot save, only the self-giving love of Jesus Christ at Calvary can do that.

As we read these verses Paul is contrasting the 'flesh' and the 'Spirit'

⁵ 'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.'

The argument that can be misleading is that of the idea of the flesh opposed to the Spirit. This has led some people to condemn all things of our physical nature while saying only our souls are pure. That cannot be the case, God created this physical world and all that is in it. He created human beings one as body and soul. In fact the immanence of God is stressed again and again in the bible; God is within us as well as being 'the high King of heaven.'

The first clue to the meaning is the fact that the Spirit has a capital letter. ⁹ 'But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.'

Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit of God which is present within every believer. God has given us so much but as with every covenant there are promises on each side. We promise to turn from sin and turn to Christ. That is, we renounce sin, as in 'the world, the flesh and the devil.' The flesh is only another way of saying that which is not of God. Paul is warning the Romans that now they are in Christ they must live lives according to his teaching. They must put away the old pagan ways. The Spirit of God dwells within believers. Thus then, those who set their minds on evil and sin will not turn to Jesus or accept his message, but those who do and live the Christian life, will share in his resurrection. As Paul concludes,

¹¹ 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

This is the wonderful gift of Jesus Christ, death has no more dominion, we will be united with him and in God's time will be part of his renewed and perfected creation here on earth.

Jesus promised life to all. Walk, walk in the light. The dead were wakened by his call. Walk, walk in the light. Damian Lundy.

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