



Revd Ro's Reflection on Monday of Holy Week

John 11.1-45

The readings set for Holy Week actually begin with John 12.1-11 this is after Jesus' triumphal entry and is set 'six days before Passover'. It is the story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary. I will discuss this on Tuesday as the reading set for the Tuesday of Holy Week is the story of the Greeks who say to Philip, 'Sir we would see Jesus.' We have looked at this in some detail on Passion Sunday so I am going to look back today at the reading often set for Passion Sunday, that is the raising of Lazarus. To do this we have to go back prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem but it is useful to do so. It really does put Palm Sunday into context and the story of the anointing will follow naturally.

In the chapel at St. Giles Hospice there are little prayer cards for people to take. Many of those people may have been bereaved. One of the most popular is the beatitudes with the line, 'Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.'

This gospel passage is about death, the death of a beloved friend of Jesus. It has the theme of a change from death to life. Jesus' friend Lazarus was seriously ill,

³'So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But 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.' ⁵Accordingly, 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.

Jesus deliberately delays and Lazarus dies. Jesus knows that this will happen but he knows the outcome too, 'It is for God's glory.'

The story always reminds me of the line from 'A Christmas Carol,' 'Marley was dead to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that'. Well just so with Lazarus. He was dead for real. The professional wailing women were there and because of Jesus' delay he had been dead for four days. The account is pretty graphic and John makes it so deliberately. There must be no doubt about the reality of the death. Everyone would have expected the body to putrify very quickly. That is why burials in hot countries are almost immediate. Yet Jesus deliberately delays. He knows what he is doing; he prays that his Father will answer him.

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. Look at 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.

The Pharisees believed in fate, that a man's life was ordered and governed by God. The Sadducees believed entirely in man's free will. 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.

⁷ 'Then 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?'

Once Jesus has made up his mind there is no going back, Bethany we are told here is only two miles from Jerusalem, it is nearing Passover the area would be crowded. It is dangerous but Jesus has a mission to complete. It is interesting that Thomas who has had bad press because of the 'doubting' is the one who says –'Let us also go that we may die with him.' 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.

²⁰When 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 and she believes Jesus could have saved her brother. She must be accusing Jesus here. The, '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 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.

²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'

Jesus' next words are stunning; they are 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, ²⁶and 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 is another person like Peter before her and Thomas afterwards to say these words but it is doubtful that Peter understood fully and Thomas had the proof before him. Martha on the other hand makes that statement before the event. Her faith in Jesus is total.

Mary comes to Jesus now and the scene is set. This is one of the rare passages in the gospels as in Gethsemane where we see Jesus' deep emotion.

³⁴'He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁸'Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to

the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus 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.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'

Now the fact that Lazarus had been in the grave four days is important. In Jewish belief that meant the soul had departed the body after three days. Lazarus, they believed would be in that shadowy region known as Sheol where there was no more relationship with God. It is not as if he has just died. This is not a normal loss either. It is a tragedy –Lazarus was cut off in his prime.

Jesus is quite specific in that the action he is about to take is for the glory of God and for the benefit of the people who will see this miracle,

⁴¹'So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I 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.'

Jesus says the action of the raising of Lazarus to glorify God in front of the crowd that they might believe.' Jesus, visibly moved, then calls the dead man by his name. 'Lazarus come out'. And the dead man lives. Remember the words of Isaiah 43

'Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you I have called you by your name. You are mine.'

This is one of the most stunning of the gospel accounts, 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 words unbind him and let him go have to echo Jesus' action by his death at Calvary. Through his death he unbinds humanity from sin. He releases us and lets us go!

The raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection and it is vital that it does so. Jesus has power over death itself. But it is different; the raising of Lazarus is only resuscitation. Lazarus will obey the cycle of life. He will die again.

On Good Friday Jesus gave up his life for us, he suffered death and was buried. He, like Lazarus, died – that is why this reading is often set on Passion Sunday. But at his resurrection on the first Easter Morning death became eternal life in Christ. Jesus has triumphed over death forever.

Christians throughout the centuries have tried to live the way of Christ and they placed their hope in resurrection. The risen Christ is central to our faith – St. Paul says without the resurrection we are 'of all people most to be pitied.' BUT Christ was raised and the world was changed forever.

From the glory and wonder of the raising of Lazarus dark clouds gather over the rest of the passage.

⁴⁵ 'Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done.'

Typically people tell on Jesus and the writing is on the wall.

⁴⁷'So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.'

Caiaphas declares that one man will die to save the nation. Ironically this man's death not only saves the nation but creation because this man is God incarnate who is fulfilling his mission from before the world began.

What is often missed in readings of this passage in churches is what Jesus did next. He did not go straight to Jerusalem.

⁵⁴ 'Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness; and he remained there with the disciples.'

Jesus went well away from the city. His hour has not come yet but it will at Passover. The timing must be right. Jesus is the 'lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,' People already in Jerusalem know what the climate is like regarding Jesus too.

⁵⁶'They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, 'What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?' ⁵⁷Now 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.'

These are ominous words. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday he is riding into the bear pit and he knows it. That really does put the triumphal entry into its context.

During Lent we try to walk with Jesus on his last journey. But we know that after the darkness of the cross there is the glory of the open tomb. That tomb is so different from Lazarus' because Jesus conquered death forever and by doing so won eternal life for every one of us.'

'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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