

The Raising of Lazarus: Passion Sunday

St. Brandon's

John 11: 1-45

29th March 2020

You might have been a little surprised by our Gospel reading. Here we are, still in Lent, and yet what we have is a resurrection story. Has Easter come early this year? Well, yes and no. Today is called Passion Sunday – we have Passion Sunday a week before Palm Sunday, which is, of course, a week before Easter. So Passion Sunday always falls two weeks before Easter, and it always marks a shift during the season of Lent. For the past four weeks, we should have been focusing on ourselves and our propensity to muck things up – in short, our sinfulness. (Having said that, and I don't know about you, most of the last four weeks has been a bit of a blur for me, so that focusing on anything has been a challenge! And I do want to come back to the coronavirus and how today's Gospel speaks into that situation, but we need to cover a bit of ground first for that to make any sense.)

So, in more ordinary times, the first four weeks of Lent would be about us, whereas Passion Sunday marks a turning point as the focus shifts away from us and towards Jesus, and His passion and death. Passion Sunday, in all three years of the Lectionary (we're in Year A, but the same applies in Years B and C), turns Lent towards Good Friday and Easter, though Year A is the only one that has an explicitly resurrection theme. And it is, perhaps, providential that we are in Year A this year, given the situation that confronts us. The Church recognises this shift by having a different form of liturgy, so if you've been following Morning or Evening Prayer in Lent, you need to turn on tomorrow to Morning or Evening prayer in Passiontide, and follow that for the next two weeks.

But back to today's reading. The key character, the reason the story is told at all, is of course Lazarus. Without his illness and death, there would be no story to tell. But actually, if this were a play, Lazarus would have a pretty minor part. He becomes ill; his sisters presumably tend to him in his illness; he dies; he's buried; and then he is raised from the dead. He doesn't say anything (in fact, Lazarus when he appears never says anything – unlike his sisters!). His only 'act' is to come out from the tomb when ordered to do so. So he is almost entirely passive – things happen to him, most of them not very nice, he is not in control of the situation. And yet, Jesus says that this illness is "for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it". How can that be the case?

It's also worth noticing two other things about this story. First, that just when Jesus seems to be needed most, when Lazarus is near death and his sisters are in despair, Jesus deliberately delays his journey. Now perhaps He felt that the work He was doing across the other side of the Jordan, the people He was interacting with there, deserved more time. There was clearly an issue about safety if He and His disciples returned to Judea. But we're still left wondering why He didn't simply heal Lazarus from a distance – He'd done that with the Centurion's servant after all (Matthew 8: 5-13).

The second thing that's worth noticing is that nowhere in the story is the issue of why Lazarus became ill in the first place addressed. Both Martha and Mary say to Jesus, almost accusingly, that, had He been there Lazarus would not have died. But they don't raise the prior question, in a sense the bigger question, of why illness in general, why Lazarus' illness in particular.

Now I expect you can already see quite a few parallels here with our situation with this unprecedented, worldwide coronavirus pandemic and its effect on us. We are almost entirely passive, things are happening to us, most of them not very nice. We are not in control. We are experiencing and accepting such limitations to our civil liberties that would normally apply only in war-time – which is probably why war-like metaphors are being used in 'fighting' this virus. And we might well wonder where God is in all of this – apparently

absent when He seems to be needed most with His healing power. And, though I doubt any of us have the energy for this at the moment, we could quite reasonably be asking, 'Why the virus in the first place? How does this huge 'natural evil' fit with our understanding of a creator God who looked at His creation and pronounced it 'very good'?'

And, as a slight aside, it is also worth noting that because we don't like being passive, having things done to us, being out of control, we have, quite understandably and quite rightly, been trying to get things back under control, establish some sort of routine in our lives, somehow come to terms with and yet also rise above this new but menacing normal in our lives. And it's worth making the obvious point that this has absorbed and will continue to absorb enormous quantities of our mental, emotional and physical energy. And that that puts us under significant stress which will emerge in all kinds of ways, different for each of us, but perhaps most particularly in our personal relationships. Tensions, perhaps some pre-existing, are almost bound to surface and have the potential for serious impacts on our individual and communal lives. This isn't easy. It's not going to be easy for quite a long time. And while perhaps our most natural inclination as Christians is to turn to prayer and to seek the Spirit's help, that's not easy either particularly if we might be questioning where God is in all of this anyway.

But that takes us back to the story. Where was God, where was Jesus in all of that? Well, yes He was physically absent from Lazarus and Martha and Mary, but it's clear that He wasn't absent in spirit; He was still thinking about and concerned for them. And it wasn't long before He was physically present. But when He arrives, of course, the worst has already happened and Lazarus is dead. Martha's and Mary's worst fears have been realised. It cannot get any worse. And it is into that situation that Jesus comes. But not only does He come physically, but of course He comes also with resurrection power. "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus came out. "Unbind him, and let him go" says Jesus, words with a meaning well beyond the physical, of course.

The raising of Lazarus has, of course, been the subject of artistic interpretation. You might like to try to find a picture of Rembrandt's 'The Raising of Lazarus'. In it the light in the picture focuses on Jesus' upraised arm and on the faces of the onlookers, with Mary particularly prominent at the bottom. Lazarus, perhaps unsurprisingly, looks pretty deathly still, and is lit not by his own energy but apparently by the light emanating from Jesus' upraised arm. It's another reminder that Lazarus is not in control here either, but is entirely dependent on the power of Christ for his resurrected life.

Now we know that Jesus' raising of Lazarus was a partial and temporary victory over death – Lazarus has been given back his earthly life, but will, of course, die again. And I guess if we had been able to get an interview with Lazarus right at the end of his earthly life, he might have said that it went something like this. "I was born and had a fairly normal upbringing and life, but then I met Jesus who came into my life, our lives, and became a good friend. But I then became ill and died. But Jesus brought me back to life – no really, I know what you're thinking, but death and resurrection were part of my experience of life. And here I am now, facing death again, but confident that I will rise again on the last day." And we might say to him, "But how can you be so confident about that?" And he would probably look at us and say, "I have experienced death and the resurrection power of Christ in my life already. Why would I have any doubt, when He told us that He is the resurrection and the life, and has already proved that in my case?"

Well, again, you'll have seen the parallels with our own situation. We experience little deaths – things that go wrong, relationships that break down, situations where we are no longer in control – many times in our lives. This situation, with the coronavirus, is like another death, although one that is probably for many of us on the extreme – not least because it threatens livelihoods, perhaps our very lives, or the lives of those we love. And we may feel that God is absent.

But this story encourages us to believe that God is actually very present even if we cannot 'feel' Him, and that He is very present in His resurrection power. That, even in this situation which feels like a death, God is present and somehow giving back life. Here are those words from our gospel reading: "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?", Jesus says to Martha.

It's tough to hold on to that belief, to believe in the resurrections that might accompany the deaths in our lives, as well as the resurrection at the end of time. But let's try to remember that it doesn't depend on us, we aren't in control and we don't need to be. That when we experience these little deaths, and feel bound and unable to move, things happening to us which are outside of our control, it is Jesus who is with us and is actually in control.

Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus, through the resurrection power of Christ, comes out and lives again.

May that be so for us. Amen