

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY 26/4/2023: GEOFF CHADWICK

LENT 5: JN 11:1-45 THE LAZARUS EFFECT

Some years ago, Gabby was called to treat a dog with a snake bite. I remember that day well. It was literally a whole day – afternoon, all night and morning. The dog, a black Labrador if I remember rightly, had two distinctive puncture wounds in his snout. If you looked closely you could see two little red bubbles of blood marking the place where the snake had struck.

Weak and near lifeless this dog was brought into the veterinary clinic, and Gabby diagnosing the situation quickly, administered anti-venom and a respirator with cautious skill.

Then the wait began.

Being a simply equipped country clinic, the respirator was manual. The bellows had to be operated by hand and in the constant rhythm of the dog's natural breathing rate. And so, a number of us took shifts to breathe for the dog until he could breathe for himself. These shifts went through the afternoon, into the night and on to the next morning. I remember Gabby, myself and the nurse swapping shifts to allow for meals and other necessities. I remember barracking- if not praying- for this dog as my hands manipulated those bellows in a meditative rhythm.

Then suddenly, as if a switch had been flicked, as the early morning sun was rising, the dog opened his eyes looked up, shook himself and peered at us as if to say: *"Hello! What am I doing here?"* How we celebrated! I'm sure that dog receive more affection in that one moment than in its entire life (I exaggerate)! How good it was to see life having its way!

Curiously the clinic's clock radio had turned itself on and the ABC News Fanfare had entered the room with a blast. The dog, who was obviously an ABC fan, started into life with the sound of the familiar.

I tell this story because I think it's the closest I have been to the situation described in the valley of dry bones and in the story of Lazarus. Just when I thought death might have its say, the persistence of life surprised me. More than that, I had been with a team which had cooperated with life.

To be honest, I find the Lazarus story difficult. It seems unfair. For example, why should Lazarus get a second chance, when my own father never had one? Even CS Lewis (the great Christian apologist of the 20th Century) wrestled with this. On the death of his mother when he was 10 years old, Lewis prayed for her resuscitation with all the earnestness of a young child. In later life, he reflected on this disappointment and concluded:

The thing hadn't worked, but I was used to things not working, and I thought no more about it... I had approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, even without fear. He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as Saviour nor as judge, but merely as magician; and when he had done what was required of him I supposed that he would simply- well, go away. It never crossed my mind that that the tremendous contact which I solicited should have any consequences beyond restoring the *status quo*.

(Lewis, C.S, 1984, Surprised by Joy, Collins Fount Paperbacks: Glasgow, p22.)

Somehow, the miracle of Lazarus seems too good to be true...

or is there more to this than just "*restoring the status quo*"?

Maybe life itself is the clue.

Lazarus puts us on the side of life. Death, the alternative, is too dark, too pessimistic, too dry, too lifeless, too disappointing. If life is optimism, and death is pessimism, then I'm on the side of life. Lazarus tells me to persevere. Lazarus tells me never to give up. Lazarus tells me to live in hope. Lazarus tells me to move forward out of deathly *status quo*.

I call this *The Lazarus Effect* and it is driven by tears. Have you noticed how many people are weeping in the story?

Mary is weeping.

"The Jews" are weeping.

And Jesus is weeping.

Here Jesus is not only alongside the weeping, but is weeping with them. His tears are sheer compassion. God is not absent, disinterested or remote. God is there suffering alongside them all. This is the *Lazarus Effect* at work.

And I think that's the point. Like CS Lewis we *are used to things not working* and we sometimes long *for things to be as they always were*. The first is disappointment, the second is stagnation. Each of these can suck the life out of us.

Disappointment, when what we had hoped for doesn't not eventuate.

And stagnation, where nothing new ever happens.

So we look to the Lazarus story and we find a weeping Jesus alongside a disappointed, weeping Mary. Mary wants things to be just as they were- the *staus quo*.

But the weeping Jesus will doing something new.

This is life. This is the Lazarus effect. To stand alongside the weeping knowing that in spite of it all something new and wonderful will happen.

CS Lewis on his adult conversion to Christianity mentions something just like *The Lazarus Effect*.

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen [College], night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of [God] whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape?... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men (*sic*), and His compulsion is our liberation. (Lewis, C.S, 1984, Surprised by Joy, Collins Fount Paperbacks: Glasgow, Pp 182-183.)

Or if you prefer. A black Labrador, with good news, waking to the fanfare of the ABC news:

"Hello! What am I doing here?"

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.