

Lent 5 John 11:1-45

This 5th Sunday in Lent sees the beginning of the end of this church season and the readings are leading us very quickly to the events of Holy Week and the crucifixion of Jesus. Chronologically we are close as we hear in the gospel that the disciples were worried to go to Bethany which was too near Jerusalem for comfort with the religious leaders sworn to get Jesus one way or another. They would even advise Jesus to ignore the news that a close friend was sick just to keep themselves safe.

But here was the beginning of the end for the earthly mission of Christ and the beginning of the end for the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. Not only was Jesus going to sacrifice himself for the sake of the world but he was going to point out his fate to his followers in actions and words as clear as he can make them. But with the talk of sacrifice and death Jesus always goes on to mention his resurrection, it just seems the disciples were slow to hear that part, or understandably, unable to imagine how that could be.

But here in the gospel reading we hear of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, showing that it can be done while promising that it will be done when his time comes. This miracle is one of the sticking points for non believers or new believers, how can someone just come back to life after being dead for 4 days, it's just not possible, is it?

It is certainly not something that happens every day, and it had to be a fairly impressive miracle to get people's attention as Jesus was known for his wonderful and extraordinary deeds. But our gut reaction, like with a magician, is to try to work out what the trick is, how did he do this? But this miracle didn't have a trick to it. Everyone there at the house knew that Lazarus had died, and let's not forget that although medical science wasn't as advanced as it is today, the people of Jesus' time were far more likely to have witnessed death at close quarters than we have. They would have prepared the bodies of their loved ones for burial and would not have been fooled by someone just sleeping as some people have suggested.

So, with all agreed that Lazarus was dead and buried for 4 days in a hot climate, the practicalities were that opening the tombstone would not have been pleasant, but Jesus is confident and in the tomb finds Lazarus still dressed in his burial robes but very much alive.

It must be said this is a very impressive miracle and we are told that even some of the Pharisees, the sworn enemies of Jesus were converted that day. But despite the gruesome details of this story, its message is not one of death and the terror of death, but of hope and the hope of new life that we have in our relationship with God.

The old testament reading from Ezekiel offers the same message, the vision of the valley of dry bones, a scene that would seem to be beyond all hope and yet with God there is always hope. Alone we are bound to our physical bodies which decay and are finite yet with God we are spiritual beings and the spirit is non perishable. What a hope! This is the hope we enter into through baptism, it is the hope that God gives us by his grace, we do not earn it and we cannot lose it but we will be changed by it. If we truly receive the spirit of God into our lives through baptism then we will be changed. Just like the image of Lazarus walking out of the tomb, so we have been through that experience of dying to the world and being born to the spirit, even if we don't remember it if it occurred in infancy, and we are different.

We, as human beings, are fascinated by what happens after bodily death, and there have been many studies done on near death experiences, some have been collated together if they are independently verifiable. Some of the articles that have been written on the experience are indeed fascinating. What people remember from being close to death or technically and clinically dead, and what actually occurred in the room around them was remarkable. There are lots of people who also want to find ways of explaining this away, lack of oxygen to the brain is a common reason, and without extensive medical training it is difficult to refute, but what was undeniable was that the people who went through this experience were changed, were happier and more hopeful than before. It is as though they were reassured through their experience that this is not it, this is not all there is for us as conscious beings and what is to come is not to be feared.

That is the hope we have in Christ. We don't need a near death experience of our own to believe in his. Jesus' death and resurrection does the same thing, it shows us that earthly existence is not the whole story and that should fill us with hope and joy. But it also challenges us to once again look at the lives we live and compare those lives not against the world around us but the eternity of God. It is not good enough to live lives that are compared to other people around us, if we believe in God surely we are driven to want to lead lives that are good enough for him. Not that we can ever be as good as him, but in order that we can be confident in ourselves that we have tried our best and made the best of all things.

We have been richly blessed, not everyone who hears the gospel really takes on board the message and many will never experience the hope of Christ in their lives. That is a real tragedy, it is hard to imagine facing some of the difficulties of life without that hope ever present. We have the gift of God's grace in prayer to communicate with him and be led by him to do better and be better and that is a gift indeed. How lost we would feel in the world if we were simply doing what we wanted and trying to make future plans of our own not knowing that there is a bigger picture, a master plan which has us within it. When things go wrong, with an outlook like that life would seem so chaotic.

So as we reflect on these blessings and the many more we have experienced let us remember that God's story is a joyful one, despite the pains of holy week to come, there is the ultimate happy ending to hold on to. Equally let us as we face the many difficulties that life throws at us remember that a happy ending awaits us all. That is the gospel, the good news, may you hear it afresh this holy week and Easter and may it remain with you always.

Amen.