

## Thoughts from our Minister, Andrew Taylor.

In John's gospel, the story of the raising of Lazarus, is that set by the lectionary, and is a firmly traditional one for the fifth Sunday in Lent. If we were of the Eastern Orthodox persuasion this would be a day of some significance, or to be more exact, next Saturday would be, because that would be Lazarus Saturday. That is not one that is generally celebrated here. It is always the day before Palm Sunday, and, placed between the privations of the main Lent period, and the sad and solemn build up of Holy Week the two days are taken as a contrast and celebrated as days of joy and triumph. Different parts of the Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate it differently: some take it as another day of fasting, which some might view as a rather austere form of celebration; in Russia it is marked by the eating of caviar!

As set down for reading it is a long reading - most of chapter 11, and to grasp its full significance you do have to take some note of the whole of the chapter. We read but part of the chapter. It is a remarkable account, and can be seen, at least in John's account of Jesus' life, as the climax of his public ministry, as it immediately precedes his entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of the major discourse that John represents as being Jesus' teaching of his disciples at the Last Supper. It is remarkable on a number of counts:

It is a remarkable, a massive miracle, and the ultimate miracle if you like, bringing someone back from death to life. It is not the only occasion on which Jesus does that, but at the point at which this happens Lazarus' death is beyond dispute. On the other recorded occasions we have Jesus intervening at a very short interval after death is pronounced. You will remember that when Jesus is first called to Jarius' daughter the child is ill - he is not told of her death till he gets to the house; it has only just happened. Similarly with the raising of the widow's son at Nain, death has been very recent, probably earlier that day. It was, and has been, open to challengers of the gospels to suggest that in both those instances death might not have occurred, only some sort of coma or trance, from which the child in each case then came round. Not so in relation to Lazarus. When Jesus arrived and went to Lazarus' tomb he had been dead for four days, and in verses 4 and 14 of the chapter there are clear indications that this was deliberate on Jesus part. The fact of death could not be questioned. Not only was it beyond the three day period after which, according to Jewish belief, the spirit was

thought to have left the body, but after four days, in the climate of those parts the process of decomposition would have set in. You need to be spared further details in an address which is given before you have had lunch, but when, in verse 39, Jesus orders that the stone be removed from the mouth of the tomb, Martha's first reaction is 'There will be a bad smell'. Jesus is facing, and arguably has engineered, the greatest challenge to his powers to bring Lazarus back to life from the condition he was in, but he does it. No wonder then, as the news of that spread, that shortly afterwards he was greeted by multitudes as he entered Jerusalem.

It is remarkable therefore that this story is only recorded in John's gospel. The others relate the other two occasions that I have just mentioned, but not this one. Even allowing for the possibility that Peter, who was a major source of the accounts in Mark's gospel, and therefore in Matthew's and Luke's, may not have been present, his name not appearing in chapters 7-12 of John's gospel, such an amazing event would have had such circulation that all amongst the disciples and Jesus' early followers would have known it. It wasn't something you could hush up. And its remarkable in the manner in which the interplay of life and death are woven right through the story, essentially in the raising of Lazarus, but also in other elements of the story, and we will be returning to that.

Such a remarkable story inevitably raises questions too, and many have surfaced over the years. As a story, is it a total fiction, or worse than that, a fraud staged amongst the key players? Such a possibility is hardly credible. Is it a factual account, or has it been written as an allegory to carry other aspects of the New Testament message? John may have interwoven elements of narrative and teaching, but it stands on the central fact that Lazarus was dead and returned to life. Is it a story to be linked with the other Lazarus account, that of the beggar Lazarus and Dives, the rich man, which Luke recounts, and at the end of which Abraham, who is with Lazarus in heaven, declares of the friends of the rich man 'they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death'. Was Jesus intent on proving that was exactly so, and that the Pharisees and chief priests clearly were no to be persuaded of who he was even by such a demonstration of miraculous power? Was it the ultimate challenge to them - a gauntlet being thrown down? Possibly. Each of those questions can be debated at length, and have been by scholars and commentators over the years. It is part of the richness of Scripture that its challenge is sustained across the centuries.

However, I want to return to the point I mentioned a few moments ago, the way in which issues, and the interplay, of life and death are woven into this passage. It is there:

In Jesus' response to the news he received that Lazarus was ill, and in his decision to stay put and not to rush to Bethany. This was a deliberate ploy, a purposeful strategy, as Jesus hints when he says in verse 4 'this illness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened to bring glory to God and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory'. It is as if Jesus is saying this is a time when the insignificance of death can be established - and that is not an easy thing to preach. All here will have memories to recall of times of death, of sadness and pain, times that were not insignificant. But Jesus is working up to demonstrate the potential of hope and assurance, to demonstrate the victory that transcends even death.

It is there in the narrative of the account. When Jesus finally decides to go back to Judea the disciples try to dissuade him, after all it wasn't all that long since he had been there and narrowly escaped being stoned to death. To go to Lazarus, traveling back into Judea, was to risk death, but the challenge of facing down death was worth the risk, and finally even the disciples see that. It is Thomas, who we tend to associate with doubt, who here issues the clarion call to the other disciples - we go, and if we die with Jesus so be it. It is worth risking death to live with Jesus and for Jesus.

Clearly it is there in Jesus raising Lazarus to life. From death beyond death, as far as the Jews were concerned, Jesus called Lazarus back. And it is there in the fact that by his raising Lazarus, Jesus virtually seals his own fate, for it is that act that prompted, in verse 53, the decision that 'from that day on the Jewish authorities made plans to kill Jesus. In restoring life Jesus makes his own death certain. But most importantly it is there in the discussion that that Jesus has with Martha, from verse 23 and particularly in verse 25 when Jesus says, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'

'I am the resurrection' says Jesus; a powerful and complex statement of who he is and what his purpose is. 'I am'. Who is I am? Moses at the burning bush knew. In his exchange there with God he was left in no doubt that God was called 'I AM'. And so 'I am' or God is the resurrection. Jesus is identifying himself as and with God and in that

capacity no less offers the resurrection to eternal life to those who believe. It takes us back to that earlier verse from John 3 'for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him may not die but have eternal life.' We used that as a memory verse for the children at the Club yesterday. Whatever else this story from John may tell us, or whatever questions it may raise, I suggest that two things alone really matter. Firstly, Jesus, God the Son, is the resurrection and the life; in him is life and through him is death defeated. But secondly is the question that Jesus put to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life....Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord' she answered.

We have our own answers to make, for Jesus asks that of us, too, and only you, and only I can answer that for ourselves. But not only the joy of Martha and Mary at the return of their brother, but the joy of Easter, is ours if we commit ourselves in faith. No wonder Lazarus Saturday is there to be celebrated. Break out the caviar - it seems a small extravagance compared to the prize of eternal life that can be ours.