

## SERMON: The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:17-45)

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March 1, 2020

In these days of being confined to our homes we are probably relying on the BBC, and ITV, and Netflix and Amazon Prime more for our entertainment than usual. And on every channel there are trailers, trailers designed to entice us and hook us into a new series.

Some of those trailers can be quite misleading. They make you think the film or programme is about one thing, and in fact it is about something totally different. Some trailers show so much that they make you feel there is no point watching them as you've virtually seen the whole thing in the trailer. And other trailers you can just tell have taken the only funny or good bits in the entire series and put them all together in the trailer.

But some trailers really work. They give a taste of what the grand themes of the film or series are about, they give you an experience of the emotions that the film will stir in you, they give you a glimpse of the struggles, the tensions of the story-line, and they may hint at the ending without giving it away.

Well the story of Lazarus acts as a trailer for us, preparing us for the even greater story, the story of Christ's death and resurrection.

There are so many wonderful aspects to this story, and please do take time this week to read the full reading and to step into the shoes of the people involved - I particularly love the way that Thomas (so often pigeon-holed as "doubting" Thomas) and Martha (so often pigeon-holed as "practical but unspiritual") emerge from this story as people of remarkable faith, but for today, I'm going to take three themes that project us forward into the bigger story that is to come.

Firstly, this is a story about death. It's a story that I'm sure almost all of us can identify with - the loss of a loved one, the desperate heart-ache, grief, desolation. Mary and Martha are desolate in their grief, saddened beyond words by the death of their brother Lazarus.

When Jesus finally arrives, a few days later than they had expected, they cannot but think on what might have been. The first words of Mary and Martha to Jesus, both quite independently, are: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Words of faith, but also perhaps words of frustration, anger, hurt. Why didn't you come sooner? Why couldn't you have done something for Lazarus as you had for all those nameless beggars and lepers you healed?

"If only..." They are words that are often expressed at times of grief, aren't they? "If only I could have said what I wanted to say... if only they could have had better care... If only they could have lived to see..."

We cannot hear this story and not find our thoughts projected forward to another death, and another body, wrapped in linen and laid in a tomb.

And in that death, in the death of Christ, we can hear the "if only's" too. The "if only" of the men and women disciples - "if only he could have been a different type of Messiah, if only he had not upset the authorities, if only we had stood by him..." But maybe the grief of God too: "if only my people had not rejected him..."; and Jesus himself, in turmoil in the garden of Gethsemane, "if only there was another way".

The trailer, the story of Lazarus, reminds us that the Easter story is a story that is about death. We cannot jump from the celebration of Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday. Without death, there is no resurrection. Painful though it is, we cannot come to know the depth of God's love for us, without journeying to the foot of the cross and looking up at the death of his son.

A second great theme of the Lazarus story is the humanity of Christ. Here is a Jesus who cares, who is deeply, deeply moved by the grief and the suffering of the world. We have seen it many

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times already in the gospel accounts - his healings, his compassionate response to the marginalised - but here we see a response that opens a window into his emotions. John writes: "Jesus wept". The sense is of Jesus not shedding a quiet tear, but of howling with grief, anger and pain, his body shuddering, shaking with emotion.

Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the one through whom the worlds were made, the one who is worshipped by myriads of angels and heavenly hosts, this Jesus, breaks down and weeps at the tomb of his friend. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, he is a man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief and pain. Imagine that. Christ weeping.

Again, the story opens a window onto the greater story that is about to unfold. For at numerous times in the next few days we see Jesus overwhelmed by emotion, in the garden of Gethsemane, and then on the cross itself. This is a God who shares our humanity, who knows what it is to suffer, who on the cross carries our griefs and sorrows. This is a God who howls with anguish at the sinfulness, the lovelessness of humankind, that has inflicted so much pain. A God who cries and weeps at the deaths of the 20,000 and more people who have died of Covid-19, and the thousands more from hunger and other treatable diseases around the world.

Over the next few weeks, as the UK more than likely feels the full brunt of the pandemic, following in the footsteps of China, Italy and Spain before us, we are to bring our hurts, our fears, our grief, to the foot of the cross, knowing that Christ has been there before. He knows. He carries your burdens for you there.

But the third great theme is the most extraordinary one of all. The stone is rolled away (does that sound familiar?) and in a loud voice Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the tomb. The gasps, the wonder, the disbelief turning to joy, must have been something to behold. A man who had been dead four days is brought back to life. No wonder Jesus had to instruct people to help Lazarus untie himself from the linen grave clothes - they were probably just stood motionless, mouths agape, uncomprehending.

Like all good trailers however the Lazarus story gives us a taste of what is to come without revealing the full story. For Lazarus is brought back from the dead, but will face death again. His death has been postponed.

But a resurrection is to come that is altogether different. Jesus in bursting forth from the tomb on the first Easter Sunday has not temporarily denied the inevitability of death. He has defeated it. He has gone through death to the other side, to make eternal life possible for all who believe. As he says to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." Death is no longer the end of the story - it is the gateway into a life of abundance and life. Christ's resurrection offers us all the hope of life in all its fullness.

We approach Easter this year under the shadow of the Covid-19 virus. It will affect amongst many things how we will worship. It will impact how we normally journey through holy week together (though for almost all our services I will endeavour to make sure there is an on-line equivalent). But as we wrestle with the impact of the pandemic on our lives, on our loved ones, on our community and world, we may find that the great themes of Easter come ever to the fore, and the greatest one of all is this: as Jesus told Mary: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." It is the great hope, to which with Martha we can respond, "Yes, Lord, I believe."