

A Sermon For Our Times Lent 5

All Saints 29/3/20

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 12-14
John 11:1-14

Good morning everyone.

Our gospel reading today brings together themes that are very pertinent to the difficult situation we are currently facing. The frustrations that can arise while waiting on God's timing and the miracles made possible through faith. My prayers for inspiration presented me with a question - "Are you living your best Lent?" and the word "confluence".

Our reflective Lenten preparation strengthens our relationship with God and thus our faith, so that as we accompany our Lord through Holy Week, we too are made anew to begin again the resurrection life with him. Amidst the distraction of all that is happening, especially without the prompt of our worship services, it would be easy to become distracted from our usual Lent practices. I urge you not to. They are now more important than ever.

A "Confluence" is a meeting together of tributaries to join a river. I believe that this time is a coming together of many individual tributary journeys including those of faith, to strengthen and enable each other by travelling together towards a shared goal. Individual tributaries may dry up, become blocked or forge diversions but hopefully most will join the stronger flow of the river and ultimately become part of the immeasurable power of the sea. As a child, I encountered Jesus in such a real way, that in the words of the eminent psychologist Carl Jung - "I don't need to believe. I know." The sense of love, comfort and hope the experiences gave me became my anchor in what has been an often challenging life. In recent weeks, as people around me become overwhelmed by the fear caused by uncertainty, I have realised, what an invaluable resource the certainty I, we, have in God is. As the hymn reassures us, whilst "everything changes.. God changeth not."

The coronavirus is attacking the world on all levels - physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, financially and thus needs to be resisted on all levels. As our Queen said, we need to be "concentrating our combined efforts with a focus on the common good." We each have a vitally important part to play and as Christians, alongside other peoples of faith, we are key workers on the spiritual level. Do not underestimate the impact we can have on others through prayer, by embodying our beliefs and especially by resting in God's peace.

In today's gospel reading, as Lazarus miraculously stumbles out of his cave tomb, we can almost hear the gasp of amazement. Do you remember nearly 2 years ago, the eyes of the world were focussed on another cave entrance, this time in Thailand, equally desperate for a miracle. Through the combination of global prayer and resources, against all odds as the monsoon floods rose, the young football team and their coach, were saved with the loss of just one life. Their coach sustained the boys with prayer, meditation love and positivity. If we can do the same to those around us, they will not go under.

Today's gospel writer, John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," (John 21:20) had the advantage of being an eye witness to the events he describes and waiting until the end of his long life to write an account based on years of teaching and reflection. His emphasis is

on the revelation of Christ's divinity but also through his interactions with people, his humanity. For Jesus's unique power derives from this combination of imminence and transcendence. Into his gospel John weaves selective teachings, including just 7 signs or miracles, of which the raising of Lazarus is the last, together with the 7 definitive I AM statements, to powerful effect - none more so than here. In a fast paced narrative that draws us in, his stated purpose is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31), echo's Jesus's prayer made aloud for the benefit of those present, principally the disciples, his target audience, that by raising Lazarus "they may believe it was you who sent me." Only believe. As Jesus repeatedly taught - faith is the key to miracles.

Having narrowly escaped from being stoned to death for blasphemy following the Festival of the Dedication at the Temple, Jesus and the disciples retreated to safety across the Jordan. We are now just a few weeks away from Passover and Jesus is facing a predicament. One of his closest friends, Lazarus, is very ill. We know from Luke chapter 10 that Jesus regularly visited and dearly loved these siblings. John reiterates here, that it will soon be this same Mary who will be anointing Jesus's feet with expensive perfume and drying them with her hair. An act of great intimacy. Jesus has proven that he can heal from a distance and has also previously raised the dead, albeit, so far very privately. Yet now he waits a further two days after receiving a call for help from the sisters, which is left unanswered. Jesus already knew the agonies that his friends were going through at his apparent abandonment of them as they dealt with Lazarus's illness and death but he is subject to his father's will and timing. "This sickness will not end in death" he says "but in God's glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified."

This is not to be a healing or a resuscitation but an indisputable resurrection. In Jewish tradition, it was believed that though the soul might hover around the body for three days, by the fourth day the individual was irrevocably dead. With a large audience of mourners, many from Jerusalem just 2 miles away from Bethany, the apparent tragedy is to be used to very publicly glorify God and most importantly to prepare the disciples for what is to come. For even now, despite all that has happened, they still don't quite seem to get it. Can we entirely blame them, when Jesus speaks in riddles? We are as confused as they seem to be.

Lazarus resting, they feel, is a sure sign he is recovering, which will avoid them having to face danger. Jesus then clarifies that Lazarus is intact dead. He is glad he wasn't there because now when he "wakes" him, the disciples and, as John intends, the readers of this gospel for ever after, will surely believe? Interestingly, it is Thomas, usually the doubter, who is here both decisive and prophetic. "Let us go too and die with him."

Jesus meets the grieving sisters separately but both confront him with the same accusatory statement, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This is a variation of what we know many will be thinking now. "Where is God in this crisis?" "If there was a God, He wouldn't let this happen." Let us be clear on this. God is never the problem. He is only ever the solution. The problem will always originate in the human abuse of his most precious gift to us, that of free will. We need to wait on God's timing for only He knows the bigger plan. We may abandon Him. He never abandon's us.

Here we see Jesus's divinity revealed in his response to Martha but then almost simultaneously the humanity in his emotional response to Mary, as the sisters respond to him differently. The building suspense is palpable. Martha's statement of faith "I know that, even now whatever you ask of God, he will grant you," is rewarded, first with the

assurance that her brother will rise again. Her assumption that Jesus means, as was the belief of most Jews, that the Messianic age will be heralded by the raising of the dead back into everyday life, derives from Old Testament scriptures such as our first reading from the prophet Ezekiel. "You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people...you will know that I, the Lord have said and done this - it is the Lord who speaks."

And now the Lord speaks in the great I am statement that marks the climax of this passage. "I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Martha responds with a second statement of faith. "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come into this world."

We have but moments to process this mind-blowing revelation as Martha rushes off to summon her sister who arrives, followed by the crowd of mourners, to fall at Jesus's feet weeping. Jesus now takes us off on a different tangent. Their tears trigger empathic emotions including compassion, grief and despair that the human Jesus has no doubt been suppressing throughout the previous days. John tells us that Jesus was in "great distress" and "sighing straight from the heart." Not just over the suffering his friends had endured and the extent of opposition and disbelief around him - "he opened the eyes of the blind man, could he not have prevented this man's death?" but also inevitably because of the imminence of what lay ahead.

John prefigures the raising of Lazarus with numerous parallels to the Easter story - the sealed tomb, the question "where have you put him?" The tears of another Mary. The mocking that is to come "He saved others...but he can't save himself. He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him" (Matt 27:42). The tension builds, becomes too much and suddenly.... "Jesus wept."

John stops us in our tracks with the shortest, most profound verse in the Bible. Our heart aches for Christ, at his all too human vulnerability. Truly he is the Messiah, the one foreseen by Isaiah - "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53:3)

Even Martha's faith now falters as, despite what she has just been told, she worries about the smell of Lazarus's decaying body if the stone is removed from the tomb. We sense Jesus's exasperation as he says "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" Then Jesus prays aloud for the benefit of those around him and through John, us, that we may understand that God hears and responds to prayers and may join in the belief that "it was you who sent me."

After the suspense of the long build up, the miracle when it comes is almost an understatement. Jesus calls, Lazarus responds and is freed from the bonds of death. Objective secured. We are told that many who witnessed what happened believed in him.

The scene is now set. In raising Lazarus, Jesus procures his own death. The Pharisees now feel so threatened that just a few verses later we read the high priest Caiaphas's statement that "it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) Unlike Lazarus however, Jesus will not be raised back into his incarnate life only to have to die again but into the eternal life with his heavenly father, that through his death on the cross, he bequeathed to all who believe in him.

Some of us were fortunate enough to begin a Lent course focused on Victor Hugo's 19th century novel *Les Misérables*, deliberating on how the various characters exemplified attributes such as grace, poverty, justice, love, revolution and hope. Ultimately love, redemption and God's grace triumph over adversity. The story remains as relevant to us now as is our gospel reading, since essentially - human nature and our response to crisis does not change. Acts of selfishness and exploitation will always be matched by acts of goodness.

It is always darkest before the dawn. Like the revolutionaries, I believe that beyond this current crisis lies a brave new world. The world of the resurrection. We are destroying our planet. Something has to change. This is our wake up call. Having now had to review our priorities - individually, corporately and globally, we must surely all be changed in positive ways to work together on other global issues such as climate change. That is my hope and my prayer and reports show that it is already happening.

So, will you be a Mary who gives up hope, cries and blames God or a Martha, who despite all odds, holding strong in faith, is rewarded with a miracle far greater than could ever have been imagined? Citizens of Christ, let us build the barricades of faith. We fight by example, with prayer, love, kindness, compassion and hope. Knowing that through God all things are possible, that He is alongside each one of us individually in this fight as well as our commander in chief overseeing the whole battle - one thing is certain. We cannot lose.

A remarkable thing happened to me during the writing of this sermon. I rarely watch television but a friend suggested I look at YouTube. I was surprised to find they have an archive and that it includes a 1959 interview with Carl Jung, which actually corrected the quote I had referenced. To see this by then, very elderly and most humblest of genius's pronounce the faith I share in such a definitive way, was amazingly affirming. If that was not a sign of God being alongside me, I don't know what is.

Jesus said "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." (John 14:1)

Keep Lent, keep the faith, above all keep safe and have a good week.

Amen.