

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The raising of Lazarus is one of the most compelling stories in the whole of Scripture. It reveals God's power to conquer death and, as well, the story carries an emotional wallop. It is human story touched by the divine - in particular, by the close relationship between Jesus and the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The Jesus we encounter in this passage is not someone who stands apart from the experience of loss, but who is very much involved, both spiritually and emotionally. And in the intensity of its emotional charge, the passage in many ways prepares us for what is soon to come: the Passion of Christ.

The story of the raising of Lazarus begins in this way: "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." Lazarus lives with his sisters Martha and Mary; the three of them have welcomed Jesus into their home on previous occasions, and so there exists a close bond between Jesus and the family. Jesus, the lover of humankind, was also a lover of individuals, and this particular family has a special place in his affections. When Jesus is told that the person whom he loves - Lazarus - is ill, he is returning to Bethany, to the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and that there, God will be glorified.

To return to Bethany means returning to a place where the lives of Jesus and his disciples will be at risk; Jesus has only just escaped being stoned to death by his opponents. This is where we come to a "moment of decision" in this gospel passage. The disciples have to decide whether or not to return with Jesus to the places where they will be at risk of arrest and even death. Suddenly, following God's will doesn't look as attractive as once did.

So they say to Jesus, reasonably enough, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus doesn't tell them that they must go. That falls to Thomas, often the butt of many a preacher's sermon, as the simpleton who doubts and needs reassuring. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is Thomas who says, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." What inspires the disciples to continue following the Lord, even in the face of death, is the faith and courage of Thomas. So Jesus and his disciples together make their way to Judea and to the village of Bethany. This is the "moment of decision" which propel the party on to the road which leads to Jerusalem, and all that means.

It is already four days since Lazarus died. There is a large gathering of people, many of them friends of the family, who have come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. How can we describe the atmosphere? I imagine there is a mixture of feelings: a deep and abiding sadness at the loss of Lazarus, because even after four days people are weeping and openly sharing their grief. Mingled in, too, there are feelings of resentment - certainly from the sisters - since both reproach Jesus for not having come sooner: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Then there is Jesus himself. This passage is a rare glimpse into the complex soul of a man who suffers the pains of loss. He is not above the emotional tumult around him. He doesn't sail into this scene serenely and wave his hand and calm everyone. He is himself carrying a

burden of grief. The gospel says that he is “greatly disturbed in spirit.” Jesus experiences a tumult within himself, and tears roll down his cheeks. As he approaches the tomb of Lazarus, he prays a prayer of thanksgiving to the Father, and then cries out, with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

The intensity of this scene, in its emotional power, is punctuated by what happens next. Lazarus emerges from the tomb, alive. Let us visualize this moment: I think it would have burst the intense emotional bubble - this man covered in bandages waddling out into the light - it would have looked rather odd.

On the scale of miracles, this is one of the greatest, because it reveals that’s God’s power extends even over death. In Lazarus we have a kind of foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus. Like all of Jesus’ miracles, is like a stone dropped in a pool of water, whose ripples move from the center to the outer rim. There is so much in this story that we could spend all day talking about it - this morning I want to talk about two things which I think are relevant.

Before I do, let’s be clear that although Lazarus is raised from the dead, his resurrection is not like Jesus’s resurrection. Lazarus is not raised to new life - he is raised to his old life, although of course, because of the miracle, this life will take on a different meaning.

So first, I want to talk about the mourners who congregated outside Lazarus’ tomb. We don’t know how many there are, but I guess a good number, and they have been coming each day to mourn and comfort one another in their grief, much as we do at a funeral. We all know from our own experience that when we mourn we do so with a mixture of feelings. The closer you were to that person, the more complex the emotions can be. Let’s take it as a given that grief will be one of them. But there may be others. Mourning often brings feelings of guilt, and with guilt, a whole list of questions: did I do enough for them when they were alive? Did we make up for our falling out when we had the chance? Did I tell them I loved them before they died? Often the answer to these questions is no, and we feel guilty that we didn’t do or say what needed to be said or done, before it was too late.

I sometimes call the story of the raising of Lazarus, the “gospel of second chances.” When God brings Lazarus back to the land of the living, I imagine Lazarus being overwhelmed by family and friends hugging him and telling him they love him. (well, at least those who weren’t put off by the stench!) What an extraordinary lesson God provides us, in the example of Lazarus, which is this: that while we are still alive, there is still time for us to reach out to those with whom we have had a conflicted relationship, and make our peace with them, or simply tell them we love them.

The second point to our story concerns Lazarus himself. Apart from the fact that he is the brother of Martha and Mary, we know almost nothing about him. But I imagine that coming back to life would have had a profound and lasting impact on him. Surrounded by family and friends, he hears over and over again how pleased they are that he is alive again. What would you feel if it were you? Wouldn’t it make you realize that your life had a greater significance that you had previously thought.

This is the second lesson from the gospel, that when we love and are loved, we touch the lives of others in ways too deep for us to know. Love lies at the very foundation of our

humanity, and it is love which connects Lazarus to his sisters, to his friends and to Jesus, and thereby to God. This isn't a love which goes in straight lines, but is messy, complex and utterly life-giving. God gave Lazarus his life back. Naturally, he had a second death, but the grief and mourning of that second death would have been informed by a remembrance of that first resurrection.

It is the memory of resurrection which informs our worship today in the Eucharist. In our Eucharist, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, who died and rose again to *new* life. This is not like the first resurrection of Lazarus, but something infinitely greater and more wonderful. When it is our time to die, let us remember God's power over death, and the love of God which brought Jesus out of death and into new life. All we need is the faith to believe, like Thomas, and the courage to follow Jesus all our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford