

Sunday 26 March 2023
Holy Trinity – Holy Communion (8.00am)
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

In our Gospel reading this morning we are so near to Jerusalem. We're near to Jerusalem, near to Calvary, and near to the cross. In fact, the text says we are "two miles away," in a place of death and mourning. We find ourselves gathered with the family and friends of Lazarus, including Jesus. And we are, in church time, only two weeks away from the events of Good Friday and eventually the empty tomb.

How fitting, then, and how challenging, to read this account of the raising of Lazarus - a story set firmly within, even tangled up with, all the controversy and plots that were swirling around Jesus at that time.

In those days there were those who saw in the words and actions of Jesus--even in the miraculous healings--a blasphemy that deserved the death penalty. But Jesus claims that he's about the works of "the Father," so even the worries and warnings of his own disciples can't keep him from making his way, not only to Lazarus' tomb, but also to his own place of suffering, death, and, eventually, resurrection.

But it's all part of the plan, Jesus says, because it is all done "for God's glory."

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, there is so much which resonates with our own human experience of loss.

Receiving news of a loved one's illness and time of need; decision-making, timing, and complications, even risks and dangers to be considered.

There's the frustrations, questioning, and lack of understanding on the part of those closest to us; grief and mourning by loved ones and the community around them, and then audacious hope, a profession of faith and a wistful "what might have been".

Some saw how much Jesus loved his friend while others cynically questioned his power and its political effects. There's the trust of Mary and Martha, even in the face of physical reality (you'll remember from verse 39 that Martha was more worried about the stench of the grave); and finally, most powerfully, there's release from the grave, glory, and Jesus' own gratitude to God.

We don't hear a single word from Lazarus in this story or know anything about how he responded to his extraordinary experience. But I suppose we shouldn't be surprised by the response of the "ordinary" people who witnessed the

'extraordinary' happenings that day. We see a range of reactions, from faith and following, to fear and fretting.

The raising of Lazarus isn't just a nice little story of friendship or even just an amazing miracle. It's a story set in the context of the journey to the cross (and, eventually, to the empty tomb).

Jesus' great work of raising Lazarus from the dead sets things in motion in the hearts and minds of those who were afraid of him, and all these things ultimately led to his own death.

We hear the words of Jesus, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Just as Lazarus was all wrapped up in grave clothes, how often are we held back and restricted in exactly the same way as the dead Lazarus? How many of us have known, metaphorically, the feel of those strips of cloth, the grave's clothing, the shroud that wraps us up in a stiff, restricting existence this side of physical death and which makes us long for release, for the light of day and the feel of fresh air in our lungs?

What are the "strips of cloth" that bind us, the habits or addictions, the fears, and the feelings of hopelessness or loss or just not being good enough?

Perhaps grief, loss, anxiety, financial troubles, anger, hatred, resentment, or simply a lack of faith has put us in our own personal tomb of despair.

Or maybe we end up calculating the cost and the possible complications involved in giving ourselves over completely to the power of God, even, ironically, over to healing and new life.

Martha's great profession of faith is also an interesting moment in this beautiful and complex story.

How do we move from just saying what we believe, to giving our whole selves and lives over to the new life that God brings?

How often, in fact, do we say we believe, but live as if we do not?

"Jesus wept." it says in verse 35 (the shortest verse in the whole of the Bible) but, more often than not, we concentrate on Jesus' divine nature and completely fail to experience his humanity.

It's clear from these words that Jesus knew anger, and grief, and deep spiritual pain, just as we do.

He was moved to compassion and sadness even though he knew that all this had happened for the glory of God.

Can we imagine the tears of Jesus, and if we can, do they change our understanding of who he is?

What is God saying to us today, in the tears of Jesus?

How and when have we been Lazarus in this story?

Perhaps just as important: how and when have we been part of the crowd, the crowd which moves around in the background, trying to figure out what's going on, drawing conclusions, not wanting to miss anything, helping to release the dead man, then going back to everyday life, transformed, believing, experiencing new life?

Or, on the other hand, departing in critical, suspicious, and cynical disbelief?

Which of these two crowds will we be in, in just a few weeks time when Easter arrives?

A long time ago, in that far-off land, Jesus stood outside that tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!".

God is still speaking to us today, calling us out from our own particular, individual tombs of despair, denial, and death to a new life, right here, right now, if only we have ears to listen.

Ask yourself this... How would Jesus live your life? Would it look the way your life does or would it look different?

Those of you who were at the Morning Prayer service here in Holy Trinity last Friday will have heard both preachers talk about this story of the raising of Lazarus and what it means for us today.

This is about living out our faith confidently.

We grow in confidence in our discipleship when we are convinced of the truth of the gospel, God's word and God's character.

But many of us find our confidence diminished and diluted the minute we leave church.

When we're gathered together with other Christians, we often feel full of confidence.

But as soon as daily life hits, that confidence can all drain away.

But we know God has defeated death... we have nothing to fear.. just as Jesus called Lazarus out, so he calls each one of us out to both live out and spread that amazingly good news.

The God of all things cares deeply about all the things of our lives. Day by day he works through each of us, giving us opportunities to make the world more like heaven with every email we send, every issue we fix, every decision we make and every neighbour or friend we speak to.

We have nothing to fear..we are on the winning side.

It is just like Jesus said to Martha back in verse 25 of our reading... "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though

they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

Today, Jesus is saying exactly the same thing to us. The question is... do we believe it?

Amen.