

LENT 5

26 MARCH 2023

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

Psalm 130

John 11. 1-45

Well, this story of the raising of Lazarus is one of those passages that preachers want to run away from. Like Jonah, head for Tarshish, rather than Nineveh, where God calls Jonah to go.

Like so much of John's gospel, this raising of Lazarus is working at two levels; the real, bodily, fleshly and the spiritual, the symbolic, the metaphorical. And John doesn't seem to distinguish clearly between these two. I find the more I read the more confused I feel I become; seeking to understand, I get mired in misunderstanding. What is being said here? I feel I have it, then it slips away.

I think there is something parabolic about John's way of narration; these stories are like parables; that is they defy pinning down; defy a final, definitive explanation. We are so familiar – maybe too familiar - with parables that they we have become blasé about them. But they are designed not to be able to be grasped, to upset our usual ways of seeing things.

There is a device in Zen Buddhism which is like parables in our Christian heritage, called a Koan. A kōan is a story, a dialogue, a question, or statement which is used in Zen practice to provoke the "great doubt" and to practice or test a student's progress in Zen. A koan can be a paradoxical anecdote or riddle without a solution, used to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and provoke enlightenment.

This is what John is doing – he is trying to provoke enlightenment for us. Light is central to John's gospel: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* So I would be deceiving myself if I thought I could explain it to you; And I would be deceiving you if I pretended to. Because this is something we all need to sit with; to be provoked by, unsettled, to be knocked out of our rational, explanation-hungry brains and allow the story to do its work with us.

Instead, I want to tell you about my brother-in law, John, who died a couple of weeks ago and whose funeral was Thursday week ago. John, in many ways was like Lazarus. Thirty-one years ago he was all but dead. He was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. His heart was giving up and he was going to die without a heart transplant. When he was diagnosed at forty-four years of age the family realised that his mother had died suddenly from the same disorder some years before. Genetic testing has revealed that some of John's children also carry this disorder.

John received a transplant – what was called a domino transplant where a heart and lung from a trauma victim was given to a man who needed an intact heart and lungs. This man's heart was a heart-match for John. And so his heart was removed in the next operating theatre, walked next door and put into John. There was virtually no trauma to the heart for this transplant and with good medical care John has lived a further thirty one years, seeing his five children grow up, some of them marry and the birth of five grandchildren. He was going to die, but he lived.

But he didn't just survive physically, he thrived spiritually for these thirty one years. And in this regard, there was something profound and mystical about John's funeral, because the mystery of *the life*, of which the gospel of John speaks, was present in the moment when we gathered to

give thanks for John's life. In John's living across those thirty one years there was something of the light of life, even as he lived each day in the face of his own mortality. Each of these days was a gift.

John had grown up in the church in the small country community into which he was born and had been active in it. But when the family moved to Geelong a couple of years after the transplant, they became part of an active church and members of a home group which has met together over many years. Numerous people in the funeral – both family and friends - remarked on John's humility, his kindness, his patience. While this was John's temperament, there was a sense that the brush with death had enabled him to live out of a place which was both life-giving for him, but as became apparent on the day of the funeral, for all he met. He was living eternal life; he was living resurrection life. This wasn't just the funeral of a good man; there was something more in our marking of his life, where we were able to, at some level, affirm that the divine, the eternal had intersected, in this particular life, with the mortal, with the fleshly, with the temporal. And we had seen something of the mystery of which the Gospel of John speaks. Difficult to put into words but there was a fulness on the day which spoke of this.

Martha says to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus says to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha responds, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

The koan element of these words is the paradox that the eternal life of God is present in the bodily life. What Jesus says is the eternal life of God does not come to an end when the bodily life does; neither does it begin when bodily life ends. This eternal life is the life that transcends death. It's not bodily life – nevertheless it is contained by bodily life; it is experienced, it can only be experienced and known, in the bodily life.

John's gospel has seven I Am saying though it. The sayings begin with the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush – I Am. When Moses asks *who shall I say has sent me* when God commands Moses to go and set the Israelite slaves free; what is your name asks Moses. God says – tell them I am has sent you. I am who I am, I will be who I shall be. This is my name forever.

So, Jesus in John's gospel resonates with this meeting of Moses with God: I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, I am the gate, I am the way the truth and the life, I am the resurrection and life, I am the true vine.

Martha is looking for the resurrection of the dead on the last day, at some point in historical time. But Jesus invites her to try and comprehend the mystery of eternal life; of resurrection life, present now; even in the face of death. I am resurrection and life. It is as though Jesus says to Martha: resurrection is not an event; it is life itself; and I will embody this life for you soon, even in the face of my own approaching death. Don't look to some point in the future. It is here with you now.

There was something very full about my brother-in-law, John's funeral. There were tears and sadness but there was also a great sense of fulness in the room, amongst the 350 or so people present. There was a sense that John had at some level lived this resurrection life in the face of his own mortality. I was asked to lead a prayer of thanks for John and I find myself praying: As he

has savoured life, so we have savoured all these years with him. John had died to death; he had been resurrected; he was glorified in his fragility and his mortality; he was immortal, even while he was extremely mortal.

So I am reminded of words of Paul struggling with this same paradox:

To the Romans: If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

To the Corinthians: For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

Again to the Corinthians: For while we are still in this tent (tent being a metaphor for our bodily life), we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

To Timothy: it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Our rational minds want an explanation of how this raising of Lazarus happens and what it means. But the miracle is in some senses a smoke screen to the resurrection life Jesus is pointing towards. This is always the trick with the miracles in John's gospel; what he calls Jesus' signs. The raising of Lazarus is a sign; a physical act which points to something about the life of God, which is hard to grasp with our rational minds but in truth bears some life-giving truth.

As we continue on our way to Easter we continue to be drawn by the mystery of resurrection life which Jesus calls us into. Through our observing of the passion of Jesus at Easter, we learn to observe our own path to the cross and how it is the light of life might come to us. We pray for grace and courage as we continue on the path that we might also be brought to the joy of resurrection.

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