

“Learnings from Lazarus”

Lent 5, April 2nd 2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:17-44

Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest – Rev Gregor Henderson

Phew, quite some Bible readings today. Bones rattling together, sinews and flesh materialising and accumulating around the bones and life breathed into them! A dead man emerging from his tomb; heartfelt emotions of grief, anguish, confusion, hope and astonishment as Lazarus comes back to life. Lots to ponder.

The raising of Lazarus is one of those Bible stories which has always fed people's imagination. Ancient icons frequently depict the scene. Artists from every century have sought to outdo each other in creating masterpieces of the miracle – Giotto, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, even Vincent van Gogh. Lazarus appears often in music, literature and movies – rock stars like the Boo Radleys, Placebo and David Bowie; writers such as Dostoevsky, T S Eliot and Herman Melville; TV shows such as the X-Files and Doctor Who.

We'd love to know more about Lazarus, but apart from his being the brother of Mary and Martha and the Jewish plot to kill him because he was causing too many to put their faith in Jesus, we know very little. The island of Cyprus claims him. When I visited the Middle East Council of Churches in 1993, headquartered then in Cyprus, I was taken to the tomb of Lazarus in Larnaca. Tradition tells us Lazarus was appointed by Paul and Barnabas as the first bishop in Cyprus – although his bones were apparently moved to Constantinople for safekeeping in 898AD. You can also visit another tomb of Lazarus in France, in the city of Autun in Burgundy, where a cathedral was specifically built in the 12th century to house the bones of Lazarus, a different set of bones. This follows the tradition that he went to Marseille with Mary Magdalene and became the first bishop there. We do not know – it might be a safer bet simply to visit the tomb of Lazarus not far from Jerusalem, with a 4th century church built over it, this reputedly being his first tomb from which he emerged four days after his death.

In John's gospel the raising of Lazarus has a crucial place. It fills a whole chapter. It happens just a few days before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It's the final sign or miracle performed by Jesus which shows who he is, the one who has God's power and God's wisdom, so fully that he is called the Messiah, the Son of God, the incarnate Word of God. John many times refers to the miracles as signs, and there are seven of them specifically regarded as signs through his gospel:

- in chapter 2, the transformation of water into wine
- in chapter 4 the healing of the nobleman's son
- in chapter 5 the healing of the paralysed man
- in chapter 6 the feeding of the 5000
- also in chapter 6 Jesus walking on the water
- in chapter 9 the healing of the blind man
- and in chapter 11 the raising of Lazarus.

Taking all these together, the irresistible conclusion is that Jesus has power over disease, over nature, over sin and over even death, it has to be God's power.

Next Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday, is celebrated in the eastern Orthodox churches as Lazarus Saturday. Special services are held and celebratory foods are shared, including in the Russian church, lots of caviar. In Orthodox tradition the raising of Lazarus is seen as showing very clearly the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine: the human in that

Jesus has to ask “where have you laid him?” and the divine in Jesus commanding Lazarus to come out from his tomb.

Which brings me to the point of this sermon! John 11:35 is the well-known shortest verse in the whole of the Bible – in the Greek just two words, in the King James Bible just two words “Jesus wept”, in the NRSV “Jesus began to weep”. Pope Leo the 1st in the 5th century wrote “in his humanity Jesus wept for Lazarus, in his divinity he raised him from the dead”. That sounds good at first blush, deeply theological – but is it correct? Popes are fallible, surely!

Jesus wept. Does this show the human side of Jesus? Certainly. Does it show the divine side of Jesus? Surely yes, it’s both, Jesus is one person albeit both human and divine. Jesus wept. God weeps.

The world provides lots of reasons for weeping. Think of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, Nigeria, climate change, domestic violence, refugees, addictions, epidemics, extinctions. God weeps. Jesus had enormous compassion for people, feeling deeply for them in their suffering, putting himself in their shoes and seeking always to alleviate their suffering. That’s not just human to feel compassion and to want to relieve suffering. It’s godlike, it’s divine. God weeps. God cares. God loves. God is wanting to breathe life and love into us, every day.

One other thing from the story of Lazarus. As well as emphasising the deep emotional compassion of Jesus, it also teaches us that life and death are never without hope. Lazarus comes back to life and is restored to his family. There is resurrection, there is new life, there is eternal life.

So friends, today two simple themes to highlight as we move closer to the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday

- firstly, “Jesus wept”. God weeps, God feels for us. We are called to be people of compassion. Weep with those who weep. Work to relieve suffering.
- And secondly, never despair, never lose hope, for with God and God’s compassion there is always reason to be hopeful.

To the glory of God, Amen.