

Passion Sunday 2017 – The Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-45

Mother Emma

The illustration of the Gospel in our pew sheet - Sir Jacob Epstein's sculpture in the entrance to New College Chapel in Oxford – is, of course, a depiction of Lazarus returning from the dead. It is a haunting statue (some of you may know it) – a life-size white stone Lazarus bound from head to foot in strips of cloth with his head twisted back over one shoulder.

As a small child, I was often taken to New College Chapel, and to the irritation of my parents and grandparents, always covered my eyes as I walked past the statue. Egyptian-style mummies with their heads facing the wrong way seemed to me then to be the stuff of which Scooby-Doo nightmares were made, and even though I am now better acquainted with the Bible story, and am aware that many are struck by the power of Epstein's image of Lazarus, staring back into the tomb from which he has come, I continue to find the statue unnerving.

But the story of Lazarus as told in the Bible would also, of course, have been a highly disturbing one for those present. The dead man stumbles out of the tomb, a cloth still covering his face, and we can only guess at the frisson which must have gone through the crowd of onlookers as they prepared to look underneath it.

And yet, the full, disturbing story of the raising of Lazarus is an essential part of the narrative in the Gospel of John. It is, of course, a pale foreshadowing of the Resurrection – a first suggestion of God's power over death, and it provides an introduction to the rest of Jesus' own story.

As we enter Passiontide today, and look ahead to the liturgy of Palm Sunday this time next week, the outcome of the story of Lazarus lays the groundwork for much of what we shall be commemorating then.

Our reading this morning ended with the optimistic report that, "Many of the Jews who had come with Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him." This gives us a first indication of the faith and enthusiasm of the crowds, who next week, we shall hear greeting Jesus on his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, shouting Hosannas and laying palm branches before his donkey's feet.

But the Bible verses which *follow* our reading this morning, are of a totally different kind. They describe how others who witness Lazarus' rising go away to tell the Pharisees, prompting the meeting of the Sanhedrin which will decide, "It is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish."

The raising of Lazarus stimulates both the adoration which will greet Jesus as he arrives in Jerusalem, and the fear and anger which will lead to his crucifixion on Good Friday. We cannot simply gloss over the story as unsettling, without realising what a pivotal part it plays in the action of the Gospel.

But although Lazarus' return to life in some ways triggers the events of Holy Week and Easter and may seem to foreshadow the events in Jesus' life which are to follow, it also provides a sharp contrast with the events of the Resurrection, and perhaps challenges some of our own deepest feelings about death and Resurrection.

We have considered some aspects of the story of Lazarus in practical detail, and it is interesting to set them against the descriptions we have received of Christ's own Resurrection.

As we have seen, there is something positively spooky about Lazarus emerging from his tomb, still wrapped in his grave-clothes. We could contrast this with the descriptions of Jesus' tomb, where the grave-clothes lie neatly folded to one side, watched over by beautiful angels. Christ rises alone at sunrise in the garden, whilst Lazarus is called forth, before the eyes of a crowd of traumatised onlookers; the only reference to the sunlight here is the suggestion that after four days in a tomb in a hot climate, the body may have started to smell.

There is of course, a sense of relief from the pain and grief of loss for Lazarus' friends and family – a fact which has made this story a very difficult one for many suffering from bereavement themselves. But though Lazarus is raised from the dead for now, the story does not relate how many more months or years he has with them – this is a far cry from the rising to a joyful eternity with God promised to us by Christ's Resurrection on Easter Day.

The raising of Lazarus does indeed show both us and the contemporary witnesses something of the power and glory of God, but it is a very pale shadow indeed of the glory revealed at the Resurrection. So, what can we take from this comparison?

Many of us will be able to relate to the loss felt by Martha and Mary, and the cry they utter in the course of the story is so painfully familiar to people who have lost a loved one - "If you had been here, Lord (or perhaps "if you had been listening, Lord") he (or she) would not have died". It is that mixture of faith and hope and doubt and anger in the face of pain which we may recognise, and we are told that Jesus himself wept too, in sympathy for what they had been through, even though we presume he knew that their grief, on this occasion, would be short-lived.

He weeps, too, in sympathy for our losses and our pain, and yet, through his own death and resurrection, he has brought us and our loved ones the promise of a far greater rising, the Resurrection which we see so inadequately prefigured in the story of Lazarus and which will bring us all, living and departed, to feast at his kingdom in Heaven.

As we enter into Passiontide today, beginning to travel the long and painful road to Calvary with Christ, perhaps the story of Lazarus can underline for us that the Easter story towards which we travel is much more than the return of someone to life on this earth – it is the promise of eternal glory.