

John 11: 32-44, The Raising of Lazarus, All Souls'

4th November 2018, CCO and StJN

Father, we pray that through your word, we may be raised to new life. Amen.

Well! This is quite a remarkable episode, isn't it? In John's gospel, it is the last of the signs that show us who Jesus is. Indeed after this sign, the Jewish authorities are so rattled that they decide definitely that this Jesus must go, they have to get rid of him because he is undermining their authority, and people are deserting them in droves in order to follow Jesus and his new way of living and loving. In fact they are so rattled that we hear in the next chapter that they even plot to kill Lazarus, because on account of what Jesus has done for *him*, even more people are rejecting them and believing in Jesus.

There is so much in this story that we can't possibly cover everything in one sermon. But some things we should note. One, which is a puzzle, is that this remarkable event only appears in John's gospel. Now why would that be? Surely something so dramatic deserves a place in any account of the life of Jesus? Is it possible that the other gospel writers never heard of it? That seems most unlikely. So *is* it a historical event? Did it really happen as appears in this story? Or is John trying to tell us something different? As we read this, we need to remember that John's gospel is not so much an account of the life of Jesus, but rather it is a theological reflection on that life. John is trying to help us get to the heart of who Jesus is, and what his life, death and resurrection mean for us. And there is no doubt that John was totally convinced that in Jesus, God was showing his power, the power of love over death and over all that causes death to the human soul.

All the way through there are little pointers: we can't read this

episode and not find our thoughts being pointed towards what is about to happen to Jesus. The echoes are loud and clear.

There are those who mutter among themselves "He gave sight to the blind man, didn't he? Could he not have kept Lazarus from dying?" Surely here we can hear the same people who would soon be jeering at Jesus on the cross: "He saved others but he cannot save himself! Let him come down off the cross if he is God's Son!"

Lazarus has already been in the tomb for several days, and the tomb is just like the one that awaits Jesus, a cave with a large stone rolled over the entrance. When Jesus speaks to Mary, he asks "Where have you buried him?", echoing Mary Magdalene's question to Jesus on Easter morning. The tomb stone is rolled away, and the miracle of restored life happens. It's as though this whole episode is a foreshadowing of what awaits Jesus. Only this is more like resuscitation than resurrection: when Lazarus is called out of the tomb, he comes out still bound. When Jesus is raised to new life, the bandages and wrappings are left behind. Lazarus will continue to live a human life which will end in due course. Jesus is raised to a new form of life that knows no end.

Another feature of this story is that it contains the shortest sentence in the whole Bible: Jesus wept. Now for us this might just seem a normal human reaction to the loss of a dear friend. But for the Greeks for whom John originally wrote his gospel, it was revolutionary. John is trying to help us understand that Jesus really is the human face of God himself or herself. If you were a Greek, your understanding of God was that he was above and beyond all human emotions. William Barclay explains Greek thinking this way: If we can feel sorrow or joy, gladness or grief, it means that someone can have an effect upon us. Now, if a person has an effect upon us, it means that for the moment that person has power over us. No one can have any power over God;

and this must mean that God is essentially incapable of feeling any emotion whatsoever. The Greeks believed in an isolated, passionless and compassionless God.

But Jesus shows us a God who is totally involved not isolated, the God who suffers passion and feels deep compassion. This is the Jesus that John reveals to us. John's Jesus shows us a God who weeps at the human suffering caused by death.

And John shows us Jesus moved by even more powerful emotions. Twice we are told that 'Jesus' heart was touched and he was deeply moved', firstly when Jesus sees Mary and her friends weeping, and then again when he arrives at the tomb. In each case, the word John uses to describe Jesus' emotion is a very unusual word which describes what a horse does when it snorts loudly in fear or anger. It's a quite extraordinary word, implying a great depth of feeling. What was it? Fear, as Jesus felt himself confronted by his own imminent human death? Or was it anger at the pain and suffering caused by death, especially untimely death, in this world. Was this like Jesus' battle cry against the brokenness of this world, against the power of evil that causes so much suffering? If you look at different translations of the Bible, they all struggle to describe this, and they all give a different, paler version. If you've ever been near a horse when it snorts like this, you will sense something of the depth of emotion John is portraying here.

And Jesus now rises to the challenge: he confronts the cause of this suffering with the power of prayer. He knows that he is at one with God the Father, and he can summon the power of the Father to overcome the death that binds poor Lazarus. It is a great statement of faith. He summons all his authority and literally yells out to Lazarus. Three little words, words that he shouted to Lazarus and that he shouts to each one of us today.

Lazarus! he calls. Jesus calls Lazarus, by name. He doesn't go into the tomb to fetch him out. He calls him. The friend who loves Lazarus is calling him by name. He knows him and believes in him and quickens in him the power to respond. Just as he calls you and me, by our name, knowing who and what we are, and loving us into new life with him.

Then he shouts "Come!" Come to me. I am drawing you, attracting you, calling you. Can you hear me? As you come to me, come also to my Father who has created you and whose child you truly are. Come to me and be what you are. Be alive.

And the third little word is "Out!" Come out of that tomb! Come out of that place of darkness where you are festering, where you are held by bad memories, by fears, by guilt, by bitterness, by sorrow. Stand up and come out and live, and be prepared to suffer with me and call others out of their tombs. Let the power of the resurrection raise you up and flow through you now!

And Lazarus comes out. And the first thing that Jesus does is to send others to help him, to unbind him and *let him go*. The word used for 'let him go' is the word that is used throughout the New Testament for the forgiveness of sins. It is used for the setting free of prisoners from prison and of slaves from slavery. It was also used at the start of a horse race, like the word "Go!" when the horses that were rearing to go were allowed to gallop off. Our word forgiveness sounds a bit tame by comparison. But all those meanings are implied in that phrase 'let him go' – forgiveness, release, new energy and power. But Lazarus needs the other people to help him find that freedom. The healing power of God is realised in him as others come to his aid. Jesus calls them, as he calls us, to share in his work.

We can all be dead inside, through sin, through hurts, through despair. Jesus calls us out of that tomb. And he calls us to help *each other* to experience the new life he offers us. “You must do for each other what I have done for Lazarus (says Jesus). So roll away the stone, unblock the tomb. Command one another to stand up in the power of the resurrection. Untie the bandages and let one another go.” (Stephen Verney: Water into Wine).

So may each one of us hear Jesus calling us by name; as we hear that call may we *come* to him; may we be brought *out* of the darkness that keeps us bound and rejoice in the new life God wants us to have. And may we work with Jesus in helping others to find release and hope and new life in him. Amen.