



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifth Sunday of Lent

readings: [Ezekiel 37.1-14](#) , [Romans 8.6-11](#) , [John 11.1-45](#)

26 March 2023

A couple of weekends ago we held our Social Committee's annual quiz led this year by the Precentor's household. We were in awe of one group with an almost unbelievable number of correct answers. Others continue to lick their wounds and plan the campaign for next Lent!

As I was growing up, if the quiz had anything to do with Bible knowledge then one question could be guaranteed. 'What is the shortest verse in the Bible?' And the problem was that everyone knew the answer: St John chapter 11 verse 35. 'Jesus began to weep'. Or in the King James' Version, even shorter, just two words - 'Jesus wept'. It might be the shortest verse in the Bible and one of most well-known but our long reading this morning from St John's Gospel pivots on it. 'Jesus wept' opens up to us the nature and character of God who is revealed in Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus whom he loved.

On Passion Sunday, the fifth Sunday of Lent, there is a change of gear in our Lenten journey. The Passion of our Lord suddenly is much nearer. The mood is darker. The journey gets more intense. We become more aware of who Jesus really is but at the same time we the storm clouds gather as Jesus' public ministry draws to a close.

St John the Evangelist tells us no less than five times in six verses that Lazarus is ill and by implication near death. This increases the tension in the story as Jesus decides to stay for two extra days in the place where he was. Jesus wants to ensure that Lazarus is dead so that the sign of new life is unmistakable and unambiguous. He doesn't rush to Bethany. He is carefully choreographing each step in his journey.

But notice how Jesus encounters the two sisters. Martha goes out to meet him. Her conversation with Jesus is rational, calm and grows in depth incrementally. 'I am the resurrection, and the life', says Jesus. 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah', responds Martha, hitting the right note but only the third time.

Encountering Mary, surrounded by those consoling her, it's quite different, and the emotions flow. The one who knows he is the resurrection and the life is full of tears – weeping and grieving the loss of a loved one, deeply moved. Jesus is the one who in his crucifixion will proclaim definitively that God has power over death and yet he is just like us in feeling the pain of bereavement, the agony of human living.

This is the self-aware, confident Jesus who embodies the resurrection and the grieving, weeping Jesus who is 'greatly disturbed' at the death of a friend. As Jesus approaches the tomb, shaken and upset, we wonder – was he doubting he'd done the right thing by delaying his arrival? In the depth of Jesus' humanity, he models the virtue of hope in the face of death that already after four days is proclaiming its triumph in the stench of the cave.

The reality of suffering and the confidence of hope are wrapped up in each other. Each carries the other, they are intertwined. These are the two truths that St John holds together throughout his Gospel. The God in Jesus for whom love is all powerful and the God in Jesus who suffers when human beings suffer. It's the cross which shapes the scene outside Lazarus' cave. In John the cross is both the moment of suffering and the crowing of the Messiah. It is anguish and lifting up at the same time. It is tragedy and glory at one and the same moment.

And it's the cross that shapes our lives during Lent, even more so as we travel into Passion Week and then into Holy Week. The weight of the cross becomes heavier as we travel toward Jerusalem.

And I wonder how you are feeling the weight of the cross today? It may be that you like Jesus are grieving at the lost of a loved one, for the first time travelling through Lent without a partner by your side? It maybe that you are seeking asylum or have the experience of being far away from home and feel the pain of separation from family and friends. It maybe the cross for you is about struggling with the cost-of-living crisis and high inflation on a limited income, or it might be about feeling marginalised, ignored or side-lined. It maybe that you are engaging with personal illness or a life-limiting diagnosis. Whatever our situation in life we feel the weight of the cross.

But the good news of St John's Gospel is that the cross is the gift of Lent. As we feel the weight of the world's sufferings on us we are given a Saviour who - to quote the Prophet Isaiah - 'bore our griefs and carried our sorrows'. We are given one who was nailed to the cross and who absorbed the pains and sins of the world in the heart of his being and who in his ultimate suffering was cut off from his life-giving relationship with his heavenly father to share in the agonising human experience of hopelessness and darkness, of being cut off from love itself.

Jesus did not come to remove suffering from our lives but to give it a new meaning, to transform the wickedness and evil of this world into righteousness, peace and justice.

God in Jesus did not give us a rational explanation of suffering but entered into its heart and emotion in the most profound way possible so that, to go back to St John, Jesus' cross becomes a throne, the absence of God becomes the gift of the Spirit, and the dying of thirst becomes the gift of living water.

And if you feel the weight of the cross today then you, we together, are united with Jesus in his death and suffering, so that we will share in the glory of his reign in the kingdom of God in all its fullness. The cross is not taken away but the meaning of our suffering is transformed. The cross feels lighter and full of purpose.

The raising of Lazarus is the last of Jesus' signs in the Fourth Gospel. Lazarus came back from the dead and his raising for us is a sign of hope. Death does not have the final say but the love that Jesus has for his friend is what has the last word. Lazarus standing before Jesus and shedding his graveclothes gives us a foretaste of what is to come and brings eternal life into the present.

Notice how Lazarus comes out of the grave bound with strips of cloth, including all over his face. 'Unbind him and let him go', says Jesus.

'Loosen', 'unbind', 'let him go' are words in St John's Gospel that elsewhere speak of forgiveness. The raising of Lazarus says clearly that God in Jesus has the ultimate power over death, yes, but also the power to offer the forgiveness of sins.

Notice that Lazarus does not unbind himself but it is something done to him, and as he is let go he is a sign of a human being loosed, freed from their sins. The raising of Lazarus is a sign for us that God in Jesus has the power to offer forgiveness but also the power to make it happen: the power to give us a new status as forgiven in God's eyes, to make us children of the same God, brothers and sisters with Jesus himself, those who suffer with none other than God himself. Not just in the future but now by the gift of God's Spirit.

But then the plot thickens. 'Unbind him and let him go' are the words that lead to the chain of events that culminate in Jesus' death. As the last verse we read says, many believed having seen what Jesus did. The next verse, which carries the story forward, and which takes over from where we left off, speaks of those who reported the miracle of the raising of Lazarus to the religious authorities.

Events take over. The pathway is set, the gear changes. Not least the words of Thomas resonate: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'. A foreboding anticipation of what happens in the story of the Passion, but more so an invitation to take the next steps with Jesus to Palm Sunday. Amen.

**The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson,**

**Dean of Derby.**