



SAINT LUKE'S

"IN THE FACE OF DEATH"

LENT V
YEAR A

EZEKIEL 37:1-14
PSALM 130
ROMANS 8:6-11
JOHN 11:1-45

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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In John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus is the last of the miracles or signs that Jesus performs before his Passion. It is the tipping point towards the Cross. The raising of Lazarus generates the huge crowds seeking Jesus on Palm Sunday, and leads directly to Caiaphas the high priest and the Sanhedrin planning to eliminate him. Immediately when he hears about Lazarus, Caiaphas says: *...It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.* Caiaphas sees that a non-conformist with such powers as Jesus will destabilize the status quo. The arrangement the religious leaders have with the Roman authorities whereby the religious leaders manage their people and in return the Romans allow the Jewish religious practices to continue - worship in the Temple, sacrifices, the whole observance of the Law - all of this could end. From Caiaphas' viewpoint, it is indeed wise to destroy Jesus for the greater good of the people. It is astonishing how Jesus' life-giving power has become a political threat.

On every level, the raising of Lazarus is a climactic miracle. Other gospels tell of Jesus bringing people back from their death bed.¹ But Lazarus is embalmed, wrapped in burial cloths, and entombed for four days. Jesus' relationship with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, is very close. Their home in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, is Jesus' southern base, and it is a place of emotional sustenance for Jesus. Lazarus is a man Jesus loves, within a family Jesus loves. Jesus weeps as we weep. We know what it feels like to lose someone we love. *Jesus began to weep.*

¹ eg. Lk.7:11f; Lk. 8:41f; Jn. 4:47f

Human reality and divine power are intermingled in this story. Martha and Mary are overcome in the face of their brother's death. Their faith in Jesus does not diminish their grief or despair. They trust Jesus to save Lazarus from death *if only* Jesus can get there before Lazarus dies. But Jesus delays two days after he gets word that Lazarus is dying. Why? If a friend needs something from us, don't we respond? Isn't that how we know who our friends are? Theologians speculate that Jesus waits so that God's glory can be revealed more fully – the power to raise not only from sickness but even from death. We cannot know why Jesus delays. What we do know is that Jesus is not anxious in the face of Lazarus' death. Jesus is sad when his friend dies but trusts God to act without constraint. And God does.

We are not privy to Jesus' state of mind as Lazarus' tomb is opened. What we do know is what Jesus says and does. Facing Lazarus' tomb, Jesus shows us that God's power to give life is without limit or boundary. There are no exceptions to God's power to give life. This is the first intimation that God's power to make alive will apply to all of humanity, not just the Messiah – people like Lazarus and like us – people who are dying and people long dead. What must it have been like for Mary and Martha to see their brother come out of the tomb? Their brother Lazarus – an ordinary man – is made alive. They must be starting to wonder whether one day, somehow, Jesus might bestow life beyond the grave on them too. Who is this man who has sat at their dinner table? *You are the Messiah*, Martha says. You are my friend and my Lord.

Incredibly, at the start of the next chapter of John, Lazarus is at the dinner table again with Jesus after being raised. Jesus' relationship with Lazarus continues. They are friends in life and death. Some artists have imagined Lazarus weeping as Jesus is taken down from the Cross. They portray Lazarus weeping over Jesus, with Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, Mary and Martha, and Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple. This is a beautiful imaginative narrative, oscillating between life and death: Lazarus is raised by Jesus, Lazarus eats again with Jesus in his own home, Lazarus owes Jesus his life, and Lazarus watches and grieves as Jesus is dying.

Lazarus himself will die again. This is why we should correctly speak of the *raising* of Lazarus not the resurrection of Lazarus. Resurrection is being raised to eternal life. Resurrection as Christians understand it is not possible until Jesus dies.

At the raising of Lazarus, Jesus is fearless, full of faith and strength. He is not anxious in the face of Lazarus' death or any sickness Jesus encounters during his ministry. But over the next 12 days, we will see Jesus sharing our full humanity as he approaches his own death. We grieve when a loved one dies and we say goodbye to them. When it is us facing death, we are saying goodbye to everything. Grief, loss, fear, resignation and acceptance intermingle. We will see Jesus in the Garden, praying *if this cup can pass from me...nevertheless not my will but your will be done...*² Jesus knows fear and dread in the face of his own

² Mt. 26:39; Lk. 22:42

death, just as we do. Sometimes we gloss over Jesus' human fear. We say it is because Jesus is bearing the weight of his divine calling that he cries out to God in this way. Yet if he is fully human, he must know human fear as well. God is incarnate in *both* Jesus' strength *and* human vulnerability, in Jesus' faith and in his courage when he is afraid. For what is courage for any of us but fear that has said its prayers?³

AMEN

³ *Courage is fear that has said its prayers* (original quotation variously attributed)

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