

The Raising of Lazarus

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 13 March 2005)

John 11:1-45

John's Gospel has a special word for the miracles of Jesus. It calls them signs. That means that the miracles of Jesus have two dimensions, and we only fully appreciate what's going on in them if we manage to glimpse both dimensions of the same events. The miracles have a dimension of what we might call everyday meaning, and this is obvious to everyone who reads the story. It was obvious to all who saw it happen. But the miracles also have a dimension of what we might call transcendent meaning, which emerges out of the everyday meaning. At level of everyday meaning the miracles tell of life-transforming events for individuals - enabling the blind to see, the cripple to walk, bringing a dead man back to life - but at the level of transcendent meaning they point to something world-transforming, the transformation of life into eternal life, the taking up of our everyday life into the life of God. And at that level they open up for us the meaning of the final events of the Gospel story to which they all point forward - those cosmically significant, world-transforming events of Jesus' death and resurrection. Because the miracle stories start within very human situations, the situations of dire but ordinary human need that we all find ourselves in from time to time, they help us towards a grasp of what we call salvation, that transformation of all life that includes the meeting of everyday human needs but also goes so much further, so much further beyond our everyday conceptions of life that we need all the help we can get to begin to understand what it entails.

So lets first read the story of the raising of Lazarus in its everyday dimension - and even at this level it is remarkable. It's a story of Jesus' love for his friends, the Bethany family for whom Jesus had a special affection. Jesus was human enough to have friends and to care about them. It's also a story of the sorrow that death brings to any family or group of friends. It's a story full of human emotion. And no one is more distressed than Jesus himself. It's because he loves his friends that he acts with divine power and authority to transform their situation. He brings Lazarus back to life.

The miracle is a stupendous one, and the story lays the sheer miraculousness of it on thick. People in those days knew that sometimes there could be mistakes about death. Someone might be to all appearances dead but revive. Not so Lazarus. Lazarus is unequivocally dead, dead for three whole days. There will be a stench in the tomb, they say. Jesus restores life to this thoroughly dead corpse, which staggers out of the tomb, still bound up in the grave clothes, visibly emerging, as it were, from death. And it staggered everyone else and us too. When I say that this is the everyday dimension of the story, I don't of course mean that it happens everyday. But it is to everyday life that Lazarus returns. It's the miracle that every bereaved family might wish, but it is no more than the restoration of life as it was before death destroyed it. Lazarus resuscitated is no less mortal than the rest of us.

There's more to the everyday dimension of the story. It is the most impressive of all Jesus' miracles to date and it has corresponding repercussions. All over the Jerusalem area people are impressed and excited, and the Jewish authorities are correspondingly

alarmed. It is this event that leads directly to Jesus' death, because it's when the high priest's council meets to decide what can be done about it that the fateful decision is taken to secure Jesus' death. So in a quite realistic sense it is Jesus' love for his friends that leads to his death.

But this is how the transcendent meaning of the story, what it *signifies*, in John's Gospel's language, takes up the everyday meaning and transcends it. Just as this is the climactic miracle within the sequence of historical events, the one that seals Jesus' fate, so it also the climactic miracle in that it most closely foreshadows the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, the miracle that tells us most about what those world-transforming events will mean. At the everyday level Jesus' love for his friends procures Lazarus's resurrection at the cost of his own death. He cannot raise Lazarus without setting in train the events that lead to his own death. In a real sense he dies so that Lazarus may escape death. And he does this because he loves Lazarus. But all this points to something much more: Jesus dies not just for Lazarus but for all of us. He goes to his death out of his love for all whom God loves. He does so in order to deliver from death the whole of God's dying creation. He disposes of death once and for all. We might think Lazarus's resuscitation hard to swallow - can even God do that? - but in the perspective of Jesus' resurrection it's nothing. It's a mere resuscitation, a return to mortal life, a temporary reprieve from death. Stupendous as it is it's function is to point to something inconceivably more and greater: the swallowing up of death in God's imperishably eternal life, the gift of a life that is not subject to death but far beyond death's reach.

So hard is that to grasp that Jesus in this story of Lazarus does not leave us to guess the greater significance of the miracle. He says it, outright, to Martha (v 25) - astonishing words - 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though he dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die.' That's not the miracle of resuscitation back into this mortal life - what happens to L. That's a life freed from death forever, life that defies death, life that defeats death - available because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, because he takes his friends with him through death into the resurrection life that is a sharing of the life of God.

There is so much in this story. I want to say a little more about what resurrection means here, but I want to do so by starting once again in the everyday dimension of the story and focusing on the emotions that swirl all around the events in this story. It's about as emotional a scene as you get anywhere in the Gospels. There's the grief of Martha and Mary, and this is the demonstrative grief of a middle eastern mourning. None of the restraint of a modern western funeral. This is wailing - you see it in television clips of Palestinian people mourning a death today. And all their friends and neighbours are there to console them - people they hardly know turn out for a mourning like this. They're still there, four days after the funeral, and the way they console is to demonstrate grief, audibly, visibly, just as the sisters are doing. When Jesus arrives in Bethany he walks into this cacophany of grief. Added to it is something more personal to him: the disappointment of the sisters, not anger but disappointment that he did not come sooner to save L from death. And then there are Jesus' own emotions. Nowhere in the Gospels is so much said about Jesus' own emotions. There's that single little, poignant sentence: Jesus wept (v 35). Amid all this weeping Jesus too weeps. Perhaps not just tears, perhaps a terrible wail of grief. And certainly visible emotion. Jesus, we're told, was moved with indignation and deeply distressed (v 33). There's a mixture of strong emotion there. 'Moved with indignation'

- 'seething with anger' brings out the force of that. And 'shuddering with distress': the Greek word is one of those onomatopoeic words that sound like what they mean - just like our 'shuddering' which indicates a visible trembling with emotion. Again, when Jesus reaches the tomb, again, we're told, he seethed with anger. Anger, surely, at death, at what death does to human life, at the destruction it deals out to God's creation. Jesus fully shares the grief of those who mourn their brother's death and, more than that, he shaken with anger that such a thing can happen to those he loves.

What does all that emotion, then, do for us we ponder the meaning of the story? It reminds us, if we need reminding, that death is the enemy of human life. We are drawn into all that emotion because we have all known it ourselves and we are brought us up against the unacceptable but stubborn fact of death. The hopelessness of death. The way death shadows even the life of the living. Death as the threat to life that threatens all the meaning we find in life. It's a very significant fact that very few human cultures have been able to live without some kind of hope for life beyond death. The secular modern west is exceptional, and perhaps not really as exceptional as it might seem from its public culture. An astonishing number of British people, for example, believe in reincarnation - and do so without believing anything else that the Indian religions teach. No God, but some hope for another life beyond death. Such people aside, how do really secular people cope with death? By hiding it away and putting it out of mind. (Compare the highly demonstrative grief of other cultures with the very private mourning most of us feel is all we're permitted.) Or by the old philosophy, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The affluent hedonism of our culture is a response to death. It's one of death's effects on life that it trivializes life: if this is all there is, we might as well get as much pleasure out of it for ourselves while we still have it. Consumerism is the lifestyle that accompanies despair in the face of death. If death is the end, it threatens all life with meaninglessness. All human cultures have known that.

So all that emotion in the Lazarus story brings us up against what death really is. To be truly human is not to be reconciled with death, but to protest against it, to recognize it as the destroyer of life that damages even the life of the living long before they are dead.

Into this tragic world, consigned to death, Jesus comes to deliver from death in the only that is possible: by sharing with us the eternal life of God. It's very important, I think, to realise that the hope Jesus gives has nothing to do with some kind of innate capacity of human beings to survive death. It's not about survival of death, but about reversal of death, abolition of death. It's not about the survival of some attenuated spiritual bit of us, but about the taking all that we are, the fully embodied people we are, into eternity. In resurrection people are no less bodily than Lazarus when he emerged from the tomb - but unlike L, their bodily life is no longer subject to death. It shares in the resurrection of Jesus who rose in his fully human, fully embodied reality on the first Easter day.

But finally, let's look again at Jesus' words to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though he dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die.' The eternal life Jesus gives is not just for the future, after death, but for the present. What does that mean? Well, just as death overshadows all of life, turns it into a life lived towards extinction, so the eternal life of Jesus defeats the power of death even within our present lives. The death we shall

die is robbed of all its power. The shadow it casts over life is dispelled. We gain the hope that defies death and the love that is stronger than death. Death is an enemy, but a defeated one. Jesus is the resurrection and the life.