

6th April 2014

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Roman 8:6-11

John 11: 1- 45

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

Once again this week the Old Testament and the Gospel readings provide us with dramatic narratives that echo each other; and both readings invite us to contemplate 'A New Creation'. Last Sunday the readings spoke of opening our eyes and seeing beyond the blindness of our everyday existence, and today's readings go even further, inviting us to realise a new creation and open ourselves to a new life and a newness of living.

Both the writer of Ezekiel and the writer of John's gospel provide us with a drama, an illustration in order to underline the life changing reality that they are both sharing.

And the process that they both illustrate is central to our continuing faith journey; for this is what contemporary tacticians would call an exit strategy, a means of leaving one's current situation. This is our way out, and our way through, the wilderness of Lent into the new creation of Easter.

Once again we will have to get past the misunderstandings and distortions that have been handed down by years of simplistic biblical literalism; so in order to more fully appreciate these narratives we might work backwards and question what we already 'know'.

Jesus has been elevated to a divine status, to a position that is 'worthy of worship', and he is not alone, this is a common cultural phenomenon:

The Roman Emperor Augustus referred to his relation to his deified adoptive father, Julius Caesar, as "son of a god".

'Son of God' Ablett rules his realm – *Gold Coast Bulletin*. Published 30 September 2010.

However Jesus is different, the elevation by the early disciples and by the formative early church was constructed primarily on two foundations, the nativity and the passion (the Easter narratives).

Jesus is the one who "overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers" according to the prayer book; the resurrection is pivotal in the Church's understanding (and elevation) of Jesus.

And so, we ask, what about Lazarus?

Today's gospel is so important for us in our appreciation and our appropriation of Easter; and that importance is very much part of the whole revelation of John's gospel.

The raising of Lazarus only occurs in John's gospel, had it been literally an earth shattering 'event' it would likely have been included by Matthew, Mark and Luke as well.

It is however the last and so the pinnacle of John's book of signs, the book, a portion of the gospel, provides seven signs that underline and illustrate the revelation of Christ: and it is helpful to name them signs rather than miracles:

The seven signs are:

1. *Changing water into wine* in John 2:1-11
2. *Healing the royal official's son* in Capernaum in John 4:46-54
3. *Healing the paralytic at Bethesda* in John 5:1-18
4. *Feeding the 5000* in John 6:5-14
5. *Jesus' walk on water* in John 6:16-24
6. *Healing the man born blind* in John 9:1-7
7. *Raising of Lazarus* in John 11:1-45

And they each illustrate, or reveal to us that which Christ reveals; today's narrative illustrates what is voiced in v25: "*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*"

For the initial audience familiar with the Hebrew tradition resurrection was associated with the end times and was seen as an event in the future that would be precede the final judgment.

John's account of the raising of Lazarus would have confronted his audience with a story of resurrection before the end times and very much located in ordinary time.

John is inviting a new understanding, and we have that same invitation today, an opportunity to contemplate what will be made real in the action of Christ in the passion of Easter.

The reality of resurrection, is a reality of new life, it is a new creation, a new appreciation of life that is found in the ordinary time of now.... And it is our pathway out of the wilderness.

John's gospel is amazingly rich in all that it reveals, the dramas it describes are not events they are very much dramas of revelation, and now, before Easter, we have an opportunity to see resurrection for ourselves.

The reality of resurrection is made even more evident in today's narrative when we consider who was there.

Following Easter we will read of Thomas, known affectionately in Christian circles as 'doubting Thomas', and we understand a **doubting Thomas** as a skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience.

But today we see that Thomas was there at the raising of Lazarus, and that changes his post-Easter significance in the whole drama of resurrection.

The writer of John's gospel very much wants us to 'know' the reality of resurrection, and wants us to engage this transformative process that will take us from the wilderness into a new creation.

So if this is our 'exit strategy', a movement out of the wilderness are there any indications to help us engage the same movement for ourselves?

The drama starts with Jesus in a safe place, away from Jerusalem on the other side of the Jordan, no longer threatened, no longer sought out by scribes and Pharisees; his ministry is valuable, successful and beneficial, recall the healing of the blind man from last week's gospel.

The activity of resurrection however takes place in Bethany, two miles from Jerusalem; in other words he moves safety into risk, from avoidance into confronting and from easy (healing the blind) into the difficult – raising the dead. And the doubt, the Thomas, who is with him embarks on the same journey as a real strength; *"Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him.""*

This is all so helpful for us at the end of Lent and before we go into the passion of Easter, however we should also take time to identify the focus of the story, Lazarus himself.

By identifying Lazarus with Mary and Martha, the writer is building on his audiences 'knowing'

Mary and Martha are two sides of the coin of faith, they represent the contemplative and the apostolic, the being and the doing sides of who we are.

In Lazarus the writer gives us another side to the same coin, that part of us that is doing nothing and of no note, just *"a certain man... of the village"....*

And it is to that part of ourselves that this gospel speaks.

Lazarus is:

The grieving widow lost without her partner
 The family lost in their million dollar mc mansion
 The grey nomad booking their third cruise to nowhere
 The parish priest binding a couple in holy matrimony unaware of divorce
 The voter who knows his tick in the box will change nothing
 The self-funded retiree watching the rise and fall of interest rates
 The gay teenager afraid to come out into a world of hate
 The refugee imprisoned, entombed, without trial
 The bored face in the old peoples home
 The blank face that is lit only by the TV screen.
 The couple who no longer hear each other for they can finish every sentence themselves
 The church that moves toward another Easter, unaware of its reality.

Lazarus is just *"a certain man... of the village"....* in other words You and Me!

"Jesus said ... "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

"Do you believe this?"