

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 2 April 2017 – Year A, Lent 5
Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

Unbind them and let them go

One of my favourite moments in the week is when I sit down with a cup of coffee to do the *Times* cryptic crossword on Saturday mornings. I'm usually in competition with one of my colleagues to see which of us completes it first; that is, if either of us can. It's very frustrating when you've got most of the answers and then get stuck on a clue because you don't begin to understand what it's getting at. You feel very stupid; though sometimes, if you leave it for a while, the answer suddenly comes to you and you kick yourself because it seems so obvious. I wouldn't go as far as to say that reading the Bible is like doing a cryptic crossword, but there are times in its more difficult passages when you need to be alert to the clues it is giving. The raising of Lazarus in John 11 is a case in point. It seems straightforward enough at a cursory glance, the last and greatest in a series of signs Jesus performs which demonstrate that he is the chosen one of God.

If you remember my favourite quotation from Gregory the Great, that's how lambs read, wading safely in the shallows of Scripture. But I am a hopeless elephant and love swimming through deeper currents to see what they reveal. A modern Gregory might compare these two kinds of reading the Bible to the snorkeller who explores the first foot or two beneath the waves and the deep-sea diver looking for strange new creatures in the hidden depths. I haven't found any of those. But to get beneath the surface of the words of John's Gospel you have to grasp its overall structure, the patterns of its narrative and the symbolism of its language. The fact that John places the raising of Lazarus immediately before the last week in the life of Jesus is no accident. And he warns us against taking too literal an approach: when Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus has 'fallen asleep' and he is going to awaken him you can almost hear them saying 'So what? Everyone sleeps and then wakes up!'

One of our problems is that we read extracts and forget the larger picture; another is that we read too fast, too superficially. For John is careful to put all kinds of clues into the story, and though they are not exactly cryptic, they do need some attention.

Here are a few of them. He deliberately connects the story with what has gone before and what comes after. Just before Lazarus is raised some of the bystanders mention the healing of the man born blind, about which Laurence spoke so memorably last week: ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’ He also tells us that ‘Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair’, as if this had already happened, whereas it does not take place until the beginning of the next chapter. Why have we heard nothing about Lazarus before, when we are told that Jesus loved him? Why does Jesus delay when he hears of his friend’s illness? What does he mean that he was glad he wasn’t there when Lazarus died, so that the disciples can believe? And when he speaks of the illness of Lazarus as not leading to death – which it does – but for God’s glory, so that the Son may be glorified through it? These are just some of the questions that came into my mind, and I began to dive.

Then an unexpected ray of light shone; like William Cowper’s: ‘Sometimes a light surprises the Christian’, in this case while he reads. I’ve been ploughing for many months through a book that had lain unread on my shelves for decades, a great rag-bag of a work entitled *The City of God*, by St Augustine, the most influential Western theologian of the first few Christian centuries. I don’t especially recommend it for bedside reading. You probably know him from his famous prayer ‘Grant me chastity, but not yet’, when he was on the verge of becoming a Christian but still attached to his partner and their young son. Or from that other prayer based on a passage from his spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*, and found on the inside front cover of our hymn books: ‘Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you’. The other night, soon after I realized that I had to preach this Sunday, I found myself on pages 905 and 906, where the author is discussing the two resurrections. Like me, you probably forgot most of what you read, but when it comes to John’s Gospel you need to remember what’s gone before, and I am grateful to St Augustine for reminding me. ‘Very truly, I tell you’, Jesus says, but in chapter 5, long before the raising of Lazarus, ‘the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God, and those who hear will live [...] for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out’ (5.25. 29). He speaks those words

just after healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda. They seem out of place there, but they fit the raising of Lazarus like a glove. It's what literary types call a kind of dramatic irony, pointing to something yet to come.

Augustine also tells us that when the Bible speaks of resurrection it means two different but connected things. The first resurrection happens in this life, when we turn aside from harmful and selfish forms of living and open ourselves out to receive the grace and love of God. John characteristically uses the language of rebirth to speak of this, both in his prologue and in his conversation with Nicodemus by night. The second resurrection comes at the end of time, at the Last Judgement, and, Augustine says, 'anyone who does not wish to be condemned in the second resurrection must rise up in the first' (xx.7). Whatever you think of that, he is clear that there is continuity between the life we live here and the life to come. What Augustine says is absolutely consistent with St John's understanding of eternal life. Eternal life begins in the here and now, the moment we see the glory of Christ and receive his grace and truth. All our life that is lived, as Paul puts it, 'in Christ', already belongs to the eternal and is beyond the reach of bodily death. It's in the exchange between Jesus and Martha that the point is most vividly made. Jesus tells her that her dead brother will rise again. She replies like a true believer, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day'. But Jesus takes us beyond doctrinal belief, for he doesn't reply 'You've passed!' but 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live'. In other words, resurrection is not an idea which we are supposed to accept; it is experienced first and foremost in a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ – who, ironically, is himself about to be handed over to death. Yet against every expectation the crucified Lord will pass through locked doors to come to his fearful disciples, then, as now. Locked doors are a powerful metaphor for the ways in which we try to protect ourselves against whatever makes us afraid. That is precisely when the risen Lord comes to us, then, as now, with his words of resurrection: 'Peace be with you'. Not the peace which builds barriers to shut out the risks of living in the world as it is, but the gift of a much deeper, transforming peace which calls us to live out the love of God as shown to us in Christ, whatever the cost may be.

Running through John's gospel, and found twice in this passage, is a word which brings all these ideas together. That word is 'glory'. It's not one we use much these days: we talk about a glorious view when the beauty of nature takes our breath away, but we also use it ironically, as in 'it's just a glorified B&B', of some pretentious boutique hotel. But it has an altogether more far-reaching meaning in John. Do you remember when it first appears, way back at the start: 'And we behold his glory, full of grace and truth'? That's what all his miracles, or signs as John prefers to call them, point to. When Jesus turns the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, John tell us that this was the first of the signs by which he revealed his glory. In each of these he transforms the situation in which people find themselves: thirsty, crippled, blind, dead. The glory of Jesus is, quite simply, the empowering love of God manifest in the Son. To see his glory is to witness him at work in human life, but it doesn't stop there: as Jesus he tells his disciples on the night before his death the Father is glorified by the fruits they will bear. Recognizing who Jesus is, what he has come to do, carrying out his commandments – all these constitute his glory. But above all else, in the sharpest paradox, it shines most brightly in his death. When Judas leaves the Last Supper to betray him, John adds three simple words, 'It was night'. Literally, yes; but night represents the darkest hour of all, when the power of evil working through human agencies will claim Jesus as its victim. And the very next thing that we read is 'When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him'. Some juxtaposition: betrayal, night, the imminence of Gethsemane and Calvary; and 'Now', the time when the glory of Jesus and the glory of God are revealed. John invites us to a profounder level of reading in moments like this: it was night; now the Son of Man has been glorified.

So the raising of Lazarus is a sign of this first resurrection, the rebirth out of darkness into light, out of the old life and into the new; and the beginning of the second resurrection, into the eternal life of God's kingdom. Maybe Lazarus is never mentioned beforehand because he stands for anyone who is befriended and loved by Jesus; anyone who can testify that in one way or another Jesus has brought them to life. Why, then does he wait for two days before he goes to his friend; by which time it is too late. May that not be, in part, a parable of prayer? Our impatience leads us to

suppose that if a prayer isn't answered in the way we expect and at the time we dictate then it won't be answered at all. The lesson of this story is that prayer has its own time. There may be silence, things may get worse; but the answer comes in its own way and when it is most needed.

For all the emphasis on resurrection and glory, this is a very human story. Last week Laurence spoke of the central place of the senses in the story of the man born blind, and here they are again: smell, in the perfume Mary will pour on Jesus and in the stench Martha fears when the tomb is opened; sound, in the words of Jesus: 'Lazarus, come forth!'; touch, in the command to unbind him of his grave clothes. But above all it gives full place to human emotion. I'm not sure when the stiff upper lip of the British was invented, but I doubt it predates the Victorians. It certainly isn't biblical. Jesus loves Lazarus and his sisters, and when Mary appears in tears before him, he is 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved'. This is where the famous shortest verse in the Bible makes its appearance: 'Jesus wept'; weeps for his lost friend, as Mary and Martha weep for their lost brother. Once again, John insists that the life of faith belongs to our bodies, our senses, our feelings. When it becomes a personal encounter instead of a test of abstract ideas or rules, then you stand before the open tomb and hear those words of resurrection which Jesus speaks to anyone who is locked away without hope: 'Lazarus, come forth!' And those other words which he spoke then and speaks to us now, a command but also an invitation to share in his glory by reaching out to the lost and the despairing: 'Unbind them, and let them go!'