

## **Lent 5 (02.04.17) The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45)**

Through the written word and the spoken word, may we know your living word, Jesus Christ our Saviour

When I was a young lad, mum had a saying that used to leave me a little confused. "Eh, our Wills," she'd say, "you look like death warmed up." Not the best piece of news to hear and usually given, of course, when I was rather poorly. Not until later, when I experienced the cold of death on my dad's body, did I realise what an accurate and apt saying it was.

I've been a little poorly this week (not looking quite like death warmed up) and while resting looked with fascination at all the famous paintings on the Raising of Lazarus - Rembrandt, Sebastian del Piombo, Giotto, Van Gogh and my favourite Caravaggio. Earlier this year Avril and I were in Stratford to see a RSC production of "The Seven Acts of Mercy" by Andres Lustgarten. The title of the play is the name of one of Caravaggio's paintings and

the play centred around the seventeenth century Italian artist. The play has been described as "violently compassionate". It certainly begins in a violent manner. Caravaggio is up a ladder daubing paint on a canvas in the dark interior of a church. On the floor is a body. Caravaggio descends the ladder, kicks the body violently and swears at it. It is only then you realise the body is dead - it's a corpse, which Caravaggio was using for a life, or rather, death study.

I tell this story because some art historians believe that Caravaggio had a body exhumed so he could paint Lazarus accurately. Caravaggio was a much disturbed, violent man, but his art is full of action, energy, humanity and compassion. The theology in his painting of the Raising of Lazarus is amazing. The use of light was one of his many artistic skills and is resplendent on Lazarus' body:

To me, he still looks dead: Lazarus, fallen,  
limbs rigid like planks of broken balsa wood,  
resting cold, like a dead man,

in the hold of another's arms, head bent back,  
as if unable to support itself, or maybe  
just dead, with Jesus still pointing,  
cautiously, as if to say, *Okay guys: let's try this again,*

These are the words of Matthew Olzman at the beginning of his poem on the Raising of Lazarus. I think he's saying "Lazarus looks like death warmed up". Certainly in Caravaggio's painting he translates "Come forth" in a radical manner. Lazarus is naked and stiff, yet alive, indeed between life and death. Yet, look more closely. One arm is pointing upwards towards Jesus and the light, while the hand of the other arm points towards the ground and a skull. Lazarus' whole body is being carried as though he is nailed to the cross - crucified, even his feet are crossed at the ankles. The onlookers are reminiscent of mourners beneath the cross, while his head is cradled in the arms of his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Caravaggio is making clear that this beautiful story is preparing us for Jesus' own death and resurrection. The lower hand points the way to the

darkness of Good Friday; the upper hand to Jesus and the shining light of that first Easter morning. Brilliant!

The Raising of Lazarus appears only in John and is the seventh and most important sign in this gospel. It takes place just two miles outside Jerusalem on the other side of the Kidron valley on the Mount of Olives in a small place called Bethany. When Jesus first hears of his good friend's illness he is the other side of the Jordan, where John the Baptist preached his gospel of repentance. Not only does he stay on there for another two days, Jesus doesn't even tell his disciples. Why the delay? What was the purpose?

Jesus knew that if he returned to Judae he would certainly be arrested and, most likely put to death. Indeed the disciples remind him that the last time he was there, some Jews were trying to stone him. When he eventually suggests going, Thomas also reflects the danger of the situation by saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." During those two days Jesus would not only be praying for his friend, Lazarus, but also for wisdom and

guidance as to his own plans and movement. He knows that Lazarus will die, that he will wake him so that his glory will be revealed. There is no revealing in John's gospel of Jesus' glory in the Transfiguration, as this story is omitted. The Raising of Lazarus from the dead is John's equivalent to the Transfiguration. Thus a two day delay would ensure the truth of Jesus' words, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it,"

And just as God's glory is revealed in Lazarus' resurrection, so is his humanity. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. In those days the belief was that the soul lingered in the body for only three days, so by the fourth the body was definitively dead. He is met by the impetuous Martha and the weeping Mary. When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he himself began to weep, being "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." This is not just about Jesus being human, it shows how God can cry with the world's crying. Here is the man of sorrows, acquainted with our pain and grief,

sharing and bearing it to the point of tears, meeting us where we are.

In many parts of the world, people still mourn the dead in much the same way that they did in Jesus' time.

Procession, carrying the coffin down the streets to the place of burial or cremation with cries and wails. Wild, sad music, a strong process of grief, where grief is communicated one to another. In other cultures, such as the secularised world of the modern west, mourning and funerals are more circumspect, where feelings and emotions can lie hidden and become more difficult to express.

This wonderful story reveals Christ's divinity and his humanity. It challenges our thoughts on death and dying. It prepares us for his Passion and resurrection. It invites us to say to Jesus, "Come and see" as we lead him, all tears, to the place of our deepest grief and sorrow. Yet most of all it questions our hope in the resurrection and our faith in Jesus Christ:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.  
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,  
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.  
Do you believe this?"