

VPBC Sermon 28th May 2017

The Jesus we never knew.

Jesus and miracle. The Sign of Lazarus and new life

John 11:17- 45

We are still in the season of Easter as we move towards the coming of the promised Holy Spirit in a week's time on the 4th June - one of the great festivals of the Christian church. On Thursday of last week was the day marked as the Ascension on May 25th in the Christian calendar. We do not tend to mark or note this very much but it remains an important step towards the events of that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem at nine o'clock in the morning when the Holy Spirit came with wind, fire and language. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on everyone, so that men and women would proclaim God's message, the young envisioned, the old have dreams and inspiration rather than weary cynicism and a desire for comfort and security. Where God would continue then, and now, to work miracles through them and us. Paul reminds us in Colossians that

"Jesus is the visible likeness of t the invisible God, that God created the whole universe through him and for him. Jesus existed before all things and in union with him all things have their proper place. He is the head of the body, the church, he is the source of the body's life. He is the first born Son who was raised from death in order that he alone might have the first place in all things and that through the Son then God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through the Son's death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven."

(Colossians 1 :15ff)

The Ascension, where Jesus returns to his Father in heaven, is a step that is towards bringing the whole universe back to himself. This incident, recorded alone by John, of Lazarus - whose Old Testament name is otherwise known as Eliezer "God has helped" - is as a sign of that which is coming. A fulfilling and a filling full of God's intention that in and through Jesus to reconcile all things. Yet it was not without cost. For John in this final seventh sign, and the greatest of the signs, is to show that Jesus is who he says he was. It is to invite saving faith. The kind of believing faith that calls out for the Lord's help. Yet it is this miracle that pushes the authorities over the edge and causes them to decide, as a political decision, to have Jesus killed.

In this short series of Jesus and the Spirit and Jesus and miracle it is within our year's theme of the "Jesus we never knew" and we will **think briefly about what was this sign intended to point towards.**

John frames the narrative back in verse 4 *"the final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus, this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory."* In concentrating on the verses 17 to 45 I seek to underline the point that Jane made last week. Miracles are not magic. They are signs pointing to God and that the resurrection is the most amazing miracle of all.



It is not surprising therefore that this sign has been a part of Christian art and worship for a very long time. From the 3rd century painting discovered in the city of Rome's world of the dead. The necropolis of the catacombs, a warren of underground tunnels, where Christians met and worshipped in grave yards as places of refuge.



To the sophisticated mosaics of the sixth century, here in Ravenna in Italy, now above ground and building beautiful churches three hundred years later.

Yet in our own day this question of death, how final and irreversible it seems, still hangs with us and the questions that lie for us today about the nature of the resurrection and its importance, the significance for who we are and what we believe and finally what we do with that belief matters just as much.

In a world still, as then, when people get sick and die. Where there is violence, bloodshed and killing. Where people grieve and mourn and shed tears and are deeply moved and hurt in the wreckage that death brings. As Manchester mourns its twenty-two dead and the Egyptian families mourn the death of twenty-eight murdered on a highway in Egypt on a bus from the Coptic Christian community who live under threat of death every day. It is a microcosm of what happens on our planet each day. The unreported atrocities and sadness. The quiet ending of life whether full of years and at peace, or taken away before their time. The sign of Lazarus is a sign to them and for us to consider. Of God, who in the midst of the reality of these things in which he shared and endured, is a God of love who is reconciling all things through Jesus bodily death and resurrection and making peace. This sign speaks literally into the gift of life that is coming. It is not the same as resurrection life that bursts out of another rock cave tomb, two or so miles away in a garden in Jerusalem in just under a few weeks later but it points toward it. It also shows that Jesus gives life only by giving his life. The raising of

Lazarus leads directly to the death of Jesus. The abundant life that he gives is life through death, his own death on the cross. It was what the disciples feared would happen by returning into Judea by coming to Bethany given the hostility of the Jewish authorities. Jesus did what his Father asked of him, it was not fear that drove him, but love that constrained him.

There were other instances reported of Jesus raising the dead recorded in other gospels. The widows son of Nain (Luke 7;11ff) and the daughter of Jairus - a Jewish official in the synagogue (Luke 8: 40-56, Mark 5;21-43).

Indeed, there may have been other unreported incidents not included in any gospel. John sends messengers for reassurance that Jesus is the Messiah he had been pointing to and telling others about. Jesus replies (Luke 7;22) *“Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard, the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me”*

At the heart of this passage in John is verse 39

“take the stone away.”

John has taken great care to underlie the reality of Lazarus death. Shortly after the messengers left to find Jesus and let him know he was ill, and before they had caught up with Jesus and his disciples, he had died. Jesus delaying two days at one level was immaterial. By the time he got to Bethany Lazarus had been in the ground four days. They had missed the funeral. Martha, ever practical, protests. In the heat, the body is already decomposing. Yet Jesus words to her are *“Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believed?”* What matters to Jesus at this moment was not power or spectacle visited in a miracle this astonishing but the glory of God was the one important thing. The real meaning of what he would do was only accessible by faith. All there, believing or not, would see a miracle but only believers would see its real significance - the glory. On resurrection Sunday those who had a ring side seat were the guards. They saw what happened and experienced it. It did not lead to faith but a conspiracy of silence and money paid and received for lies, distortion and deception. As Jesus remarked at the end of one of his parables (the only one where he uses a name, that of Lazarus) with the punch line from Abraham - *“ if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.”* (Luke 16;31).

As the stone was removed by the onlookers Jesus prayed. John consistently depicts Jesus as dependent on the Father and interested in His glory. He is not like the ordinary popular wonder workers who sought to magnify themselves. Jesus is dependent on the Father. He prays aloud for the crowds his thanksgiving “I thank you Father that you listen to me. I know that you always listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people

here so that they will believe that you sent me.” Faith has content. That content is the mission of God’s Son. That he is indeed God’s “Sent One.” The character of which John has already written about “For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its Saviour” (John 3:17).

So, Jesus calls out to a dead man in a loud voice without adornment. Unlike wizards who mutter incantations and spells that Isaiah describes as the popularist approach from fortune tellers and mediums who “chirp and mutter. “People who ask for messages from the spirits and consult the dead on-behalf of the living (Is 8;19). Lazarus emerges, wrapped in grave clothes. Jesus tells them to unwrap him and to “let him go.” Yet death is deferred, not yet defeated. Lazarus, like the widow’s son and Jairus’s daughter who were brought back to life for a season but would on another day face death again. Yet it points to the coming reality of life swallowing up death. Of a hinge in history, not just human history, but creation’s whole story itself.

Recently archaeologists surveying the Crossrail site at Liverpool Street station uncovered the existence of a road that was suspected but never confirmed. It is the Roman road round the walls of Londinium to bypass traffic jams in the clogged-up centre. It is well constructed and wider than our present day dual carriageways. Britain’s first full length 67-mile motorway was opened in 1959; the M1. The first motorway was the 8 mile Preston by pass. The fuss they made over the motorway you would have thought the British invented it but the Germans had over 2,000 miles of motorway in 1939, twenty years before, and even Poland had 81 miles and Denmark 75 miles. Not just the Romans 2,000 years previously were building big roads. But to enjoy this new life on the road, without speeding restrictions, **needed new signage** able to be read at speed. **A sign fit for the times to provide a road map for a new life on the road.** Margret Calvert and Jock Kinneir did just that producing ground breaking, creative, and effective signs we see whizzing past our windscreens today. These have become a role model for modern signage all over the world. A British design success at least. The sign of Lazarus was a fit for purpose sign for a new life. A helpful guide to the new way of living that God was opening up.



Jean Vanier tells us that the word for Lazarus sickness was “asthenes” – “without strength”, feeble, insignificant- one today we may say was disabled. It was a family- with Martha

and Mary- that Jesus shared mutuality and friendship. Lazarus is present but he never speaks. Is never described but he seems to be at the centre of his family with his two unmarried sisters. A bit of a nobody, but that was somebody to Jesus. **Jesus wept.** He shuddered in his spirit and was agitated – his heart was touched and he was deeply moved. In front of the remaining family he knows that if he does respond to their need it will condemn him to death. The sisters would have been amazed and over joyed with Lazarus being unwound from his bandages and could never have imagined that “he loved us like that.” **Yet the pain Jesus confronts is that while some are brought to faith by miracles, others harden their hearts.** They do not want to see. They cannot believe Jesus is really from God. Yet although this results in division **some now have faith, which was based on miracles. It is not the highest faith but it is better than no faith at all.** They believed on him – they put their genuine trust in him.

Yet are there still parts of us that are dead? Caught up in a culture of death, more or less hidden in our conscious self in shadow? Where we judge and push people down, wanting to show that we are better than they are? We refuse to listen to those who are different and so we hurt them. **Jesus wants us to rise up and become fully alive in order to give life. The resurrection is a process that begins every morning, every night, every day. We are called on a journey of resurrection to do the work of God to bring love into our families, our communities and our world.**

Easter makes Jesus dangerous. We have to listen to Jesus extravagant claims like “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*” (John 11:25,26).

Yancey quoting *Frederick Breuchner* notes that because of the resurrection “*we can never nail him down, not even if the nails we use are real and the thing we nail him to is a cross.*”

Easter and the miracle of the resurrection puts the life of Jesus in a whole new light. Yet there would also be terrible consequences for those who followed, who believed in his name. Betrayal. Suffering. Yet it was for our good he departed both to the cross, the resurrection and then the Ascension. Not least as the helper would send another helper, an Advocate, a Paraclete, one who comes along side – the Holy Spirit (who we have been thinking about these last few weeks) **but also that he planned to depart in order for them and us to carry on his work in other bodies. Their bodies. Our bodies. The body of Christ.** The church is where God lives, bringing to all healing, grace, the good news of God’s love. That is the theory. Practice can be another thing.

By returning to heaven Jesus took the risk of being forgotten. That is the modern question. “Where is God now?” in the light of modern horrors and a cracked, wounded, broken world and where wealth and want sit side by side.

One of the last parables that Jesus told was the parable of the sheep and the goats (found in *Matthew 25:31 to 46*). **God has not absconded rather he has taken on a disguise.** The most unlikely disguise of the stranger, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the disabled. *“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the last of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40).* As Yancey observes. *“If we cannot detect God’s presence in the world, it may be that we have been looking in the wrong places.”*

Yet there is a problem. *Bruechner* writing on the church at Corinth agrees that they may have indeed been Christ’s eyes, ears, hands but the way they carried on would only leave Christ bloodshot, deaf and all thumbs. **Why can the body of Christ so faintly resemble him?** God is utterly realistic as to what goes on in our churches, as the first few chapters of Revelation illustrate. Yet God loves us. *We have this treasure in earthen vessels.* Furthermore, Jesus takes full responsibility for the different parts of his body. *“You did not choose me but I chose you.” (John 15:16)* Never did the disciples disappoint him more than on the night of his betrayal. Yet we read before he took the slaves role they were all unwilling to adopt to wash feet *“Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and to go to the Father. He always loved those in the world who were his and he loved them to the very end.” (John 13:2).* While for this Corinthian church Paul wrote (*2 Cor 13:2*) *“yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots”* as we thought earlier, he goes on to write *“in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not us.”*

Look around you. You want to see a miracle? You are a miracle. All who seek to follow Jesus. A miracle of gift and grace, embodied for service to Jesus in this world. The sign of Lazarus is still the sign to us of God who brings new life. God’s new life of resurrection, grace, redemption embodied in us. Of God making peace bringing the whole universe back to himself. We are a part of that, we are party to that.

Just a few questions to think about as we end.

What is it about the resurrection that makes a difference in our day to day rather than just at the end of the day?

If we too are a sign to be read what is it about us that helps point the way not to ourselves but to God?