

Human Life - Eternal life

(Cathedral Sermon for Lent 5 - 29/3/20 – John 11:1-45 by Rev'd Canon David Head)

Today's Gospel story of the raising of Lazarus is a strange unsettling story of a strange unsettling miracle. An urgent message is sent to Jesus: "Lazarus whom you love is seriously ill, even unto death" Many of us have no doubt had such a message about one of our own beloved family members or one of our dear friends that have suddenly become seriously ill or who have died when we are some considerable distance away from them. We know the sense of helplessness and anguish we feel in such circumstances. Here, the two desperate frightened sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, send this urgent message to Jesus expecting no doubt that Jesus would immediately drop everything and hurry down to them post haste. It will in reality still take some considerable time for Jesus to get there as there are no cars or public transport. The sisters knew and had seen that Jesus was a renowned healer and miracle worker. He was their dear friend and, we are told, he loved Lazarus. A very unsettling part of this whole narrative is that we are surprised to hear that Jesus doesn't just drop everything! In fact, the passage says Jesus does wait two days before he goes back. Jesus is not always predictable. This seems to be a very strange thing for Jesus to do. Why did he do this? John's Gospel doesn't tell us. The Gospel doesn't state that Jesus was attending something important up North, like say a convention of healers, nor, that he was "on a holiday break", nor that he was just too busy with other things. The passage simply says that Jesus didn't immediately come. Jesus declared instead that this illness was not going to lead to Lazarus' final death, but would instead result in glorifying God. Therefore, he stayed on two more days! If you are alert, you may have noticed the strong symbolic coincidence of timing in this Jesus story. Lazarus does apparently immediately die and he has been dead four days before Jesus gets down to Bethany to do his healing and miraculous work. So, it was probably on the third day after Jesus left where he was that this event occurred. The strange numerical coincidence is of course that Jesus himself will soon die too and, like Lazarus, he will miraculously be raised on the third day. Perhaps this story of Lazarus is more about Jesus' coming victory over death than about Lazarus himself, and hence Jesus' earlier remark that God will be glorified through Lazarus' illness and death. By the time Jesus does get back to Bethany, the funeral is all over. Martha, the sister of Lazarus, comes out to tell Jesus he's too late. There is no point in his presence and power now that Lazarus is dead and buried! If only Jesus had come straight away then things might have been different. Mary too then comes to Jesus and says "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." Strangely, it is now that we are told that Jesus weeps. This reaction is perhaps both to the reality that Lazarus had died, but also, at their seeming unbelief in God's power. Jesus goes to the tomb. He commands that the stone be rolled away. But there is some resistance, as they all say that by now there will be a stink of decaying flesh. Jesus again commands them to remove the stone and he cries out in a loud voice: "Lazarus come out!" Rather macabrely, this wrapped and shrouded dead man shuffles out to

everyone's profound shock and amazement. Jesus further commands: "Unbind him and let him go" This seems to be both a command to those who would physically unbind him, and perhaps it is also a command to death itself to unbind him and let him go. Rather strangely there is no further mention of Lazarus in John's Gospel, nor is he ever mentioned again in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet this was such a profound sign of Jesus power over death! Lazarus, we are told, was one of Jesus' closest friends, and that indeed Jesus loved him. Jesus had often stayed in his home with his sisters Martha and Mary who were also dear and loved friends of Jesus. Now, Jesus had raised Lazarus from death in this most extraordinary of miracles. Yet this special important man disappears from the story. Was Lazarus present, with his sisters Mary and Martha, at the crucifixion and death of Jesus? Was Lazarus present in the group of believers in the Resurrection and Pentecost experience? Perhaps Lazarus was just a quiet unassuming follower of Jesus and not the outgoing evangelistic type. Perhaps Lazarus did actually die again fairly early in the life of the church and so was not significant in the expansion story of the Christian Church.

In the face of Lazarus' death, we perhaps noted that Jesus proclaims to Martha not that he has come to raise her dead brother to life again, but that "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Martha do you believe this?" This is an extraordinary claim to make and especially to a woman in deep grief at the death of her beloved brother. However, Martha replies to Jesus in a strong and powerful way: "Yes Lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." It is strange that she says 'The one coming into the world' as if Jesus is not yet actually here before her. It was almost as if she had a deep premonition that Jesus still had to come in the power of his own future resurrection.

In the Gospel of John, eternal life is not some supernatural place that we are transported to after death. Instead, eternal life is already here and now. Of course, to make proper sense of the word eternal, ie forever, then it actually must also mean here and now. If we, in Christ, inherit eternal life, then it is both now and forever. So, eternal life has to happen at that point when we encounter Jesus Christ in our hearts and souls. In Jesus Christ, God becomes human for us, the dividing barrier between heaven and earth has been breached. Eternal life has become accessible and real for us all now. So then death in a very real ultimate sense has no more dominion over us. The boundaries between today and eternity, between heaven and earth, between life and death have become much more porous. In the midst of life there is death and in the midst of death there is life, because Jesus is the Lord of Life. This whole strange episode with Lazarus occurs when Jesus is on his final fatal journey to Jerusalem. He is literally on his way to his own death. But Jesus will not let this confrontation with the forces of evil and death constrain his direction and his own journey from life to death to new life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' death is spoken of as his 'hour of glory'. In Jesus' strange counter-cultural, even sometimes "upsidedown" way of looking at things, death and glory are

indissolubly linked. Jesus understands that each one of us, in human terms, is suffering from a mortal disease called life. This incontrovertible fact comes to us all, and it is a very forceful reality in the world today as we cope with the COVID 19 virus spreading so vigorously worldwide. But in Jesus' understanding, death is not the worst thing that faces us, because death is a mere process of moving from this life to a new life as we journey from the now and into the ongoing forever of eternal life. Jesus also knows that many of us are bound up in other cages of death before we actually physically die. We are bound up in doubts, stresses and dysfunctional ways of being. We are bound up in angers and hatreds and inability to forgive. Indeed, perhaps Jesus stayed on where he was those two more days in order to tell us that death is not the most awful and decisive factor in our lives. The most decisive factor in our lives is how we now live our lives productively, caringly and lovingly while we have life. And, whether we accept eternal life as a reality in the here and now so that this reality does change our whole outlook on the way we live and the way we approach death. There is no way we can find a detour around death. Even Lazarus whom Jesus raised from death had to eventually die again. For most of us, there is no way we can avoid illness or the sad incapacities and frailties of old age. But, what we can do is not to let these human uncertainties and disabilities overwhelm our ongoing life journey and so diminish the continuing meaningful significance of our lives. In our world of earthquakes and floods, of bushfires and cyclones, of violence of many sorts, and of the insidious spread of Covid19, death is ever present, but Jesus is powerfully there too. Death, our final and often greatest human fear, is encountered and defeated in the resurrection power of Christ. Whenever we allow Jesus to enter with us into our dark and unsettled places of doubt and fear, then eternal life is already present breaking open the future of hope and new life.