

Sermon Lent 5 Year A 2023

The first tenet of belief that Christians lay claim to is that God is the God of life. *I believe in One God, creator of heaven and earth* we say every Sunday in the Creed. Out of nothing God brings into being all that is: *all things visible and invisible*. In this we affirm that *we* do not bring into being the wonders of creation. And we affirm that this world with all its beauty, diversity and wonder is not here by accident! We want to say that the universe does not unfold simply by some arbitrary game of chance. God intentionally and purposefully calls creation into existence. Life is the concern of our God. God is known in life. God reveals Godself in life. God is *for* life. Scripture is bookended with the Christian vision of life: the Genesis account of creation at one end, and at the other, the Book of Revelation with its vision of hope and glory of eternal life, the life won for us the Resurrection of Jesus.

As we are now only a week away from celebrating the chief mysteries of the Church's faith in Holy Week, we find the shadow of the cross looms large. How marvellous, then, that we have placed before us today this story of the raising of Lazarus. In this perhaps the most dramatic and touching of all the stories of Jesus (at least in John's Gospel), we *anticipate* God's triumph of life over death. While other Gospels report Jesus raising someone who has only recently died, the gospel writer John deliberately wants Jesus to be away for some time after the death of Lazarus. It emphasizes the point John seeks to make. It stresses his main concern here: *Jesus is the life of the world*. And so, Jesus arrives when death had taken place several days before; the tomb is sealed; the decay and stench of death is well underway.

That Jesus is able to bring Lazarus back to the land of the living in these *extreme* circumstances shows that he holds all life in his hands, that, like the Father, *he* is the Lord of life, and that his power reaches even into the tomb. The tomb is not a barrier for him. Jesus' words bring life. Jesus' command, *Lazarus come out* is heard! Jesus calls to Lazarus, and Lazarus steps out! But before Lazarus can re-enter the world he has been called back to, he must leave the cords that bind him in the land of the dead. He must shed his grave clothes. And so Jesus also commands, *Unbind him. Set him free!*

For many of us, the hope of eternal life - and of our sharing in Christ's resurrection - can remain something terribly abstract. For many of us, we imagine that sharing in Christ's resurrection is something that applies only *after* this present life. But Christian faith is much more than this. It requires us to live – *here and now* – as people who have *already* been raised to new life. Yes, we place an ultimate hope in what is to come. But that has direct implications for how we live now. We do not simply believe eternal life to be true. We allow that belief to shape our lives. If we affirm that God is for life, and if we share in that life, then it is not good enough to say that that life will be realised at some remote point down the track. And if we take eternal life seriously, then we will take all that *opposes* life here and now seriously. In other words, we cannot wait until eternity to live God's life. We live God's life now!

Now, while our faith calls us to live out our faith, including our faith in the resurrection, we recognise that there is much that opposes life, that keeps us bound in our grave clothes and in the darkness of our tombs. So much of our lives - and so much of our world - are trapped in a pattern of attitudes that deny the resurrection; patterns that deny God's call to life. Importantly the Gospel today highlights some of the main ways we deny the reach of God's call to life.

First, attitudes of despair in the face of human suffering deny God's call to life. *It will make no difference....there is nothing that can be done...it is all too late.* We have all heard these cries of despair. Perhaps we have said them ourselves. We can despair in the face of suffering. We can also despair when things simply change, or move beyond our control. Few things are more tragic in the life of the church than the mood of despair. Churches who complain – well despair really – *that there are so few young people, that no one seems to take notice of us any more, that we have lost our place of privilege, that our days are numbered, that there is nothing more to be done.* This view has no place in the life of the church! Such an attitude shows we do not really believe, let alone trust, the power of the Gospel. We must constantly remind ourselves that it is God's church and God is in control. God visits us in our hardship and suffering. God can radically turn a situation around! And God can call to life even from the stench of the tomb.

The second attitude which denies God's call to life is one which says, 'it's all too much bother'. When faced with hardship or falsehood or discrimination, we might recoil and say it's all too disconcerting, too uncomfortable., and that nothing we do will change things. Yes, there will always be difficulties – in our personal lives, in our life as a church. There will always be troubles and obstacles such as we hear in the Gospel: *there will now be a odour!* But until we confront these difficulties they will only grow. The smell will only grow worse! Now, there is no guarantee that in confronting our difficulties we will overcome them. The heart of our faith is the cross. But in confronting our difficulties we look forward to the final victory of Christ. And we will show ourselves to be people of hope, a people not fearful of engaging with all the ickiness of life, but willing to tackle it all head-on. If Christians are to have any credibility, then we need not only to be people of hope but also *people of courage*.

The third attitude which denies God's call to life is that of fatalism: the assumption that there is really no hope of things changing; that there is no possibility of conversion. Lazarus is dead. The tomb is sealed. Nothing can change the situation. But such an attitude denies the power of God. It denies the power of forgiveness, the power of God to turn things around, to break open our hearts, to heal our lives. So many people in our world, and even in our pews, find it so hard to let go of the past. So many people are stuck in the past. So many people shape their whole self-understanding through their mistakes. So many people view life only through their burdens and their guilts. But if the first thing we want to say about God is that he is the God of life, then close after that we want to say that God is also the God of mercy. God forgives! There is nothing – *nothing!!* – beyond his healing, transforming, forgiving touch. No matter how heavy the stone, no matter how tight the grave clothes, we can be free! It might mean we have to be honest about our failures. It will certainly require a good dose of humility. But *we can be free!* We can actually, truly enjoy the life God offers.

It is in confronting *each day* the sufferings and darkness of our world that we show the depth of our belief that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. It is when we seek to overcome the tombs and graveclothes that deny life that we show *our trust* in the One who releases us from all that binds us. Belief in the resurrection confirms the most basic thing we say about God – *that God is the God of life*. It may seem to be one of the most abstract aspects of our religion. But actually, nothing makes more concrete and real demands on us. It is our ultimate hope in eternal life that determines how we live our earthly life. Amen.