

Sermon Lent 5 Year A 2020

John 11:1-45

How many times have we all heard the word ‘unprecedented’ of late? Not only did we come out of an ‘unprecedented season’ of bushfires (a questionable claim at best), for weeks now we have been assaulted with the claim that what we are currently experiencing is ‘unprecedented’. Certainly, the experience of disruption, of change and the mammoth adjustment we are all living with at present, is unfamiliar to most of us. However, the experience of plague, pestilence, calamity, disease and famine has been the experience of the vast majority of humankind for almost the totality of its existence. Indeed, it *remains* the experience of the vast majority of world’s population. The Litany with which we opened this holy season here on Ash Wednesday included prayers for deliverance from pestilence, calamity and plague. It suggests that, at least in the religious imagination of our spiritual forbears, these experiences were a much closer reality. As so often, those who are in need, know their need of God, all other human agencies failing. Wealth, education and advances in medical science (thank God!) have largely removed those experiences – the sheer fragility of human life - from the lives of most of us. But it is important to keep in mind, not for everybody.

The pessimistic author of Ecclesiastes writes, *‘there is nothing new under the sun.’* In other words, there ain’t much in life that is truly ‘unprecedented.’ One of the reasons we keep on turning back to the scriptures, one of the reason we keep reading them, seeking to be led, inspired and directed by them, is because they seem so timeless, precisely because in so many places they appears to describe *‘nothing new under the sun’*. Everything that is open to human experience finds some reflection in the Bible. That’s why its contents remain so incredibly fresh. After 2, 3 thousand years, these ancient texts remain so incredibly familiar.

We know the people described in its pages. We know their characteristics because we see them in ourselves and in the people around us. Their joys and sorrows, hopes and failings, cries and triumphs are ours. The great characters of the bible - whether Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah and Jeremiah, Mary, Joseph, Peter and Paul – we know them. We can believe in the truth their stories convey truth because they speak to what the entire human family experiences. And not just the main players and key characters. *All* of scripture speaks to and reflects the great themes - not just what to means to be a person of faith - but what it means to be human.

We see this in every mass we celebrate here. The psalms, for example, infuse our worship. They are the framework of our mass. It is from the psalms that our introit our gradual, our offertory, our communion chants all come. And the psalms are the heart and centre of the daily prayer of the church. At Morning, noon, midday and night the prayers the church sets for these hours are anchored in the psalms. And in the psalms *every* emotion, every human experience, every joy, hope, grief, anguish, every frustration, and victory, the highs of life and the lows, anger and forgiveness, guilt and shame, faith and doubt are *all* found there! In this time when we cannot join in communal worship, I have been urging you all of you to take up the challenge of praying at home, alone and with you families. And in your daily prayers I hope you will discover some of the wealth – and *familiarity* - of the scriptures. We *continue* to read them and hear them because they *continue* to speak to us. The good, (the very good!) the bad and the ugly... No human experience is sanitised out of the bible. Including death. Including grief.

Death and grief are brought close to us in the gospel set for this fifth Sunday of Lent. This magnificent story we know as the ‘Raising of Lazarus’, is not really Lazarus’ story. Not surprising, really, because Lazarus remains dead until the last couple of verses! So, this really is Martha’s story. And just as we have seen the last two weeks from the stories of the woman at the well and the healing of the man born blind, we find once more a powerful reflection on the meaning of faith and salvation. And once more, the journey toward greater insight into who Jesus is comes by Jesus coming alongside Martha (and later, Mary as well), by speaking with them, gently leading them to greater truth.

Clearly, Jesus’ relationship with Martha, her sister Mary and brother Lazarus is already deep and well established. ‘*See, how much he loved him*’ say those gathered about. In a most touching detail, we are told *Jesus wept*. And the evangelist tells us that his sigh is ‘*straight from the heart.*’ This is the depth of love and affection Jesus has for this little family. He *shares* their grief. So, in this story we see at once the true humanity of Jesus, even as it affirms his true divinity, the whole point of the story to reveal Jesus as *the resurrection and the life*. And the profound insight into both who Jesus is and his saving ministry, yes, is Christ’s gift to Martha. But she is able to hear and receive it by allowing Jesus to come close to her and her family; allowing him to share their life, and even their deaths.

Jesus comes alongside them even in grief, even at death, and speaks the word of life: *unbind him, let him go free!* There is, then, no 'unprecedented' sphere of human life Jesus himself does not venture. There is no sphere of human life – and human death – beyond Jesus' reach. Which, of course, is why we hear this story the very Sunday before we commence Holy Week. From next Sunday we commemorate and celebrate how Jesus takes to himself the totality of human experience, even to the point of *his own* suffering and death.

Perhaps the whole reason the situation *we* now find ourselves in has so shocked and shaken us is that it has pulled us up short: it reminds us - in our cosy, comfortable, medicalised lives - that we are mortal! *Remember man that thou art dust...* We have now reached a place in our culture where our finitude is so remote and divorced from daily existence that it appears as an offence, a failure. And God, for the most part, is not permitted to come close or to share in the full scope of our lives.

As people of faith we need to reclaim our earnest *hope* in God; we need to reclaim our *faith* that Christ truly is *the resurrection and the life*. As people of faith we need to remember that even death, even the tomb and even the stench of four days does not prevent our God's ability to turn situations around. Because what we celebrate at the very heart of our faith *is* what is truly unprecedented: the resurrection of the Lord Christ from the dead. The great Mysteries we are about to recall - and yes, this year in strange and unusual circumstances – reminds us that there is no situation that is hopeless, no life that cannot be healed, no power that can resist him.

Jesus' raising *is not like* that granted Lazarus. For Lazarus, his is a resuscitation. He *remains* mortal and the life given back to him in his old body means poor Lazarus must die again. But for Jesus, his rising *is* totally new: *truly* unprecedented! All the old categories collapse in the light of Jesus' resurrection.

Over this time when we are separated, when our lives are so disrupted and disturbed, run, as did Mary and Martha, to our Lord. Hear the word of life he seeks to speak to us *now!* Trust that he shares our griefs, that he carries our sorrows. And believe that in him all things can be made new. Amen.