**LENT REFLECTION 5 FOR PASSION SUNDAY**

**The Death and Raising of Lazarus – John 11: 1 – 45**

NB: only Verses 1 – 16 are printed below

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory, so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

“But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Then Thomas (also known as Didymus, ‘the Twin’) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

**Collect for Passion Sunday**

Most merciful God,

who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ

delivered and saved the world:

grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross

we may triumph in the power of his victory;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Reflection**

The story of the death and raising of Lazarus is found only in John’s Gospel, where it is the crucial hinge between Jesus’s public ministry of preaching and healing, and the beginning of his lonely journey to his Crucifixion and Resurrection. There is not the space here to include the whole account, so please have the text in front of you as you read these thoughts.

The raising of Lazarus is the last of the seven ‘Signs’ which John uses to convey the uniqueness of Jesus’ person and Messiahship. It is also a moment of profound irony, because the one who is the Resurrection and the Life now begins to walk the path of self-renunciation, that will lead to his cruel and lonely death on the greatest symbol of dereliction ever invented. So this is the climax to Jesus’ earthly ministry in John’s Gospel, foreshadowing his own death and Resurrection, the ultimate sign of God’s Love for each of us.

In John, love is linked inextricably to death – cf: John 3: 16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”. The story of Lazarus’s death focuses on the deep love Jesus has for Mary and Martha, and for Lazarus. But it is interesting to note how John uses different Greek words to indicate the nature of his relationship with Mary and Martha, compared with that of their brother Lazarus.

In v 3 when the sisters send word to Jesus that “Lord, the one you love is sick”, and again in v. 36 when we read that the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”, John uses the Greek word “phileo” to describe the relationship between Jesus and Lazarus. Phileo indicates brotherly love, the sort of companionship that is built up over a period of time. Jesus wasn’t just a great preacher and healer - he had a special gift for forming deep bonds of affection and respect on a human level with a wide circle of people.

But when John writes in v. 5 “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” he uses the Greek verb “agape”. Agape denotes the supreme, unconditional Love at the heart of the relationship between God and His creation.

The power of that Love drives this whole story, and the strength of Jesus’ agapeic Love for Martha and Mary is seen in v. 35, the shortest and most poignant verse in the Bible, when John tells us that “Jesus wept” as he felt the pain that Lazarus’s death was causing his sisters.

I love Bp Timothy Rees’s hymn “God is Love: let heav’n adore Him”, especially verse 2,

God is Love: and He enfoldeth

all the world in one embrace;

with unfailing grasp He holdeth

every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking

under sorrow’s iron rod,

then they find that selfsame aching

deep within the heart of God.

It is a huge comfort to know that Jesus’s empathetic weeping with Mary and Martha shows that we can be assured of the “selfsame aching deep within the heart of God” whenever we have times of grief and tragedy.

And John wants us to know that Lazarus really was dead. In v. 39 he tells us that Lazarus had “already been in the tomb for four days”. Jewish belief taught that the soul left the body after three days, so Lazarus was not just in a coma from which he would recover. Hence the warning that “there would be a bad odour” from his decaying corpse. We are not spared the grisly details!

A fascinating aspect of this story is the brevity of the account of Lazarus’s raising. After forty-two verses of scene-setting just two are given to the raising itself, which is achieved through Jesus simply “calling in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’”

The raising of Lazarus follows directly on from Chapter 10 where Jesus tells us “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. They will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10: 14)

So this story is further assurance that God loves us all in Jesus, and in him new life is offered freely to all who, like Lazarus, listen to his voice and respond to his call, wherever that may lead.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER OR DISCUSS**

* The raising of Lazarus teaches us that even in the darkest of times God “is working for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28). Jesus declared that Lazarus' sickness was sent that they might “see the glory of God” (John 11: 40). As we journey these two tumultuous weeks of Jesus’s betrayal, death and Resurrection, can we see parallel moments when God has been active for good in the dark times of our own lives, and the lives of those we know and love?
* At Jesus’s Transfiguration, a voice comes from Heaven saying “This is My Son, the beloved; listen to him” (Luke 9: 35). Amidst all the noise and confusion of this busy and distracting world, how can we make time to hear Jesus speaking to us, and respond in faith and love?
* Jesus laid down his life so that not only Lazarus, but all people might be brought to Life through faith in him. It is often said that in this post-Christian era “we are the only Gospel most people will ever meet”. How might we recommit ourselves this Easter to live in such a way that we can draw others to listen to and follow Christ?

Nicholas Maddock.