

**Passion Sunday 2020 – Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17-45**

Lord, if you'd have been here, my brother would not have died.

It gets said twice in today's Gospel, once by Mary, once by Martha.

Lord, if you'd have been here, my brother would not have died.

And then there's the crowd looking on when Jesus weeps: couldn't the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?

Where were you, Lord? Why did you let us down?

There must be very few human beings who never have to ask that question. All of us, at some point or other, get hit with the terrible, the overwhelming, the sadness from which there is no comeback. It's happening to people now, all the time through this virus, but it has always happened and it always will: the slow sad decline, the sudden puncturing of our lives.

And in it all, the question: where were you Lord? Why did you let us down? If you'd have been here, my brother would not have died.

Mary and Martha ask God that question. That's who Jesus is for John's Gospel: God-in-person, God as one of us. You ask Jesus something, you're asking God.

And God's answer is first to ask, where have you laid him? Where is my friend Lazarus? To which the answer is simply, 'come and see'.

I say simply, but actually I think this is one of the wonderful moments of artistry in John's Gospel. Not a phrase goes to waste. Way back at the beginning, we've heard those words before, 'Come and see' – it's what Jesus says to his very first disciples when they ask him where he's staying, 'come and see'. The invitation marks the beginning of their discipleship. God spoke, and beckoned human beings into a journey they cannot know the end of.

And now, human beings are saying to God: come and see. Come and learn. Come and feel and know and experience what its like to be us, what it is to know sadness and loss and tears and the end of everything. Come and see. Come and know death. Humans speak, and they beckon God into a journey He cannot know the end of. The journey towards death. That's one reason why this Gospel is set for Passion Sunday, when we turn our gaze steadily towards the Cross.

And God's first response? Jesus wept, we're told, and was 'greatly disturbed in spirit and greatly moved' – and I think our translation misses something of the note of anger there in the original. Grief and anger. This is not, says God, how things were meant to be. This is not what I made Lazarus for, not what I made any of you for. You were made to be my image, to be brilliance and beauty and glory, and how has it come to this? How does my creation, my beloved Adam, lie in ruins?

The first response is grief and anger. The second response is power. *Lazarus – come out!* God's response to death is not just to weep with us, not just to empathise, or share our rage. Nor does he try to explain or justify death, to make sense of it in a bigger picture. No, he is come to judge it. To reverse it. God will not come to terms with death. It is the enemy, never to be reconciled. It must be overthrown. And because this is a Gospel of words made flesh, it is no use just stating that: it must be *done*. Lazarus, come out! And out he comes, from the tomb, blinking into the sunlight. Death shall have no more dominion over them.

Except, of course, it does. Lazarus, one day, would die again. Indeed, in John 12 we read there was a plot to kill him. And that's why John, in another superb piece of artistry, records the fact that when Lazarus came stumbling out of that tomb, he came still wearing his grave clothes. Why bother mentioning that fact, you wonder, until you remember the story of another morning, and another tomb, and people finding the graveclothes of the dead man neatly folded and left behind – the story of the first Easter morning? The point is, you see, that Lazarus keeps his clothes because one day he'll need them again. Jesus leaves his behind, because he never will. Lazarus comes back to life; Jesus is resurrected. Lazarus comes back like you and me, and will die like you and me; Jesus rises as a man of fire who has burned up death and ended it forever. I am the resurrection and the life, he'd told Martha – when you put him into a tomb, death itself implodes. You can no more kill Jesus than you can bury the sun: the beauty and the brilliance will always burn through. He will rise, and he will bring his people with Him.

That's the Gospel. God in Jesus goes into our wreckage, into our tombs, and he sets our darkness ablaze. His life surges into all the dead things, all our corpses, and turns them round to glory. Because of his death, his diving into darkness, all of us are destined for the light.

If you'd have been here, Lord, my brother would not have died. My mother, my father, my beloved child. Where were you God? What were you doing?

God's only answer to that question is, I was there. I was there in the heart of death, stretched out on a cross. I was there in the silence of the tomb, there at the end of everything.

And because I was there, I made the end a beginning. Because I was there, all that was cold and sad and done with begins again, and it begins with a power and strength and glory that death will never touch again. I am the resurrection and the life. Because I was there, death is just a doorway, just the way into the kingdom of beauty and brilliance. I know your hearts are breaking; I know all there is room for now is that burning question *why ??*- but I promise you, I was there. I am there, and I am making all things new. Nothing you have lost is lost forever. No-one you have lost is lost forever. We rise. We rise together in glory.

All of us at some point are confronted with mortality: our own, those of the ones we love. Most of the time, especially in the modern West, we put that thought very successfully at the back of our minds. We shut death into a corner, behind curtains, in nursing homes, at the edge of our towns and the edge of our thinking. We're scared, and what we're scared of, most of us like to ignore. Covid-19 is going to test that strategy to destruction. It is forcing us to look at death squarely. This is not something Christians should be afraid of. Indeed, our forebears used to say one should regularly, daily, contemplate one's own death – for all sorts of good spiritual reasons which we could discuss another time, but above all because there is nothing to fear. There is nothing to fear. *Where are you God?* is the question, and the answer is, I am right here. Right here in death. I've gone before you. I'm here for you. This end is but a beginning. Be not afraid. I am the resurrection and the life, and all shall be well.

As we draw near to Good Friday and Easter, and as we go deeper in to our present darkness, may that Gospel hold us, and give us strength. Amen.