

2020 Fifth Sunday of Lent, Passion Sunday, the Raising of Lazarus: The Revd Canon Patrick Curran
Ezekiel 37.1-14, Psalm 130, John 11.1-45

On this Passion Sunday, which signals the impending suffering and death of Christ that characterise Holy Week, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the world of which we are a part is living through a different sort of passion, a different time of suffering. These two stand in relation to one another. God was not indifferent then and God is not indifferent now as all time is encompassed by God. "It belongs to him" as we affirm at the Easter Vigil,

Christ yesterday and today,
the beginning and the end,
Alpha and Omega,
all time belongs to him,
and all ages;
to him be glory and power,
through every age and for ever. Amen.

One of the reactions to the present crisis that I am hearing loud and clear (coming from different voices within and without the church) is criticism of the church as institution. The criticism turns on the church's perceived inability or unwillingness to articulate clearly its core message in this crisis triggered by the virus Covid-19 as death lurks at the door. "As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death". It is not enough to remind people that they need to wash their hands as some put it crudely. Or to remind people that everything will be different afterwards. They know that already. Or even to simply counter the present crisis with what in German is called *Aktionismus*, a flurry of action for action's sake.

Last week we heard the episode of the healing of the man born blind. Jesus says of this man, "... he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him". (John 9.3) The week before that we heard the episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well on the edge of the Samaritan town of Sychar in which Jesus exhibits a knowledge of the woman's relationships which is astonishing and which has her proclaim, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" (John 4.39) Prior to that episode we heard Jesus say to Nicodemus who comes to him by night, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" (John 3.7) Today Jesus exclaims on hearing that Lazarus has died, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the son of man may be glorified". (John 11.4) The commentator adds, Jesus ... "after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." (John 11.6)

The message behind these different episodes in Jesus' life as recounted by John is a stark reminder that the Jesus we meet in the Bible and in the Church is not someone a little different from ourselves. Nicodemus' astonishment at what Jesus says remains when we are hindered for whatever reason to see as John sees with the eyes of faith. For John the Evangelist, for the Church, the Body of Christ, this living organism, you and me, Jesus is Son of God. Or as we will profess in a moment adding our voice to the Church down the centuries "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...".

Let us be frank. It sounds strange to us that Jesus on hearing of the death of Lazarus waits for two days rather than rushing to his aid. It is disturbing that a man should be born blind so that the Son of God can perform his healing on him that he may become a witness to the healing power of God.

A man is born blind that God may be glorified! Really? These actions have come to offend us. And the offence that Jesus causes us today doesn't go away as he breaks into our world. I encounter it in pastoral conversations or in Bible studies. We want God to be other, a little more humane, a little more kind, a little more 21st century. But Jesus' purpose is other. It is from above. It is to show that God is. It is to show that glory belongs to God alone. Jesus' purpose is God's purpose. It is one of revelation. It is one of making known. It is one of life. These passages remind us that the God of all creation stands *over* all of creation. God is sovereign. God is to be glorified. God in John's account of Jesus shows that he has a purpose for us, for the world and as we need to learn anew, for all of creation. God acts deliberately. God acts decisively. God acts once and for all. This finds expression in that beloved passage in the Book of Common Prayer 1662,

“Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death on the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; ... “

Jesus raises Lazarus, but he does not remain unaffected by his death. He weeps. God is not indifferent then and God is not indifferent now. Jesus says of himself that he is the resurrection and the life. Our present and our future are secure come what may because Jesus is the resurrection. We are destined not to be lost to death. We are destined always to be found for life, to be found by God. It is Jesus who through death conquers death. For St Paul the Apostle death is the final enemy. But Jesus doesn't just say that he is the resurrection, he also says just as emphatically that he is THE LIFE. John's Gospel for all its otherness, its other-worldliness, its offence is turned towards the world and is therefore turned towards us. (We remember that God saw all that he had made and it was good.) Jesus says elsewhere in John's Gospel that he has come that the joy of his followers might be complete. He comes that his followers might have fullness of life. He is as he proclaims to Martha prior to raising Lazarus THE LIFE, as in the resurrection and the life.

How is this expressed? We find it in the following episode in a seemingly casual by-the-way reference. The occasion is a dinner that Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, give for Jesus. The reference is, “and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him”. (John 12,2b) To have life is to sit at the table with Jesus. It is to acknowledge that there is one who knows us better than we ourselves. It is to know that we need to be born again to eternal life, which requires a dying to self. It is to allow ourselves to be instruments of God in this world that God may be glorified. This human being Lazarus, you and me and millions of others are born that in us the works of God be made manifest. What is it to have life? We are given a picture, an illustration: It is to at table with Jesus. Mary and Martha are also there. Mary pours out costly perfume. We are to give ourselves as an offering in life for life. Martha serves. All of us are called to serve. In these three persons we have a picture of the Church and hopefully of our community in which all of us are called to serve, all are called to give generously of themselves (pour themselves out) and all are invited to sit at the table with Jesus.

Above I spoke about the criticism that is being directed at the church as an institution. Let me affirm the need to wash your hands etc. and to observe good hygienic practise for life. Things will indeed be different. How they will be different is dependent on how we act, respond and prepare ourselves now for life. How we interact as a community now for life. Do be proactive. Do reach out to others. Do be available for others, even if you can't be there for them in person. Do it virtually. Do it through prayer. Now as always God calls us to live knowing that Jesus is THE LIFE. To have life

is to be one of those who sit at table with him. Today our table out of the necessity and for a time must be this platform zoom, but in the near future we will gather again in person around the Lord's Table to do what we always do:

- to **Praise** God for his mighty acts of compassion, mercy and love
- to **Repent** of our sins by which we are sorely hindered
- to **Adore** (meaning worship) God that God may be glorified
- to **Intercede** for the world and ourselves.

The protagonist of "The Plague" by Albert Camus is Dr Rieux. He says. "It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency." Another character asks what decency is. "Doing my job," the doctor replies.

In the meantime let us do our job by remaining faithful in prayer. I am reminded of some words of St Paul's with which to conclude.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. **Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.** Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." (Romans 12. 9-13)