

Readings for Sunday 29th March 2020 - Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11: 1-45



Agio Lazaros, Larnaca, Cyprus

REFLECTION ON JOHN 11:1-45

Back at the beginning of February Sandy and I took a short four day break to Larnaca in Cyprus. It seems an age and a lifetime ago now, so much has changed since then. We had a lovely few days exploring the area around Larnaca, but my favourite place was the church Agio Lazaros in the old part of the town. As the name suggests it is built to honour Lazarus, the friend Jesus raised from the dead, the story of which you can find in John 11:1-45. Greek Orthodox tradition says that after Jesus' crucifixion Lazarus fled Judea because of threats to his life and settled and became an evangelist in Cyprus. When Paul arrived during his missionary journeys he made Lazarus the Bishop of Kition, which is the old name of Larnaca. He died in Kition and was buried, again for the final time, there. This church was built in the 9th Century over his burial place. Now, of course there is no written evidence to prove that any of this is true. However, in 1972 a marble sarcophagus on which were inscribed the following words 'Lazarus, the four-day dead and friend of Christ' was found when archaeological work was being done at the church. The history of what happened to the contents I'll leave you to investigate for yourselves but I found the story fascinating.

Lazarus, as we know, was Jesus' friend. He was the brother of Mary and Martha, and Jesus was a frequent visitor to their home at Bethany. The reading schedule in the Lectionary put the story of Lazarus at the fifth Sunday in Lent. A fitting place in events, as from Bethany Jesus will head to Jerusalem for Passover and ultimately his crucifixion. For Mary and

Martha to summon Jesus to help when Lazarus was ill would be dangerous for Jesus, his enemies were out to get him, and yet they trusted him and begged him to come.

How disappointed they must have been when it took at least two, probably three days before he arrived. They knew he was only a days' journey away, and yet he didn't come immediately. When finally he arrived it was to find that Lazarus had been buried four days earlier.

We know how the story continues. Both sisters are resigned to the fact that Lazarus, their brother has died. They both believe that if Jesus had arrived earlier he could have healed Lazarus and they wouldn't have had to bury his dead body. Mary almost chastises Jesus 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

Already all the mourners had gathered to support the sisters. We can picture a sad scene of weeping and wailing and despair. They knew Jesus had the power to heal the sick. He had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, but he had done that on his own in her room and told the family not to tell anyone, so perhaps that news wasn't yet commonplace. Mary and Martha had formed their own idea as to what Jesus was capable of: and dealing with a man dead in a tomb for four days, wasn't something they could imagine.

But, as we know, Jesus tells them to roll back the stone and summons Lazarus out of the tomb, alive, although probably still wrapped up in his burial cloths.

What an amazing sight! You can almost hear the cries of 'No, don't! The smell! He's been dead four days! Don't move the stone!' changing to cries of disbelief and amazement. Even more, I don't think there was any smell, just a walking, talking Lazarus, healed and risen coming out of the tomb into the arms of his sisters.

A glorious story that shows us the power and love of Jesus. A story that, although those there at the time don't realise it, points to the glorious resurrection of Jesus. He has the power over death. One commentator even suggests that Jesus had to call Lazarus out by name 'Lazarus, come out' (v.43) because if He hadn't everyone who had ever died would have risen from the dead at that moment.

But, you will have noticed that I have left something out. The famous shortest verse in the Bible. v.35 'Jesus wept'. And it's this verse that speaks to me most at this particularly strange time that we are living through.

Mary, Martha and their friends and families were in tears, crying their hearts out, at the death of their brother and friend Lazarus. Their tear-stained faces as they hugged each other in consolation and sadness must be been a heart-wrenching sight to see. Lazarus was

a friend of Jesus as well, and when He saw the broken hearts of those standing around, He wept too.

Jesus, who had just told Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die' (25,26), Jesus who knew that death was not the end, Jesus who knew that death was just the beginning of new life in Him, Jesus who knew what He would go through at Calvary to bring eternal life to all, that same Jesus wept.

Our God is not a God sitting up in the sky, impassive, watching the world and our actions unfurl beneath Him. He knows how we feel. He came to earth in the form of His Son Jesus Christ and lived as a man on earth. He knows exactly how scared we are at the moment, how fearful we are for those more vulnerable among us, how worried we are for the future, how lonely we might feel at the moment being on our own in isolation. He knows, and He weeps with us.

BUT - through His great love for us He brings a promise of peace for those who believe in Him. In a week's time we will start Holy Week, which will end with Good Friday, that day when the sky turned black as Jesus died on the cross, and a new week will begin on Easter Sunday when Mary finds the stone rolled away from the tomb, and her beloved Jesus alive, in front of her, in the garden.

There are a lot of bad things going on in the world at the moment, and we are fearful, but Jesus went to the cross to die carrying all those bad things with Him. He has already paid the ultimate price for all the bad things in the world that have already happened, and are still to happen in the future. By believing and trusting in Him, we can have the peace He promises that finally all will be well. He will weep with us in our sorrow, but He will restore us again with joy.

Jesus, knows how we are feeling. He walked on earth as a human too. So tell Him your worries, talk to Him in your isolation, shout out your anger at what is going on, listen for His voice in the quiet, ask His forgiveness for the wrongs in your life. Take these quiet few weeks as an unexpected blessing that gives us time to sit with our Father and talk to Him. Don't restrict what Jesus can do. Mary and Martha did but He surprised them in the most amazing way possible.

So sit tight, keep yourself safe, and let's spend these weeks in Jesus' company in hopeful anticipation of the amazing and surprising things He's going to do!

Amen!