

2019-05-05 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Isaiah 38: 9-20; John 11: 27-44

Why does Jesus bring Lazarus back from the dead?

In looking for an answer to this question I came across two different angles which interest me and which I would like to share with you.

The first is to do with a particular message John was looking to make about who Jesus is through the way he has constructed his text and in the context of the timing.

The other is to do with the meaning of Jesus' declaration that he is the resurrection and the life – our second reading opened with Martha's response to that: **'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, ^[g] the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'**

John places the events in time near the Festival of Dedication, a winter festival now more commonly known as Hanukkah. It celebrates the rededication of the temple in 165 BC thanks to the efforts of the Maccabean martyrs, who are recorded in the books of Maccabees which form part of the Old Testament Apocrypha as celebrated for giving their lives for the flock of God and dying in hope of the resurrection and eternal life. And also in those books, the festival is praised as a time of gathering for the scattered flock of God and the high priests whose behaviour contributed to the destruction of the Temple are said to be false shepherds.

Our reading came from Chapter 11 of John which is closely linked with Chapter 10 where we find the sayings of: **'I am the good shepherd'** and **'I am the gate'** and the accompanying parables of the sheepfold.

1. In chapter 10 Jesus says he is the good shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. We heard how Jesus goes to Bethany to save Lazarus even though it will be significant amongst the events which cost him his life.

2. Jesus calls his sheep who hear his voice and he gives them eternal life. Jesus calls Lazarus from the grave and promises that he will rise again.

3. Jesus says there will be one flock, one shepherd. In the priestly consternation about the number of followers who believe in Jesus after Lazarus's restoration to life, Caiaphas, the high priest, perhaps unknowingly, prophesies that Jesus' death would **'gather into one the dispersed children of God'**.

So for John, Jesus demonstrates in Lazarus's revival what it means that he is the Good Shepherd and in reflecting on the festival timing - he shows that Jesus is the new focus of God's story, the new Temple.

But the story of Lazarus is also a very personal one – for the family but also for Jesus who we are told loves them, and whose strong reaction to the emotions of bereavement that he is met with and presumably his own feelings of loss is a significant element of the description.

There is a clear expectation from both Martha and Mary, that if Jesus had been there, Lazarus wouldn't have died. Why was that?

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There are many instances of healing by Jesus and Lazarus is not the only person who is brought back to life by him. Did Jesus heal and revive everyone he met who asked or for whom it was asked? I can't think of a recorded time when we hear of him declining to heal – although correct me later if I'm wrong. But why, in the light of eternal life, would Jesus feel the need to bring people back to life on earth, only for them to have to die again?

Alongside this question, I would reflect how tenacious humans generally are to life and how anything less than a long life is a disappointment to us when it is the death of someone else. Our first thought is not always to seek comfort in believing that the deceased is alive with God, our first thought is of the loss in this life.

I found an understanding to this in an explanation of resurrection by an American writer called Frederick Buechner. He reminds me that, as we say in our creeds, our belief is in the resurrection of the body. We do not believe that the body dies and the soul effortlessly lives on. We are bodies – body, mind and spirit all wonderfully made as an indivisible unit – and made in this way by and for God's glory. And a human body was good enough for God to inhabit in the name of Jesus. Buechner says, and I quote: ***“Resurrection ... is entirely unnatural. We do not go on living beyond the grave because that's how we are made. Rather, we go to our graves as dead as a doornail and are given our lives back again by God (ie resurrected), just as we were given them by God in the first place, because that is the way God is made.”***

Jesus said: **‘I am the Resurrection and the Life’**. He said: **‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’**.

Our life in this world is important, we were created for it. That must be why Jesus heals and revives the people he does – so that they might live abundantly. That must be why he understood and shared the sorrow of Martha and Mary. He is the Life.

And yet, he is also the Resurrection. What wonders lie in store for us when God gifts us back our renewed bodies? In God's good time we will know.

Now, we must live the life we have been given, faithful and in the hope of the life to come.

Thanks be to God,

Amen