

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**

**Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

*John 11: 1 - 41*

Denial; He's not dead he's asleep<sup>1</sup>, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, said Jesus.

Anger; Martha said to Jesus, 'If you had been here, sir, my brother would not have died.'<sup>2</sup>

Bargaining; 'Your brother will rise again,' said Jesus, if you have faith in me<sup>3</sup>.

Uncontrollable grief; Mary wept<sup>4</sup>, Jesus wept<sup>5</sup>.

Loss and that desperate, futile search for what has been lost; 'Lazarus is dead. I am glad not to have been there,' said Jesus, then immediately, 'But, let us go to him.'<sup>6</sup>

Denial, anger, bargaining, uncontrollable grief, loss and futile search. This story from the Gospel of John - the Raising of Lazarus - is a story about bereavement. If you have ever been bereaved, you don't need me to tell you that this is a story about the bottom falling out of someone's world; a number of people's worlds actually, Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters and Jesus, Lazarus' friend. Their grief is scratched in pain onto every line of this story. And what a story.

These symptoms of bereavement: denial, anger, bargaining, uncontrollable grief, and loss, all evident in the reading, are not set out as in an academic journal, or as described in a self-help booklet. Academic papers and self-help booklets have their place in the world, but they will never be as widely read over centuries as a good story.

That is why when John, the Gospel writer, wanted to say something about the way Jesus Christ can transform your life, he didn't write a paper to be peer-reviewed, or suggest people read a 'helpful guide', instead, he fashioned dramatic, powerful, and emotionally compelling stories. Over the course of the past five weeks of Lent we have heard and read a number of them.

Three weeks ago, we read about Nicodemus to whom Jesus said if you believe in me then you will be born again. Of course, Jesus didn't mean that Nicodemus would literally be born again out of his mothers' womb. He meant that believing in him liberates us from our inherited national, social, cultural and religious traditions that so often determine who we are, who we will become, how we think and what we believe. Liberated in this way we find salvation in a fulfilled life through the freedom to build our own loving relationships with God, ourselves and our neighbours.

Two weeks ago, we read about a woman at a well who Jesus persuaded to drink living water so that she would never be thirsty again. Of course, Jesus didn't mean literally that she would never have to drink water again. Jesus meant that believing in him sets us free from the enslavement our physical and material needs, wants and longings place upon us. Liberated in this way we find salvation in a fulfilled life that prioritises our spiritual relationship with God,

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:11

<sup>2</sup> John 11:21

<sup>3</sup> John 11:23 - 26

<sup>4</sup> John 11:33

<sup>5</sup> John 11:35

<sup>6</sup> John 11:15

ourselves and others, rather than our physical relationship with material things, and our physical relationships with other people.

Last week we read about Jesus giving sight to a man born blind. Of course, Jesus didn't mean that if you are blind and believe in him then literally your sight will be healed. Jesus meant that believing in him sets us free from our inability to understand how we should see God, ourselves and others. Liberated in this way we find salvation in seeing what a loving parent God really is, what loving people we can be ourselves, and how love, when shared with our neighbours, can transform the world.

This morning we read a story in which amidst his and his friends' stomach-churning desperation and loss, Jesus raised to life the person whose death had caused that grief, freeing him from his entombment. He said to Martha, 'I am the resurrection and I am life. If a man has faith in me, even though he dies, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die. Do you believe this?'<sup>7</sup>

Of course, just as in the other stories, Jesus didn't mean literally that if you believe in him you will never die. God knows, in these days we know that is not true. Jesus meant that if you believe in him then you will be liberated from the power that death holds over you so that you will find a fulfilled life, saved from the fear of death and the crushing entombment of grief.

'Jesus raised his voice: "Lazarus, come forth." The dead man came out, his hands and feet-swathed in linen bands. Jesus said, "Loose him; let him go."<sup>8</sup>

Today, six days into a complete lock down, and weeks into social isolation, you may be feeling the pain and confusion of loss. Stuck at home as you are, you may also be starting to feel something of the asphyxiating isolation of entombment, like Lazarus did. These feelings may not be as crushing as grief over the death of a loved one, or death itself, but your feelings of loss and entombment are real and they are on the same spectrum.

Perhaps you are feeling the loss of social interaction with friends, family, grandchildren. Perhaps you are feeling the loss of routine and rhythm. Perhaps you are feeling the loss of work, a job, a wage and that brings not grief as much as fear. Perhaps you are working in a hospital and feel the loss of peace of mind, or just a good night's sleep.

Or, perhaps, you are feeling not loss, but entombed: entombed in your home, no longer able to work or exercise or socialise in the ways that you used to, the ways that brought purpose, meaning and direction to your life. Perhaps you are feeling entombed with people with whom spending hours and hours each day germinates a different relationship with them than you want to have; a relationship that is more irritable, angry, or worse.

In the Gospel of John, in between the stories about Lazarus and the Man Born Blind, Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. Comparing himself to shepherds that aren't so good, he says, 'The thief comes only to steal, to kill, to destroy; I have come that all may have life, and have it in all its fullness.'

That is the central message of John's Gospel. If you want life in all its fullness, believe in the power of Jesus Christ's message, ministry, life, death and resurrection to transform your life. That message, ministry, life, death and resurrection was all about love for God, yourself and others.

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<sup>7</sup> John 11: 25 - 26

<sup>8</sup> John 11:44

Whether it is the circumstances of your birth, or your dependence on the perishable material or physical world, or the state of your health, even the ultimate challenge of confronting death, your life can be transformed through the power of love to transform life as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If today you are feeling the grief, or the fear, or the desperation of loss or isolation then start there, with love; for yourself, for others and for God. Believe this: you are still connected; you are still one of God's people; you are still in communion with others in the church, the body of Christ; you are still loved; you are not lost, you are found.

If today you are feeling the crushing weight of entombment then start there, with love; for yourself, for others and for God and believe this: there is more liberation in love than you can you can imagine. Knock on its door, it shall be opened to you, and you shall be released.