

‘UNBIND HIM, AND LET HIM GO’

Isaiah 25. 6-9

Revelation 21. 1-6a

John 11. 32-44

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Unbind him and let him go.’ You may be surprised by what I am about to say, but the story of the raising of Lazarus is not just a miracle. If it were simply about raising the dead, then we might feel cheated, because it doesn’t happen that often, if at all. Our own loved ones are rarely brought back from the dead (and here, I am not speaking about resuscitation, of course; I mean being raised from the dead). Lazarus had been in the tomb a while. He had been dead for four days; and his body was decomposing. The story of Lazarus is not just about raising the dead to life, even though it is that;¹ the raising of Lazarus in St John’s gospel is a *sign* that is far more than a miracle. Something deeper and more powerful happens in the raising of Lazarus, and we have to look beyond the grave and the miraculous to discover it.

We could say that a key to the power of the *sign* is the presence of our Lord with his friends, and his experience of human mortality in the loss of his own friend. The tears that Jesus sheds are human tears. Since Jesus is also truly God, in this story which follows the death of Lazarus, *God* experiences human grief and frailty. Christ’s shedding of tears is very significant. There is something very unique about the human shedding of tears linked with emotion. Animals can vocalise pain and distress, but I think that it is true to say that only humans can shed tears as an emotional response. And weeping (which is often accompanied by an uncontrollable, physical racking of the body) is definitely very human.

¹ Lazarus gained his mortal body back, but went on to experience a second physical death later on.

Note that our text tells us, ‘Jesus began to weep.’

In so doing, *God* experienced human emotion by coming face to face with the death of a close friend. *God* experienced the same emotion and encountered the mortality that he had created at the very beginning, when he formed humankind in his own image. Could it be that weeping is one characteristic of God’s image? We are so used to God being distant, powerful and omniscient. Yet in the gospel story today, *God in Christ* experiences human frailty and emotion.

All three of our appointed readings for All Saints’ Day have this common theme. In the book of Revelation, we see that *God in Jesus* dwells among mortals, wipes away tears and takes away death. In the vision of the prophet Isaiah, God wipes away the tears of all peoples, swallows up death for ever and *in Jesus* feasts with them. In St John’s gospel, God destroys death and *in Jesus* sheds tears as he experiences the grave.

So what has any of this to do with the Saints and heaven? Precisely this: that Saints are human and mortal like us. We believe that the Saints have moved into the greater glory of God after death, and are bathed in his light; but when they were on earth, they were very fragile, fallible and always aware of their frailty. That old phrase is true: ‘The definition of a Saint is someone who knows that they are a sinner’.

Thus, one of the things that we celebrate today is that we are called to be Saints. The word ‘saint’ means ‘holy’; and we are all called to be God’s holy people. I hope that you will agree with me when I say that holiness is not a quality that is earned. I am not even sure that it is a gift. Holiness is *dynamic process* by which we become more like God. As one theologian (Philip Sheldrake) once said, ‘Holiness is a process, a *continual movement towards God*.’

So we go back to the story of the raising of Lazarus. Our Lord has journeyed to Bethany and meets with his close friends. He experiences human emotion so much so that his body is racked with grief and the tears flow. At the grave, *God weeps* and thus we discover something so wonderful and so magnificent about our loving God. Deeply disturbed, Jesus turns to Martha and says these words, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ We think that the glory is in the miracle; but the glory is also in the action of Christ: God’s presence with his friends, journeying with them in their grief and affording them hope.

In our passage from the book of Revelation we see the wonderful image of the New Jerusalem prepared as a bride for her husband, coming down out of heaven. This image of the New Jerusalem is a sign of how things will be; God will make his home among mortals. But it is also an echo of the many visions of the past and the experience of the faithful. The sign of the raising of Lazarus is a sign of God’s glory. The miracle is not the just the raising of one dead man, but the potential of *all things being made new*. The glory of God is found in the person of our Lord, who took our human nature upon him. All saints, be they past, present or future, are called and invited to discover the glory of God as it is revealed in Jesus. He is the one who makes all things new.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey, himself a saintly 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, knew these things and experienced them in his own frail body; and he taught others to search for the glory of God. When he was buried in the cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, a simple inscription was put on the stone. It was one of his favourite quotations from St Irenaeus, a bishop and martyr who lived in the second century:

‘The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man is the vision of God.’

In a wonderful encounter recounted in St John's gospel, Lazarus meets Christ who reveals himself as the author of life; and his family and friends discover the glory of God in their midst.

As saints-in-progress, our journey in life is a journey of discovering that we are truly and fully alive when we seek, and recognise our Lord to be the one who not only gives us life, but who makes us new.

To quote from our passage in Revelation, 'And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."'

Or, as Irenaeus also said:

'Human beings shall therefore see God in order to live' (*Against the Heresies*, Book 4, chapter 20).

Amen.