

A REASSURING VOICE

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

Romans 8. 6-11

John 11. 1-45

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

We have all heard the expression, ‘That was the straw that broke the camel’s back’. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, the fact that our Lord raised Lazarus from the dead was the straw that broke the camel’s back. From that time on, they did everything they could to arrest him and put him to trial. After this miracle occurred, more and more people began to put their faith in Jesus; and so the Pharisees plotted to kill Christ, and Lazarus as well.¹ They were threatened by the fact that our Lord had performed such a miraculous act. He was quickly gaining credibility and popularity. It challenged the Pharisees’ authority and power.

This story challenges us, too. It challenges our faith. Are we able to accept the raising of Lazarus as a historical event, or was it just fiction? No scientific data can support the metaphysical possibility that Jesus brought the dead man Lazarus back to life. Neither does the gospel account explain *how* it happened. We are told simply that Lazarus was dead; and when Christ called out to him, he came out from the cave.

Lazarus was dead, with no possible chance of new life. Even if (as some think) he had been lying in a coma, he had no way of escaping the tomb. Death had made him a prisoner. He would never know freedom again. The voice of God changed all that, however. Our Lord’s voice stirred new life in Lazarus’ body. Jesus’s voice set him free. The power of God is greater than the power of humankind.

¹ Cf. Jn 12. 9-11.

Lazarus came out of the tomb because he heard Christ's *voice*. What did Lazarus hear? He heard a familiar voice, like the sheep who know the voice of their shepherd. Lazarus heard the voice of reassurance.

Consider a time in your life when you were stuck, trapped or confined. Life appeared dark; and you felt lonely and helpless. What you needed at that moment was a reassuring voice. Years ago, after finishing my university studies, I borrowed my father's car to take a trip in the country. At one point during the journey, I approached an intersection where there should have been a stop sign; but some youngsters had taken it away, as a prank. The result was that I had a head-on collision with a lorry and suffered a number of injuries, including a concussion. An ambulance came and I was rushed to hospital. I remember waking up in my hospital room. I was confused, could not remember what actually happened, but knew that I had nearly lost my life. I felt very alone. It was only when my father came to see me and I heard his voice, that I felt reassured. I could then face reality and take the steps I needed to in order to get better.

The voice of God is a voice that reassures. The voice of God doesn't frighten us, or cause us additional anxiety. God's voice is a calming presence, a 'still, small voice' that comforts and gives us hope. Such was the voice of our Lord that comforted Mary and Martha; such was the voice that enabled Lazarus to be free.

The voice of God can come to us in many ways. It is rarely an audible voice (although that is possible); more often, we experience it as a feeling of 'inner prompting', or as a recurring thought. It is a 'voice' that we might hear through the reading of Scripture, or after praying, or after talking with a trusted Christian friend. Significantly, it is a voice that calls us from the past and calls us to the present. It is a voice that calls us from our old habits and invites us to try new ones. It is a voice that calls us from apathy and indifference to caring. It calls us from despair to hope.

It calls us from darkness to light. It calls us from loneliness to community. It calls us from captivity to freedom.

This reassuring voice of God, this voice of Jesus, is the one that says to Martha (and to us), ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.’ Too often, we are tempted to apply these words of Christ to the end of our physical lives. It is deeply unfortunate that these verses are mainly heard only at Easter and at funerals. The Church tends to preach about death and resurrection at the time of death, but shies away from such topics in the midst of *life*. Yet it is in the everyday rhythms of life that we need to talk about our Lord’s power as the resurrection and the life, so that death can indeed lose its sting. These verses offer us a promise not only about how we will end our lives, but also a promise about how we can live them.

I know of a true story that involves a priest whom I will call Philip. Upon finishing theological training, Philip’s bishop sent him to his first posting. It was an inner-city church which had been in decline for the past twenty years. ‘Just keep it going as best you can’, the bishop said to Philip. When he arrived, Philip told his parochial church council that he thought he had a gift for working with children. Rather bluntly, one of the women on the PCC said to him, ‘the bishop sent you to the wrong church. We are long past those years here.’

Then the creative wind started to blow. Philip found an old lady in the parish named Sarah who in her youth had played in London alongside a number of talented jazz musicians. Philip found two other ladies who said that they would make sandwiches. And then, on Wednesday afternoon, the four of them rolled the old piano out of the double doors of the Church Hall. Sarah sat down and began to play hits from the ‘30s, and then some ragtime. By 3.30pm a crowd of children had gathered. Philip passed out the sandwiches. Sarah switched from playing ‘In the Mood’ to ‘Jesus

Loves Me'. The priest then told the children a story about a man named Jesus. They clamoured for more. A year passed. Today nearly a hundred children crowd into that church every Wednesday afternoon. On Sunday, classes are full, taught by a group of older women who thought that they were now too old to have anything to do with children. Those children brought parents. A church which had died, has now come back to life.

When Christ told Martha that he was 'the resurrection and the life', he wasn't speaking only about the end of this earthly life. He also wanted her to understand that death and resurrection are a life-long occurrence. It wasn't just eternal life that our Lord had promised; he promised resurrection of life each and every day.

The potential to experience new life occurs whenever we hear the reassuring voice of God. Resurrection, in its various forms, is possible all through life. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

Amen.