

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 29th March 2020
5th Sunday of Lent

Collect

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Readings

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has

fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, '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. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Sermon

On Tuesday evening some of our House Group tried to meet up using our phones and computers. The idea is that we are all able to see one another on our screens and we can talk to and be heard by each other. It worked, of a fashion, though we experienced a number of technical issues. One person couldn't hear anything, although everyone could hear her; others couldn't see everyone; and the way the system works makes it quite difficult to have a normal conversation without speaking over one another and not really catching the thread. We all had to be much more deliberate in allowing space for each other to talk. The discussion had to be somewhat structured.

In the course of our attempt to communicate there was probably a range of emotions. Frustration, definitely, as we tried to get the technology to work properly. But also a great deal of humour – and this was shared by others in the family, not just members of our House Group. There was the odd guffaw of laughter that came from the background, as we all struggled with our devices. There was an overwhelming sense of relief and joy at being able to see one another, albeit on a screen. It feels like a long time since we last gathered. And there was also that realisation that, no matter how good the technology, it just isn't quite the same as meeting face to face and in person.

I wonder whether you, like me, in the enforced isolation we are experiencing as a result of the important attempts to slow the spread of Covid 19, are discovering important things about what you really value. This feels like a time when the restrictions placed on our lives are helping us to see the importance of things we have previously taken for granted. Being in a room with friends; having a meal together; shaking hands or offering a shoulder to cry on.

In this week's gospel, we hear the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha. The narrative is quite straightforward. Jesus receives news from Mary and Martha that their brother is ill, no doubt hoping he will come quickly. He delays for two days before making his way to Bethany in Judea, by which time Lazarus has been dead for some four days. Nevertheless, Jesus asks them to roll the stone away from the tomb, and in response to his request, Lazarus comes out.

There is a great deal about this story that looks ahead to Jesus's own resurrection. The stone rolled away; the grave cloths; the one once dead who is now alive. And yet this story is about so much more than pre-figuring the resurrection. Listen carefully to that statement of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life". The resurrection, yes. *And the life*. This story is not just about our final destination; about the resurrection in which we have hope. It is also, and very significantly, about life; about life here and now.

It is in John's gospel that we hear those extraordinary words: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". Jesus spent a great deal of time inviting his followers to consider exactly what that means. What abundant life really is. And never more so than in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

The disciples, as always, struggle to make sense of what Jesus is doing, and yet they remain faithful followers. When Jesus says he will go to Judea, they are concerned for his safety, yet for Jesus life is about more than his own personal safety. He is looking at a bigger picture. And Thomas – the one we often call the doubter, but who in fact asks the questions many of us are asking – plunges in with his statement: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' It's a bold aspiration that receives no specific response from Jesus. And yet there is surely truth in it. As the story of Lazarus unfolds, the disciples "die" to some of their old assumptions and ideas in order to live more fully.

It is Martha and Mary who really show us the way. In her exchange with Jesus, Martha shows her understanding of the resurrection. When Jesus speaks about her brother rising again, she assume that is what he is talking about. And that is when Jesus reminds her that his purpose is not just resurrection, but is also life. Lazarus will not only rise again on the last day, but will come back to life here and now.

Mary and Martha help us to see what it is that brings abundant life. Loving God; and loving one another. This is an overwhelmingly emotional story because these are people who care deeply about one another. Jesus is not only deeply disturbed, but is brought to tears. We find abundant life in our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. It's something played out in the person of Lazarus. Before this point, he has not appeared in John's gospel. We can assume that he and Jesus are close because Jesus is told "the one whom you love is ill", but we know nothing else. And yet after his raising, we meet Lazarus again, in the following chapter, reclining with Jesus while his sister Mary anoints him with costly perfume. Lazarus has learnt what really matters. He has learnt what brings abundant life. Spending time with Jesus; and spending time with those he loves.

We are living in uncertain times. In challenging times. And yet my hope is that there is a chance as we all come to terms with having to live very differently for a while to take a little time to think about what *really* matters. To consider what abundant life is all about.

Right now it may be too soon to draw any conclusions, but being forced into changes that we probably wouldn't have chosen for ourselves might just give us the opportunity to notice those things that make a real difference. The sound of a voice; the touch of a hand; the proximity of other people; the joy of singing together; being with one another in the ups and downs of everyday existence. And knowing those things, we might commit ourselves to treasuring them as we go forward, so that, through loving God and others more fully, our lives will be even more abundant.

Amen