

Lazarus

1

The story of Lazarus stands in a particular place in John's gospel. It's the longest story of all and extends right through to Chapter 12. The story is in the very centre of the gospel. It binds together the great themes of death and resurrection. It looks back to the first half of the gospel and sums up many of its themes and ahead to Part 2 – the passion.

John's gospel tells the story of Jesus in seven great miracles or signs. They are in ascending order. They begin with the changing of water into wine. They end with the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

John weaves into the narrative his seven great I am sayings. This story contains the sixth of them: I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die shall live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die".

There are only two places where the signs and the I am sayings coincide. In John 6 where the miracle of the loaves and fish is followed by "I am the bread of life" and John 11 where "I am the resurrection and the life" comes just before the raising of Lazarus.

One of the central moments in Matthew, Mark and Luke is the moment when Jesus' disciples recognise him as the Messiah. In those gospels the disciple is Peter. The confession happens at Caesarea Philippi.

The story of Lazarus contains John's moment of confession and recognition. John's gospel is written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God".

Here in this story the disciple who makes the good confession is not Peter but Martha. Jesus asks her directly after his declaration about the resurrection: “Do you believe this?” Martha replies: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world”.

The story is told carefully, in stages. We are reading the story today because we find in the story of Lazarus a picture of Christ who is first contemplative; second compassionate and third, courageous.

Jesus says these words in John 10: “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly”. The theme of life and fullness of life runs through this chapter in the miracle and in the I am saying. But it runs also through the narrative of the chapter. Fullness of life, what it means to be human, is modelled and lived by Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be human? It means to be contemplative, to be compassionate, to be courageous.

I want to offer these reflections to help us to explore those three words today in the midst of all our conversation.

We read the story first to explore what it means to be a contemplative church. Jesus lives in close relationship and dialogue with the Father. And here is a mystery. At almost every turn in this story, Jesus does the opposite of what is expected of him.

First there is the mystery of why Jesus does not go to Lazarus immediately.

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Martha and Mary. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.”

We know and John will tell us again that this family is dear to Jesus. Lazarus is ill. Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities

has written very movingly of this passage in his great commentary on John. Vanier believes that Lazarus is disabled or handicapped in some way.

Jesus has the strength of mind and character not to respond at once and under pressure of what is expected of him. That strength and that alternative direction comes from dwelling deeply in God.

Through the passage, as elsewhere in John, we have the sense that Jesus is listening to a deeper story within, the story of God's purposes. We see the outcome of that deeper story in Jesus' unexpected actions. We catch a glimpse of the deep relationship between the Son, the Spirit and the Father, the mutual indwelling, which makes that deeper story possible.

We see the contemplative Christ first in Jesus decision to stay and then in his decision to go. The timing is all. We see it in Jesus understanding of what is happening to his friend and of God's purposes. We see it in Jesus words to Martha and then to Mary. Most of all we see it in Jesus prayer before the tomb:

"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".

Jesus dwells in the Father and that indwelling is expressed in prayer, in dependence, in poverty of spirit, in meekness, in purity of heart. Jesus will makes clear to the disciples in the last discourses that we too are called to dwell in God and that God comes to dwell in us. There is to be an abiding, a resting in the vine, a collaboration with God.

The fruit of that dwelling in God in prayer and worship is the ability to dance to a different song in the whole of our lives. It is the ability to know God. It is the ability offered to every disciple to become fully

human: living a life set free from sin and selfishness and in relationship with God who loves us.

Luke expresses the same truth in his story about the same family, the sisters Martha and Mary. Martha is busy and distracted by many things but only one thing is necessary. Mary sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to what he is saying.

Every action of value and every word of value in the life of the Church flows from deepening our relationship with God and our life of prayer: our contemplation of Jesus. It is in this contemplation that our lives are transformed, from glory to glory as St Paul says, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord”.

We are in much of our life an anxious church in an anxious world. An anxious church finds compassion very difficult. We are worried about preserving our own life. An anxious church finds courage very hard. We want to stay with the familiar pathways. An anxious church is easily distracted from what is really important, like the Martha of Luke’s gospel. An anxious church is likely to be far too busy to be good news to the world. The antidote to anxiety is dwelling deep in God: in contemplation.

The many different communities we serve need a contemplative church. The people around us who are like sheep without a shepherd need a church which is willing to take God seriously. We are really no earthly use without a heavenly dimension. We are a poor social club. We are not the society for the preservation of ancient buildings. Without prayer we can easily become an empty group of do gooders concerned more for our own survival than for the salvation of the world.

Knowledge abounds in this generation. But wisdom remains scarce. Facts seem plentiful but truth is rare. Trends and fashions abound but where is the wisdom on which a person can build their lives.

I quoted in the booklet a short extract from Rowan Williams. The quotation is from his address on Contemplation and Evangelism given to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2012. The full address is available on the web. Rowan argues that contemplation is essential to the life of the Church because of the need to detach ourselves from the culture and act independently.

“In this perspective, contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”

Jesus deep relationship with the Father enables him to offer meaning and significance and perspective on the otherwise random events of life. That meaning is vital in order to live reflective lives. In order to be fully human.

The Church are called to model what it means to be fully human, to live life in fellowship and community with God, to bring the sacred and the holy into ordinary life, to live life in all its fullness.

There are many different ways to pray: as many ways as there are people. The Church needs all of them. In saying that we are called to be contemplative I do not want to say that we are to prefer one way of prayer above another.

But I am saying that our first calling is to rest in God, to dwell deep, to abide in the vine so that we might live the abundant life and be a channel of God's grace.

2

The story of Lazarus shows us Christ who is contemplative. The story of Lazarus also shows us a Christ who is compassionate.

Jesus comes to Bethany. Martha comes to meet him first and makes her good confession. She returns and calls her sister Mary who also comes out to meet Jesus.

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". But hear what follows:

"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, "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.

Listen to these words and think about what they mean.

"Weeping...weeping...greatly disturbed....deeply moved....weep....greatly disturbed". The word translated greatly disturbed is an immensely strong one. It means shuddered or agitated.

This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus reveals his deepest emotions. We love him for it. This weakness and vulnerability calls forth a response in John's readers in every

generation. There is compassion here for Mary and Martha in their grief and for Lazarus in his suffering.

To understand the passage fully, we also have to understand that Jesus is aware that the raising of Lazarus will certainly lead to his own death. That note is present in Thomas' prediction that the disciples journey to Bethany to die with him. As the narrative continues we go immediately to the chief priests and the Pharisees who determine to kill Jesus. It is better for one man to die for the sake of the people. Then as we will see tomorrow, Mary anoints Jesus for his death. Jesus is facing not only the question of whether to raise his friend. In raising his friend, he surrenders to his own suffering.

We love Jesus here for his compassion, for his grief. In several places John's gospel present us within a few verses with Christ's divinity and his humanity and the ways in which the two are interwoven. This is one of them. The prologue is another. The foot washing is a third. Here we are presented first with Martha's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. This is bold language. In the very next paragraph, this Son of God, the Messiah, the king, is weeping: moved and deeply shaken in love for his friends. John is saying more than this particular person was like this. John is saying, God is like this. God's heart breaks and is shaken when we are bereaved, when we suffer, in the face of premature death.

Vulnerability is an essential part of love and an essential part of God's love for us. Vulnerability is an essential part of being human, of forming deep relationships. We become more like Christ not as we become more powerful and remote but as we become more compassionate and identify with the suffering. The Church at its best is not a community of the sorted and self sufficient and independent. The Church at its best is a community of the vulnerable: those who

know their need of God and those who know their need of human connection. They are therefore able to love fully.

The story of Lazarus brings us face to face, as it were, with the Christ of compassion, of tenderness, of vulnerability who calls us to walk this way, who shows us, as it were, that this is what it means to live abundantly and fruitfully.

Jesus will say to his disciples at the end of the gospel, after his own resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". That verse gives us the frame in which we read the Christ of the Lazarus story. This picture of Jesus before the tomb of Lazarus gives us the picture of how the Church is to be in the world: the foundation of God's mission is compassion: feeling with and suffering with others. Weeping with those who weep.

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted is a word for the Church. We need to be able to lament with those who suffer in the world and hold that lamentation in the even deeper perspective of joy that in the end all manner of things shall be well.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Part of our calling in a time of change as the Church is to learn to be strategic. We need to be intentional about analysing the situation we face. We need to be good stewards of our resources and allocate them according to agreed priorities not simply go on doing what we have always done. We need to identify areas of fruitful ministry and pursue them. We need sometimes to stop doing something in order to focus on something else.

That's why we are focussing in our workshops on possible strategic priorities for us as a Diocese and how we order our life and steward our resources. That is why at local level, we encourage mission action planning in parishes and deaneries.

But one of the dangers in this kind of work is that it slips out of proportion and becomes the main thing. When it does the Church becomes focussed on objectives and measurement and efficiency and becomes the Church of England plc or the Diocese of Oxford plc or St Agatha's by the Marsh plc.

Who we are together is more important than what we do. What we are called to be together is a community of compassion: daring to love God's world.

Pope Francis has one of the most challenging vocations in the world. His calling is to lead the largest Christian church stretched across every continent, a church which is full of challenges and problems. His calling, like ours, is to articulate a fresh vision of what it means to be the Church in the 21st Century. A church bearing witness to the love of God in a globalising, secular, pluralist, sometimes dehumanising culture.

How has Francis done that?

He has talked in a very simple way about mercy and compassion. And he has put his conversation into practice in symbolic actions which demonstrate that courageous and consistent love.

When this picture was first published it carried the caption in one newspaper: Pope Francis first encyclical. It shows the Pope embracing a man who is disfigured in St Peter's square. On his first Maundy Thursday Pope Francis went to wash feet not in St Peter's and not the feet of Cardinals and bishops. He went to prison. He washed the feet of women as well as men. He washed the feet of Muslims as well as Christians.

Francis has chosen again and again to teach on the theme of mercy and compassion as the centre of the Church's life, following the pattern of Jesus Christ seen in this passage.

In an era of global corporations, the Church could so easily think it is another one. But we are to be different. A connected network of communities loving our neighbours and loving our neighbourhoods.

"I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.....More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: Give them something to eat".

In my journey across the Diocese I have visited some remarkable ministries of compassion begun by local churches: foodbanks and homeless shelters and mental health charities and work with refugees. I often ask about how they started. More often than not they begin with just one or two Christians who come to stand, as it were, in front of the tomb of Lazarus. Their hearts are breaking, they are deeply disturbed and shaken and they know they have to do something. What follows from those moments can be years of remarkable and fruitful service.

On my visit to High Wycombe I listened to the story of how the homeless night shelter began. Churches had been talking for months about doing something. Then, tragically, one Christmas, a homeless person was found frozen to death near to the Baptist Church. Hearts were broken. Compassion led to action.

The credibility of our witness must be rooted in mercy and compassion. I walked down Cornmarket in Oxford on Saturday. I saw what you can see in most towns and cities on a Saturday afternoon: people witnessing to their faith. There was a man with a placard with a scripture verse. There was another speaking to the crowd with a friend giving out tracts. There was a table with literature about the Mormons.

I may be wrong but I think all of those ventures would be of limited effect. What makes a difference in towns and cities and villages across the country is compassion and mercy as the foundation for our witness and evangelism. We need to build on that compassion and mercy in the way we share our faith. But that slow, incarnational mission is vital.

2.35 million people live across the Diocese of Oxford in cities and towns and villages. In every place God has called an often fragile community of people to bear witness to what it means to live abundantly: to be contemplative, compassionate and courageous. To love God, to love others and to live with hope for the future and for the changing of the world.

This is the kind of church we are called to become.

3

We are exploring what it means to have life in all its fullness and to read the Lazarus story through this lens. At the beginning of the gospel of John we read “ In him was life and the life was the light of humankind”. At the end of the gospel: “As the Father sent me, so I sent you. David Ford has said that the most powerful words in John’s gospel are the little words, the conjunctions, the “as” in that verse. Jesus shows us life in all its fullness. That abundant life is first contemplative: abiding deep, enabling us to dance to a different song, loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

The abundant life is second compassionate: helping us to weep with those who weep, to be a people of mercy, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

You might think that love of God and love of neighbour says everything there is to say. But we also need to look and find in the story the Christ who is courageous. To be courageous is to face the future with hope and confidence in the purposes of God.

I would not want you to think for a moment that I am exploring these three words because I feel that I have even begun to understand what it means to be contemplative or compassionate or courageous. I wrestle with each one. I find this vocation to be as challenging personally as anyone here.

In particular I've wrestled all my life with the question of courage in ministry: with anxiety and self doubt and fear. At each stage on ministry as responsibility has increased so has my sense of not being adequate to the task. I'm working with a senior leadership coach at the moment as I go through this first year in Oxford and we are working specifically in the area of courage in leadership and ministry.

Through this story Jesus demonstrates immense courage. As he does in the other gospels, Jesus goes intentionally and deliberately to suffering and to death. In Luke he sets his face towards Jerusalem. In Mark and Matthew he predicts his death. Here in John, he makes the decision to return to Bethany when he knows that the Jews are seeking to stone him. Thomas and the others believe they are going with him to die with him.

Jesus walks towards difficulty and pain and danger despite his emotional turmoil. He offers himself to the purpose of God in this story out of love for his friends and obedience to his father.

Jesus walks towards pastoral pain and difficulty in his encounters with Martha and Mary. He takes his friends into difficulty and danger.

He stands before the tomb and calls out the dead, knowing that he holds the power of life and death yet knowing too the cost to him of calling Lazarus back from the grave.

I can only begin to imagine Jesus emotion as he stands before the tomb of Lazarus.

“Then Jesus again deeply 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 (and ever practical) 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 unbound him and let him go.”

I'm grateful to Margaret Bird I my small group for sharing this picture of the risen Lazarus and the risen Jesus: one remains bound. The other is gloriously set free. That liberation is an inner struggle as well as an outer one.

What does the word courageous mean? I was in Germany and I gave a talk around our three words and the beatitudes. I had a long discussion with my interpreter about how to translate courageous.

There is no exact German equivalent. In the end, he went for boldness or bravery, which is not quite the same.

To be courageous is to be whole hearted. The word courage comes from the Latin word cor meaning heart. To be encouraged is, literally, to have the heart put back into you. In the language of Jeremiah, to be given a new heart.

The Church is called to be Christ like. To be a Christ like Church means to become a more courageous church: to be whole hearted, to dare greatly together for the sake of the kingdom of God.

In the language of the beatitudes, the Church is to be courageous in being hungry and thirsty for justice. We are to be courageous in pursuing peace and reconciliation. We are to be courageous, like our Lord, in bearing the cost of our discipleship and the consistent boldness of our witness.

To be a contemplative Church is about the quality of our relationship with God, rooted in love. To be a compassionate church is about the quality of our relationships with our neighbours, in the Church and beyond it. To be courageous is about the quality of our relationship with the future. Courage for a Christian is grounded in hope: in the profound expectation that God is at work in the world.

This blend of courage and hope and faith is there in the story of Abraham and Sarah, daring to believe that, somehow, God would create a great nation even though they were in great old age. Courage, hope and faith are there in the story of Moses as he plants his staff on the shore of the Red Sea and invites the waters to part. Courage and hope and faith are their in the story of Elijah as he calls down fire from heaven. In the disciples as they proclaim the gospel on the day of Pentecost, in the church in every age as we bear witness to the faith.

We need to do all we can to nurture these seeds of hope. We need to remember that hope in the Christian life is not a mood but a virtue, like faith and love. Hope is a way of living not something that comes over you when the sun is shining and all is well with the world.

To be courageous as a Church is to write a whole hearted and bold story of our future, for old men and women to dream dreams and young men and women to see visions. To be courageous as a Church is to rest our hope and confidence in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, in the God who can do immeasurably more than all we can ask or even imagine.

Courage in our vision casting draws people together and draws energy and gifts to the task.

I was part of a local church once where we birthed a vision to see a thousand people come to faith in a single decade. That vision inspired prayer and sacrificial giving and many gifts offered in God's service. It was never realised quite as we envisaged it. But we did see that church more than double in size. We did see scores if not hundreds of people come to faith. And the material we developed in that place became the core of a set of materials called Emmaus and was translated into German and Dutch and Chinese and Korean and Welsh and used all over the world. More than we can ask or I imagine.

We saw something of the impact of fresh expressions yesterday in George Lings statistics. In 2004 I was asked to go and see Rowan Williams who asked me to set up and lead a new initiative based around the ideas in mission shaped church. To say those ideas were marginal is absolutely accurate. I asked Rowan how important this was to his ministry. He said immediately that it was one of his two priorities for the Church of England in his time as archbishop. That was a deeply courageous statement which has born immense fruit.

The Diocese of Sheffield in 2004 had just 8 million in historic reserves. We were celebrating our centenary. The Diocese took the immensely courageous decision to invest over 1 million in children's and youth workers in poorer parishes – a gesture that renewed hope and ministry right across the diocese.

There are many individual stories of similar hope and courage across the Diocese of Oxford in recent times. There are deep stories of courage and perseverance in our history not least the founding of our schools by Bishop Wilberforce. I visited the Lindengate centre in Wendover. We will see a clip this evening. The two founders have begun a whole new movement in mental health. Our Education department is full of courageous ambition. So are some of our larger churches and not so large ones as well.

Can we find that same courage to step out in faith, to dream dreams, to see God act, to invest boldly in this generation. I hope and pray so.

We have been considering today in our workshops six areas in which we might act together and draw up plans and invest resources.

- To Make a difference in the world
- To support and grow the local church
- To establish new churches and congregations
- To serve our schools
- To invest in Milton Keynes
- To renew discipleship and ministry

We will explore later and tomorrow the outcome of those conversations.

I hope we will aim to do all of these six things in a way which is contemplative: which arises from our vision of God and dwelling in God.

I hope we will aim to do all of these six things with compassion: that we will be motivated by love

But I hope as well that we will aim to do all of these things with great courage, recognising the times we are in, putting our whole selves into what we attempt, supporting one another and seeking to make a very significant difference in the lives of these communities in this generation.

I have said on a number of occasions as I have travelled the deaneries, I do not believe that this is a moment for the Church of England to mess around. We need to discern carefully what is right and then really go for it, to invest properly, to have the courage of our convictions and look for God to make an immense difference in the places where we serve.

May God give us grace to be together a contemplative, compassionate and courageous church across this Diocese. Amen.