

Lazarus, come out at this time of Covid 19!

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Lent 5 A. Jn 11.1-45

In these strange times, the readings set for today have an unusual poignancy –perhaps a completely new force – for us in the so-called ‘developed’ world. We’re not used to sickness and death being an immediate threat – not to us, and certainly not to absolutely everyone. We’ve never seen our wonderful health systems confronted with anything so overwhelming as this Covid 19 virus, nor so many people reacting out of fear and grief and confusion on anything like this scale.

Most of our younger people have grown up thoroughly insulated from death and mortality. But we’re all being woken up to a reality that’s always been a conscious part of life for most of the world’s people – the majority world – where the smell of decomposition is a normal part of life. There, questions of death and what comes next, questions of spirituality, questions of where God is in the midst of really challenging existences – these questions are quite literally in the air most people breathe there. And suddenly they’re everyone’s questions here too.

In our ‘developed-world’ lifestyle of materialistic choices and first-world problems, we’ve been largely unconscious of these life and death questions. We’re being woken up. So I wonder if we Christians of the developed world might hear today’s gospel in a new way; this story and the ones we’ll hear on Passion Sunday and then on through Holy Week and Easter. They’re all stories about death and resurrection. What new insights might we, the developed, sophisticated, deodorised people of the 21st century, learn to hear in this

story?

In our vernacular, the story of the raising of Lazarus is usually the province of political and sports commentary – X has made the greatest comeback since Lazarus. There's much more to this miracle than a comeback.

The power of death is confronted by the Lord of Life. And we are confronted by him too.

Let's join Martha and Mary. They send Jesus a message. It is a prayer; a deep, simple prayer – 'Lord, [our brother Lazarus] he whom you love is ill.' The message doesn't say what they expect Jesus to do, yet their grief and fear and hope are all palpable. But significantly for *us*, the first response they receive is the same response most of *us* feel like we receive when we pray for help; a long, bewildering silence. At least we know Martha and Mary's prayer has been heard.

It's painful to follow what ensues because of the delayed response. John's gospel tells how Jesus demands a discipleship from people which they find very challenging. John's lesson about discipleship is that it means learning to grow in the way we understand and follow Jesus – living more and more *into* his love. And that involves us changing and growing, because that's what life is. And change means saying goodbye to things you've grown out of, so that you can put on what fits you now. But new things—think new shoes—take some use before they are comfortable.

So instead of being straightforward and practical, in John's gospel, Jesus turns every prayer and every question people put to him into the starting point of a new and unnerving journey of change and growth in discipleship.

Today, we are uncharacteristically preoccupied with the frailty of our own physical life. We're dwelling on the loss of everything that seems normal – possibly even of ourselves. Where is God in this; where is Jesus in this?

Jesus knew what was going on for Lazarus; he told his disciples that Lazarus had died. But he wanted to turn Martha and Mary's prayer into an opportunity for their growth in discipleship. And he did just that. He took Martha from complaint to confession of him as Messiah – one of the greatest confessions in Scripture. And he took Lazarus from irreversible corruption to new life when he called him by name.

Jesus called Lazarus from his tomb by his name. So Lazarus was still the same person after death as in life; still able to respond to his beloved friend's call; his friend – who is now revealed as the Lord of life. For me, this means that the people who live in our hearts, but whose remains wait in our memorial gardens and graveyards are only as far from new life as their name is from the lips of our Saviour.

Jesus calls to life one in whom was no life. What does that call mean to us in this time of such confusion and fear?

I attend many funeral services. They all share a common tension with this story. Unless the person who died was a person rich in years, the grief always has an element in it which cries out to Jesus what Martha and Mary confronted him with; ²¹...*'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died ...* if Jesus loves us – he couldn't have meant this ... why could this happen?

Into that tumult of feelings, at the beginning of each funeral service, Jesus's words cry out to us from this very story of the raising of Lazarus: ²⁵...*'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,* ²⁶*and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'* He asks us all to trust, to entrust ourselves, to the One who is Lazarus' friend; the One who loved Lazarus – the One who is our friend; the One who loves us. In these strange times, and in this once-immune society,

let us entrust ourselves to the One who is the resurrection
and the Life. Amen