

The gift we share of the breath of life

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Lent 5A – Ez 37 1-14, Ps 130, Rm 8 6-11, Jn 11 1-45

Lazarus Sunday has been precious to me for a long time now. Every three years, we hear this story on the Sunday before Palm Sunday. In the Holy Land, the traditional Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem used to begin at *Al 'Azaria* – Lazarus's place – in the Biblical village of Bethany, over the far side of the Mount of Olives. The march began at Lazarus's tomb – the place where, once upon a time, the people of that district were given a sign by Jesus that God's love for us – God's commitment to us – is stronger than death. The people of Bethany have never let the memory of this sign pass from knowledge.

On Palm Sunday nearly 30 years ago, my family walked the road from Bethany to Jerusalem amongst the enormous annual throng of Christians from the various Palestinian churches, and with a great many others who, like us, came from churches of all nations. Tragically, that way is now blocked by the separation wall, so Palestinian Christians who live beyond it can't join in the march any more.

The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death to life has had added poignancy for me too since we attended a funeral in Papunya of one who died too young. Just like in the story of Lazarus, the whole community joined with the family, supporting them in wave after wave of heart-broken wailing. I felt myself longing there for the voice of Jesus to cry out again – to call our beloved friend back from death to life.

Jewish leaders and their community gathered with Mary and Martha and wept with them. The shared love and sadness of a

whole community is both beautiful and shattering. John's story tells us that Jesus joined with them in their weeping; that Jesus shares in our sadness as we mourn; Jesus *also* loves the ones we mourn.

This story also tells us that Jesus risks more than just sharing in our sadness. When he decides to respond to the call of Mary and Martha, his disciples remind him of the danger that confronts him there. ⁷ *[when] he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.'* ⁸ *They ... said to him, 'Rabbi, the leaders of the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?'*

The American Lutheran scholar, Karoline Lewis writes that for John's Gospel "it's the raising of Lazarus to life that incites the plot for Jesus' arrest and death ^{11:53, 57}. In the verses which follow today's reading about the raising of Lazarus, ^{11:46-57}, the chief priests and the Pharisees are told what Jesus has done, and *from that day on they planned to put him to death*. More than that, the chief priests want to get rid of the evidence as well, and they plan to put Lazarus to death *since it was on account of him that many of their people were deserting and were believing in Jesus* ^{12:9-11}. It's Jesus' claim, *I am the resurrection and the life* ^{11:25} that provokes his death in the Fourth Gospel."

I attend many funeral services – few like that one in Papunya – but they all share a tension with this story from John's Gospel. And unless the one who's died was a person rich in years, the grief always has an element in it which says to Jesus what Martha and then Mary said to him. ²¹ *'Lord, if you had been here, this one would not have died.'* If Jesus loves us, why did this happen?

Into that tumult of feelings, and at the beginning of each funeral service, Jesus's words cry out to us from this story:

²⁵...*'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'* He asks us all, and I guess the answer varies for each one of us, from one day to the next.

Martha shared a faith in resurrection which had been nurtured in part, I assume, by our reading from the prophet Ezekiel today. It's a vision of God's power and will to raise the dead to life again; to restore us to our families and our friends. Ezekiel records something extraordinary though. Even after the bones have come together, the sinews, flesh and skin have come on them, and even the breath has restored them to life, God still refers to them as 'these bones'. Ezekiel is telling us that their life, and ours, is entirely and always dependent on God – moment by moment. Without God, we are very dry bones.

In this vision, God addresses us directly: ¹²*Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."*

Then we will know.

It's important for us to ponder all these things a week out from Palm Sunday. They raise questions we must face about our own life, and our death. What do we make too of these images and words which have shaped our faith and our values. What is our image of Jesus as we enter the week before his public self-offering? What is our understanding of resurrection?

Ezekiel and Jesus both make a distinction between mere resurrection or resuscitation and the fulness of life. And so

we need to ask ourselves what we are doing with the gift we share of the breath of life. Are we only apparently living, like those reconstituted dry bones? If we are, can we hear the voice which calls us by name to come out to life again? Will we come out? Are we open to receiving abundant life? My prayer is that we are, and that we can open ourselves and others to this gift. Amen