

## **An Online 'Sermon' for Passiontide**

Next Sunday (29 March 2020) sees the start of Passiontide. The readings are Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130 & Romans 8:6-11. The Gospel is the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45).

So, just when you thought you'd escaped the sermon slot, here's a brief reflection from me for Passion Sunday:

*We now enter the most difficult and solemn period of the Church calendar as the journey inexorably leads Jesus through some of the most familiar and profound territory of human experience: those times in life when things are heavy going, and may feel unbearable; when we are fearful of what lies ahead; that terrible feeling of being abandoned by God - alone, exposed and vulnerable; times of psychological and emotional anguish, physical pain and the inevitability of having to face up to death itself - something each of us must do one day. The church building, usually ornate and colourful, is now made stark and bare, with pictures and statues veiled, to symbolise the harshness and desolation of it all. Easter, though only two weeks away, somehow seems distant from today's perspective: there is a long road to travel first, and it is called the way of the cross.*

*Today's readings, however, already point towards the fact that these things – including death itself - will not have the last word. For example, Ezekiel's quite surreal vision of the valley of dry bones is an image of Israel, broken and hopeless after the fall of Jerusalem, to all intents and purposes 'dead' in captivity in Babylon. God's promise is that they will be restored: a host of skeletons will become again a mighty nation, when they repossess their God-given homeland.*

*The Gospel account of the raising of Lazarus is, in many ways, a foreshadowing of the story of Jesus's own death and resurrection. It is one of a number of miracles ('signs', as John's Gospel refers to them), intended to make plain the significance of Jesus. For me, the main focus here is not so much on the raising of Lazarus, but on the portrayal of Jesus himself. Anyone who has experienced the death of someone close to them will recognise the scene in this story. We see Jesus – human, shaken and mourning - weeping at the death of his friend, Lazarus, and sharing the sorrow of bereavement with Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary. Even Jesus, who in John's Gospel says, 'I am the resurrection and the life', finds himself in tears. It is one of those extraordinary moments when we see straight into the heart of the paradoxical things Christianity says about God. Here is Jesus, about to demonstrate God's absolute power of life over death - as first Lazarus is raised, and, later, he himself would rise - reacting as we all might to a life cut short, the desolation of losing someone we love, and sharing the pain of others who mourn him, too.*

*As if any of us needs reminding, suffering is an inescapable part of the human condition. For all the advances that science has brought, life is still often framed by*

*pain. Birth involves physical distress - before later joy - for the mother. And those of us who have watched with, and cared for, the dying are only too aware that death, for too many, comes after physical pain, and can leave a numbing pain in the hearts of the bereaved. Humans, throughout recorded time, have had the goal of alleviating pain. But since pain – physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual - cannot be totally eliminated, it must be faced, contemplated and, indeed, used to come to a fuller understanding of what it is to be human. Passiontide offers precisely that opportunity - which is why so many of us find it hard going. But you can't rush the way of the cross - or death. Besides, we know human life isn't like that, and the world is not like that. We may have to face any number of Maundy Thursdays and Good Fridays in our lives and in our world before we can celebrate the sunrise on Easter morning.*

*The good news (and this is what is unique about the Christian perception of God) is that the Jesus story demonstrates God's willingness to share the vicissitudes of life in the world. In contemplating his experience, we can begin to grapple with the significance of suffering in the world and in our own lives. Jesus's outstretched arms on the cross are certainly a symbol of the cruel and lingering pain of his death. But they also convey another, I think more powerful, message. They are the open arms of a compassionate figure extending an embrace to all who suffer. Here, surely, is the divine compassion at its most intensely human.*

*The tomb wasn't the end of the story of Lazarus. However trapped we may feel in tombs that events put us in, or those of our own making, today we hear that stones can be rolled away and that we may somehow hear the words Jesus spoke to the crowd as Lazarus left his tomb: 'Unbind him; take off the grave clothes, and let him go!' And so Lazarus walked forth, though, of course, one day he would have to die again! On Good Friday, Jesus died. But on Easter Day, the Lazarus story happened all over again, except that Jesus left the place of death for **ever**. Because he did that, whatever entombs us, or our world – including death itself – need not have the last word. Of course, that doesn't mean an end to suffering and pain, and we will still weep when things prove too much to bear - not least in bereavement; that is only human. But, two thousand years on, the Christian story still encourages us to take heart from the new possibilities symbolised by the resurrection.*

I realise many of you will be receiving the RTM newsletter, too, so it isn't my intention to bombard you during this period. I will email from time to time, with at least a brief reflection for the coming Sunday and any news specific to St John's. However, just let me know if you'd rather not receive these, and I'll remove your name from the distribution list.

With my prayers and best wishes,

Neil

Revd. Neil Summers,  
Team Vicar, St. John the Divine