

29<sup>th</sup> March 2020

# Lent V

Readings Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:

John 11:1-45

We stood at the front of the house, well back from the pavement, to see Vicki's coffin driven slowly by. Sophia and Yemi walked, dignified, confident, even managing a smile and wave to us as they made their way to Church. I could not go with them for the, now, not uncommon reason. Thank God, Diane could lead the service. We read and prayed and sang "How can I keep from singing?" in the living room. I was more frustrated for them, though, given only ten people could be there. It was not the huge gathering we had anticipated. Inwardly, I am thinking also of Dilys Prescott's family. She died this week and, after all those years' commitment and prayer and witty fellowship at All Saints since before I was born, now her funeral won't be in church.

Is it tactless or reassuring now opening John's gospel to find Jesus wilfully missing a burial, then turning up at a huge funeral gathering? Many of us want to be there for someone and cannot be, physically at least. By contrast we heard of the terrible discovery of the bodies of residents of several older people's care homes in Spain abandoned by staff. That is just about as bleak as news can be. Is it tactless or reassuring, then, this week to overhear Martha reminding Jesus about the stench of death? Is the vivid reversal of decay in Ezekiel's vision, rattling bones, sinew, flesh and skin, too much to bear just now? While friends struggle for breath and desperate orders are put in for ventilators, is Paul's talk of the breath of God's Spirit hurtful or inspiring?

It is touching that there was a large gathering to support this odd little family of unmarried siblings whom Jesus loved and on whom he relied for shelter and good food. (Both Luke and John show them giving him dinner.) Mary and Martha are quite talkative, but Lazarus is silent. They represent for us three very different spiritual characters, Mary devoted and emotionally daringly demonstrative, listening at Jesus feet (Luke 10:35ff) and (John Chapter 12) anointing his feet with costly perfume. Martha is more clipped in speech, but intellectually lively, interested in doctrine, with a strong sense of justice. When Martha challenges Jesus with his neglect, "If you had been here Lazarus would not have died," she does so quite formally (Gk *Eipen*). It is both statement of faith in his power and criticism of his neglect. She is soon into theology with him, teasing out a creed, perhaps intellectualising as a way of coping as much as anything. We notice she trusts and pulls back, trusts and pulls back, not quite daring to believe Jesus can do anything now. The reminder of the stench of the tomb is a last jerk back from hope before the astonishing revival of her brother.

When Mary makes the same challenge "if you had been here..." she speaks with more passion (Gk *Leguso*). Indeed she didn't at first go out and see him at all. Martha addresses him standing, Mary knelt at his feet, making the accusation and the devotion both seem stronger. What is beautiful about this is that Martha's apparent lesser feeling does allow her to get on with practicalities and in fact persuade the apparently more devoted, and therefore maybe more hurt, Mary to go and see

Jesus after all. In Luke's encounter with them, it was the other way around. Mary's devotion helped Martha re-calibrate and get back in touch.

Some have wondered if Lazarus lived with a disability of some kind. He is silent, absorbing, listening, a non-assertive male (normally the house would be in his name, but Luke calls it Martha's), his presence seeming to nurture fellowship among others. Was it their response to need that drew Jesus to them? We know they argued. (Luke 10:40) Was it their awkwardly loving life together, complementing each other? Or did he love the way, even from their disadvantage, they seemed to be important to the rest of the community, and so brought out the best in people? Could it be that they are a glimpse of Jesus' hope for the church?

There will be frictions in our restricted homes this week, surely. Jesus does not expect perfection and seems to have been drawn to a kind of loving imperfection. Each of us has different ways of expressing our frustration and our need. One person's need can at some point turn out to be exactly the gift that another needs. Our different foibles are meant to complement each other.

The siblings' trust is expressed before they get their brother back. This is what moves Jesus. It is not a bargain they make. Beholding the crowd around him and the dear friends before him, Jesus weeps because here, the focal point of an amphitheatre of grief, he absorbs the human condition. He takes in just what it is to be a grieving human being who is faced with the stench and decay of death, or who attends a funeral afraid of what will be said at their own, or who longs for a family like that one over there, or who lives with cruel disability or lives in fear of the authorities, but who still can't help believing in God. God is moved. In tears, God recognises the consequences for his creatures of the gift of their much wanted freedom. Jesus' tears are prisms refracting human hope in the face of death; our indignation at suffering; our defiant readiness to do something beautiful and do something together when disaster strikes. Martha's and Mary's faith and Jesus' tears were shown before Lazarus was restored to them. This story would still matter even if he wasn't. That he was is disruptive, unsettling and unfair. But just as we can't help believing in God, perhaps Jesus couldn't help that one time breaking in with a sign that their indignation is right. Lazarus should not be dead. One day we will all rise. This disruptive event is a tremor ahead of that great day showing it will come.

It is important that the story is so graphic. For, on the one hand it exposes our mixed motives and any religious naivety with which we may be tempted to varnish over life. It purges away our tendency to want to do deals with God. On the other hand, it challenges God, bringing before him the blind cruelty of a virus, or whatever took Lazarus' life. John begins, of course, with the assertion that Jesus is the Word made flesh, so the one through whom all things were made is now standing still, listen to a grieving woman describe the decay of human flesh that is part of the creation.

There is one more unsettling word to dwell on. It's tiny. In Greek it is "hina" or "so that" in verse 4. This illness is not leading to death, but is there so that God's glory can be revealed, Jesus asserts alarmingly. But like the man's blindness in last week's reading. This "so that" is an ironic, almost sarcastic seizing of tragedy to force some good out of it. It is in the defiant Hebrew tradition of casting God as manipulating their oppressors (Pharaoh, Babylon, Rome) so as to marginalise their evil and search for anything good they can learn from tragedy. Just so here, Jesus will make something beautiful emerge from grief.

As a virus makes its stealthy way around the world today, we can make up some cheap theology about God “sending it” because of some sin or other. That is usually a shallow way to underwrite our lurid fascination with others’ sin. We could dismiss God as irresponsible for making such things and then find somewhere to hide and nurse our resentment. Or, we could pick up the accent of Hebrew Christian defiance and say “what can we learn from this chaotic threat? What wisdom is to be grown defiantly from the crisis?”

Perhaps it is to feel the ache of absence and wonder who to give an encouraging call to. Perhaps we feel isolated and day by day realise more and more the tragedy of isolation too many live with ordinarily. Perhaps, finding a tin of anchovies at the back of a cupboard\*, as we re-discover how precious is the food ordinarily accessible to us that we start to recognise the scandal and outrage of 25% and 30% food waste being an ordinary state of affairs in this country. Perhaps as we re-consider which jobs are essential, hierarchies may be scrambled, and we find cleaners somewhere near the top rather than the bottom. Maybe the cleaner air over our cities will be an encouragement to spur on our response to climate change. A summer without public exams might remind us what they are really for and how neurotic and bureaucratic they have become.

We may also be able to re-evaluate past decisions. That hostile environment for migrants: how does that look now as a friend of ours approaches the end of her nursing training after years of struggle with cruel treatment from the Home Office? How does the destruction of local education authorities look now we need local coordination of schooling for essential workers’ children?

We are all worried at the moment. Some may find it hard to speak with God at all. We can encourage each other, though, some speaking with God when they can on others’ behalf. Brandish the fear and indignation at God, by all means, but then with Martha and Mary and Lazarus, say “Even so we’re sticking with you to make good come of this. For we can’t help believing in you.”

#### A PRAYER

As we watch this little Bible family find its rhythm, help us in our diverse households to make room for you. In a time of enforced togetherness, where there is friction, keep us honest; where there is need, keep us tender; where there is grief, give us patience. In a time of enforced isolation, where there is loneliness, keep us company; where there is dullness, stir our thanksgiving; where there is fear, give us peace. Together or apart, help us to appreciate one another’s intellect, to admire each other’s devotion, to notice anyone’s silence. Help us to enjoy each other without jealousy and imagine what wonders you can do when we welcome you among us.

O breath of life, **come sweeping through us.**

Witnessing Lazarus’ burial rites, we pray for all involved in caring for the bereaved and honouring the dead, for mortuary staff, for funeral directors, for coroners and lawyers, for cemetery staff and bereavement counsellors. We pray for all who have to look hard at the graphic detail most of us turn away from. Affirm their vocation and help them steer their careful way between hardness of heart and despair. We pause to pray for those older people abandoned in Spain, that you will absorb and transform the terrible array of feelings that ensue. Assure all who love them that they are now safe in your eternal care.

O breath of life, **come sweeping through us.**

Mary and Martha embolden us to bring you our criticism, our sense of injustice, our need, our resentment, and especially our indignation on behalf of all who struggle for breath and all who grieve. We trust that you will absorb it all and honour it with your tears. Then, enlivened by your Spirit, turn us outward to speak more kindly with each other and attend well to one another's needs. There we will find you are working with us to bring about the healing we indignantly ask you to perform.

O breath of life, **come sweeping through us.**

We pray for our political leaders and advisers, for hospital staff at every level, decisions to make on a dizzying scale. We pray for anyone seeing their business, their plans or their country in disarray, little more hopeful than Ezekiel's dry bones in the valley. Let them feel the breath of your Spirit begin to stir their courage. You have raised a whole nation to new life before. You raised Christ from the dead. You promise to breathe through us, not fix things for us, so make us ready and expectant. Already, in our present crisis, you stir ingenuity and imagination, connecting us in new ways. Help us like St Paul, to accept the humbling limitation of our flesh, yet be open to the vast possibilities of your Spirit.

O breath of life, **come sweeping through us.**

\*A RECIPE for two

Finely chop a large clove of garlic. Fry gently in olive oil until just beginning to colour and add four or five chopped brown anchovies from that tin you found in the cupboard. Stir until almost dissolved and add a tin of tomatoes. Simmer gently for twenty minutes or so, mashing the tomatoes, stirring regularly, loosening with a spoon of water if it begins to reduce too much.

Cook pasta for two, drain and drizzle with olive oil. Serve with the now emulsified rich sauce. A fine grating of cheese (ideally parmesan but, hey, not everyone has that in) and you have a truly delicious dish. It shouldn't need salt because of the anchovies and cheese. A twist of pepper is good.