

Sermon for Sunday 26 March

Passion Sunday

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14; Romans 8: 6 – 11; John 11: 1 – 45

The God of life

The clocks changed last night, so we're now officially into British Summer Time, and today we move into Passiontide. The buds on the vicarage magnolia tree are about to burst open. There is life burgeoning all around us. It reminds me that God is the creator and the sustainer of everything on our planet, the God of life.

So how does all of that fit with starting to focus on Jesus' death as we move towards Holy Week and Good Friday? Well, our readings today also remind us that God is the God of life. Life brought out of death. And death that brings life to us all.

We know Jesus was close to Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who lived at Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem, and often visited them. When Lazarus is ill they send a message to Jesus to let

him know, presumably in the hope that Jesus will come and heal him. But Jesus deliberately delays because, as he says, "this illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it." Finally, he decides to go to Judea, but the disciples are worried, knowing that opposition is building and his life is in danger. When they arrive, Lazarus has already died. First Martha and then Mary come out to meet Jesus with the identical words, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Martha's words lead on to a conversation. Martha expresses her faith in Jesus' power and her belief that He is the Messiah. Jesus proclaims that he is indeed, "the resurrection and the life." By contrast, Mary weeps. Jesus, moved by her weeping and the grief of those around her, also weeps. We see his true humanity as He shares in their grief, and when they come to the tomb, he is "greatly disturbed". Somewhat reluctantly, they roll away the stone from the tomb in obedience to his command, and Jesus calls 'Lazarus, come out!'. Lazarus stumbles out into the light, still bound in

the grave clothes. “Unbind him and let him go” says Jesus.

The story of Lazarus is about dying and living. It takes us from sickness, death and grief to resurrected life. It comes at a pivotal moment in John’s Gospel. It’s the last of the great signs that proclaim who Jesus is. It seems only five minutes since I was preaching about the first one – the wedding at Cana, at the end of January. The raising of Lazarus is a stunning exhibition of Jesus’ power. The proof that he is indeed ‘the resurrection and the life’ as he proclaims.

But as Jesus brings life back to Lazarus, he surely knows that this act brings him closer to his own death. Early in the story He refers to the Son of God being glorified through Lazarus’ illness. But in the Gospel of John, for the Son of Man to be glorified is a reference to his death on the Cross. Perhaps that is one reason why Jesus is so disturbed as he approaches Lazarus’ tomb. It is not only his own grief at the loss of his friend, his very human sympathy for those who mourn. He knows his own death to be near.

“Lazarus come out!” “Unbind him and let him go.” Lazarus walks free. God’s power breaks into our world through Jesus. There must have been amazement, joy, fear, bewilderment. Some believe in Jesus. Others report Him to the Pharisees.

Jesus continues his journey to the Cross. That is the cost of our freedom.

Writing in the light of the Resurrection, Paul reminds us that if we belong to Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us. Right since Adam and Eve, human beings have always had the tendency to choose death. But the Spirit that lives in us gives life, making it possible for us to live as followers of Jesus. We are freed from everything that leads to death.

We can only share in God’s abundant life because God, in Jesus, is prepared to share in our death. So, as we prepare to mark Holy Week and to enter into the Passion of Jesus, let us thank Him that His death sets us free.

“Unbind him and let him go.” The God of life died
for us so that we can live for Him.

Amen