

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

Sunday 2nd April, 2017 - 5th Sunday of Lent

GOSPEL READING John 11: 1-45

EPISTLE READING Romans 8:6-11

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

The stench of death is hardly something that brings cheer. This harsh reality has hit those who loved Lazarus. The word goes out to Jesus to come, but for whatever reason he takes his sweet time to arrive. And when he gets there it is far too late for his friend.

Grief often causes us to lash out in pain. "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

In some ways the stench of death clings to those yet living. We feel that all hope has gone, desolate like dry bones. Or perhaps the heavy blanket of grief keeps us in our own beds, unable to move, without desire to move. The death of a loved one can be like death for those who endure the pain of it.

Although it can be far more subtle than this too. We often live in ways that are short of the abundance that God imagines for us. Every time a word is spoken in anger; or one is betrayed; or when there is no path to forgiveness; or when one is isolated, cast out, called unclean, or dismissed as a fool – death comes where life ought to be.

I wonder what has cut you this week or robbed you of life and joy? I wonder what has wrapped you up and taken your breath, or slowed you down, or knocked the wind out of you?

Martha points towards Jesus. If only you had been here, my brother would not have died! How many things do we carry like that? If only, if only we had done or not done! How quickly guilt can bind us. How quickly it robs us of life, even though we live.

It was four days before Jesus arrived. There must now be a stench because the soul would only linger for three days around a body, or so the Jews believed. Lazarus is now proper dead. He is beyond redemption. Soul-less, life-less, as certain as the pattern of life and death.

Almost everyone in Jesus' day believed in the resurrection of the dead. Martha believes it. When Jesus tells her her brother will rise again, she agrees. 'Yes, it will be in the last day, at the end of the age.' There is no comfort in these words - Lazarus and our hopes remain bound in a tomb. But Jesus wants Martha to see deeper. So he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

It is difficult to believe, and see. We perhaps long for a world of miracles where our loved ones are raised back to life like Lazarus. Or we long for a world where those who are blind have their sight restored. But all through the gospel, these signs or miracles are invitation to see far deeper than the physical world. When Nicodemus is invited to be born anew, it is an invitation to be born in the Spirit. When the Samaritan woman is invited to drink, it is from a well of living water that comes from God. When those blind are invited to see, it is not eyes that are the problem, but hearts that are blind to the spirit and identity of Jesus.

So, do you believe – that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?

In response to the question, Martha says something extraordinary. 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' And this realisation happens before they head to the grave and fear the stench in opening it. Martha has insight that perhaps meant the raising of Lazarus was not necessary. Except that we are still onlookers, still seeking to fathom this riddle of life and death.

And so Jesus calls the one bound in the grave to 'come out'.

Come out and drop those wrappings of death. Come out from the darkness and into the light. Come out from all that is death and embrace the author of life.

There is a beautiful blessing about Lazarus that comes from Jan Richardson. (see <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>)

*The secret
of this blessing
is that it is written
on the back
of what binds you.*

*To read
this blessing,
you must take hold
of the end
of what
confines you,
must begin to tug
at the edge
of what wraps
you round.*

*It may take long
and long
for its length
to fall away,
for the words
of this blessing
to unwind
in folds
about your feet.*

*By then
you will no longer
need them.*

*By then this blessing
will have pressed itself
into your waking flesh,
will have passed
into your bones,
will have traveled
every vein*

*until it comes to rest
inside the chambers
of your heart
that beats to
the rhythm
of benediction*

*and the cadence
of release.*

Doesn't Jesus call us out from all that wraps us up, from all that binds us and keeps us in the dark? Doesn't he invite us into a heart that beats the very heartbeat of God and a breath that is the Spirit breathing us into life?

I think this is what Ezekiel's image of dry bones that rise and breathe again is about. And I think this is what Paul points to when he addresses the church in Rome about what is life and what is death.

Let go of what binds you, what robs you of life, what hinders and drives your flesh and distracts you from the life of abundance you are called to. Tug away at what confines you, or at least listen to the voice that calls you. 'Come out'. Come out and up and into the light and life that only the resurrection and the life can offer.

Come out and discover the cadence of release. In the name of Christ.
Amen.