

NEW LIFE FOR LAZARUS¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, 29 March 2020

Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

Who is Lazarus, that Jesus should so unceremoniously summon him from the grave? What entitlement has he to this special attention? What has he done to excite Jesus' interest in his return to life? Why should he, and not the countless other dead of first century Palestine, be the object of this demonstration of supernatural powers?

At first reading the matter may appear to be quite plain. Lazarus was the brother of the two sisters of Bethany, Mary and Martha. These two women are mentioned as sisters in Saint Luke's gospel, where their personal styles are contrasted. Mary sat at Jesus' feet, while Martha rushed about preparing food. Martha complains to Jesus about Mary's laziness, but Jesus points out the necessity of quietness and waiting in the midst of the busy rush of the world.² The two sisters have the same characteristics in this story. Their brother, Lazarus, appears only in John's gospel.

What is both clear and important is that all of the actors in this story are friends of Jesus. Lazarus is particularly described as one whom Jesus loved. This is a story about what Jesus is prepared to do for those whom he loves. Who is Lazarus? He is a person whom Jesus loves.

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But why? Why should Lazarus obey this peremptory summons? Perhaps he feels that he is better off dead. I must confess that I have a Monty Python vision of an alternative story of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus is standing in front of the tomb and calls Lazarus out. From within the tomb comes Lazarus's voice, "No! Go away! I'm not coming out. What's so good about living anyway? I'd only have to go back home. What with Martha busy, busy everywhere, you can't even sit down before she starts sweeping under your feet. And Mary, always washing her hair in case you come to dinner. And what about Palestine anyway? Grasping priests, Roman conquerors, good Samaritans everywhere doing neighbourly acts. I'm staying put! In any case, you're too late. I'm half way to heaven. I've started harp lessons and been measured for my halo. Go away!"

But this is a serious question. At least some traditions of Christian teaching suggest that my Monty Python Lazarus is correct. Life is wretched. It is something to be escaped from. Even if we do not wish immediately to escape through death, we may wish our religion to provide a form of escape. In practical terms also, this view is correct. The raised Lazarus did go home to Mary and Martha with all of the advantages and disadvantages of their former life together. He did return to an unsatisfactory social and political situation. He continued to be robbed by tax collectors, intimidated by a religion of rules and regulations and oppressed by foreign conquerors. And he would later fall sick and die a second time. What was Jesus offering him by calling him from the grave?

Jesus might have replied in the following way, "I know that things are bad. I'm not offering an escape from the problems of everyday life. Nobody who follows me can expect to be insulated from its ordinary pressures. Many things will be harder. But I am calling you to a new kind of living."

¹ Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

² Luke 10: 38-42

Perhaps we have Lazarus' objection all wrong. What he might have objected to was being used by Jesus as a demonstration case. Perhaps he knew that, if he came out, he would be the centre of some unwelcome attention. The Pharisees would have him before the Committee as quick as anything, just as they did with the blind man in Chapter 9 of John's gospel, which we read last Sunday. He may even find himself blamed for being the subject of Jesus' attention. In any case, everyone from all around would come and look at him.³ Perhaps it would be better if Jesus could manage to do the raising in private. Then Lazarus would have the advantage of it without the attendant publicity.

We can easily recognise these objections. If the Christian faith is to offer anything, it ought to offer release from the trials of life. What is the use of responding to a call if no tangible benefit ensues? Very natural reactions, but ones for which there is not the slightest support in the Bible. Jesus nowhere promises an easy life for his followers; on the contrary, he promises difficulties. There is not the slightest suggestion that Christians are to be free from the ordinary troubles of life, from sickness, personal and marital difficulties and so on, including COVID-19.

Neither is there any suggestion that Christianity is primarily, or only, a matter of personal spiritual belief, without any corresponding public or social consequences. On the contrary, Christianity is amongst the most materialistic of religions. If the Incarnation means anything, it means that the whole of life is encompassed in God's activity. One part of it cannot be discarded for another.

Having recognised these objections and rejected them what do we imagine that Jesus is actually offering Lazarus? He is offering a new life, a life that is new because it is one in the company of Jesus himself. In external appearances it is the same. It is in the same old location, with the same old family, but it is transformed by the continuing presence of the Christ.

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Why is Jesus doing this? Why pick out poor old dead Lazarus in this way? Or rather, why is the author of the gospel telling us about this event? It is not simply because, if true, it is amazing, although it certainly is. The author of this gospel is not trying to dazzle us with spectacular events. In any case, in his day, every religious leader was believed to do miracles. The ancient world would have been much less impressed by this event than we are.

This story has a number of purposes and has been constructed to achieve the maximum emotional impact. One purpose, which is not immediately obvious, is that it serves to combat the Docetic heresy. This was the tendency to believe that God only "appeared" to become human in Jesus, that Jesus only "appeared" to die on the cross, and thus only "appeared" to rise again from the dead. This view was derived from ancient stories of gods disguising themselves as humans. There are some inferences to this view in the New Testament. This story shows a truly human Jesus, with emotions exactly like ours.⁴

It is also significant that Jesus delayed his arrival until Lazarus had been dead for four days. Common belief was that the spirit of the deceased left the body after four days. At this time the effects of physical corruption began to appear and resurrection would not be possible. Jesus' own resurrection after three days might have given credence to Docetic views and this story is intended to combat them.

³ John 12:9-11

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_wept See also <https://readingacts.com/2018/03/26/was-1-john-written-to-answer-docetism/>

But the story has two other major and more obvious functions. The first is to foreshadow in the flow of this gospel the resurrection of Jesus himself. It is to reassure us that whatever might happen next, all is not lost. Resurrection, the triumph of light over darkness, the victory of love over evil, is central to the heart of this gospel.

The second purpose is to provide a framework for Jesus' magnificent assertion, "I am the resurrection and the life." What Jesus offers Lazarus is in truth himself. He offers what will overcome death; that over which death has no power: his own love. It is a great pity that we most often hear "I am the resurrection and the life" at funerals. For this message is not primarily to comfort the relations of the deceased about the fate of their loved one. It is a message for all of us, living as well as dead. It is a message about the quality of Christ's love and presence; about the enduring power of his life, death and resurrection.

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Lazarus, Jesus' friend, is called to live his old life in a new way, to enter into that new life with Jesus, supported by a love of such quality that even death pales into insignificance. But who is this Lazarus, who is called from death to life? Who is this Lazarus? I am this Lazarus. You are this Lazarus. To whom else is Jesus calling but to me? To whom else is Jesus calling but to you?

If we are in any doubt about what this call means in today's world, we should listen to Pope Francis who, on Friday, delivered his traditional *Urbi et Orbi*, "City and World", address and blessing from an empty St Peter's Square. He said:

Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. ... You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of *choosing*. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people—often forgotten people—who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time ...⁵

That is why we are Lazarus, hearing the call from death to life.

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⁵ https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/27/read-pope-francis-urbi-et-orbi-address-coronavirus-and-jesus-calming-storm?fbclid=IwAR2JSp_6XEtred92DIEV20f1eo4WjQ15mxMRNU7gGRtrYfcFnp1aGWO0GQ