

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

11.00am Choral Eucharist

All Saints' Sunday [3 November 2024]

readings: Isaiah 25. 6-9; Revelation 21. 1-6a; John 11. 32-44

In our Gospel reading this morning, we witness Jesus performing what has got to be among the most dramatic acts of his ministry – that of raising another human being from the dead. For if we consider all his healings and other miracles, which of them can really come close to matching such an extraordinary feat? To overcome death itself – what St Paul later described as ‘the last enemy’ – surely this is the gold standard for expressing the power of faith to mould our human experience. Of course, I could stand here for the next several minutes agonizing over whether we’re obliged to take this story literally, or if we might somehow get away with reducing it to metaphor, and thereby preserve our own precious notions of rationality. But that, it seems to me, would be a largely fruitless exercise. Because those of you already willing entertain the possibility of miraculous action will most likely carry on doing so, regardless of anything I can say, and those of you are aren’t, won’t. What does seem to me worth considering, though, is just how much of the narrative power of this story is actually located somewhere other than in the act of resuscitation itself. If the physical raising of Lazarus isn’t exactly an afterthought, then, neither is it the only point of interest or concern to us. And this fact alone tells us something crucial, not just about this particular moment, but all such miraculous moments throughout the life and ministry of Jesus.

As the passage opens here, the scene is fraught with grief and confusion. Of Lazarus’ two sisters, it isn’t surprising that it’s Mary who confronts Jesus upon arrival, given that elsewhere she’s always shown her eagerness to be as close to him as possible. Even so, her expression of disappointment in him is jarring – how rare it is for anyone to talk to Jesus this way, indeed, to suggest that he’s somehow failed to live up to his responsibilities. But quickly it becomes obvious that Mary is simply caught up the wider distress that has overtaken the whole community, such that her weeping is accompanied by the weeping of everyone else around her. And in a mixture of sadness and frustration, Jesus himself is immediately drawn into this same grief, such that we encounter the succinct and unforgettable phrase, that ‘Jesus wept’ (v.35). *Jesus wept*. Why have these words always resonated so powerfully with so many people? Years ago, when I was a student in Dublin, I’d sometimes overhear this phrase muttered by people on the bus or in the pub or on the street, usually to express sadness, or anger or incredulity. And while I know that some would say that uttering this phrase is a kind of profanity, for me, it’s always had a much more positive resonance. Because when someone spontaneously says these words, I hear it as an affirmation – an affirmation that God is in fact among his people in the face of their struggles. Despite, or perhaps because of its brevity, it reminds us that Christ experienced the fullness of our human condition, not excluding the grief and rage that comes with losing a loved one, or indeed, having to stare mortality in the face. And this is not just a show of solidarity to make us somehow feel better about ourselves; this is Jesus really suffering, suffering right alongside us as a fellow human being. And with these tears we can be sure there is not just grief, but also the other feelings that death so often brings: loneliness, anger, regret, exhaustion, and also, as the ever-practical Martha points out, the sheer stench of it as well. All these things, it seems to me, are somehow contained in those two simple words: ‘Jesus wept’.

So the miracle, when it finally comes, can only really be approached through this heavy and complex atmosphere of emotion. And this, far more than the supernatural aspects of the event, is really what gives the raising of Lazarus its immediacy for those who witness it. They, every bit as much as dead man himself, experience here the lifting of what the prophet Isaiah calls ‘the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations’ (Is 25.7). In this moment they see the world in a different way, with a new sense of possibility and a new sense of expectation. Not because they have escaped the eventuality of death – no one does – but

because they finally see that it doesn't have to be the defining experience of life. In the same way, those of us who have gathered here today are able to hear this story anew, not as a test of our credulity but rather as a testament – the testament to a world in which our fear and our anxiety finally take their place among more ultimate concerns.

Before I finish, I'd like to turn briefly to our All Saints' celebration today, which may seem like a bit of a gear-shift, but which does actually, I think, bear some relation to what I've just been saying. Because when the Church calls upon us to honour the saints each year, those people in Christian history who have demonstrated exceptional faith or enjoyed some form of beatific vision, the temptation is always to place these people on a pedestal, as though they were another category of person altogether. But to do so is in fact to rob them of an important part of their sainthood, which is that they were, and are, and will be, people who in the fullness of their humanity reached out to God and chose to inhabit the world they saw God offering. Saints are not saints because they are made of plaster and never cry at funerals. They are saints precisely because they do cry and laugh and lose their temper and feel lazy and all the rest of it, and yet still find that seeing the world through God's eyes is the best possible way to be human. They are saints not because they take the miraculous in their stride or lack the doubts that plague the rest of us, but because they receive these possibilities as a gift. For saints, such moments do not circumscribe life but rather extend and enrich life. And for those of us here today, to contemplate seeing life this way, with the shroud lifted and the tears drying on our cheeks, may just be the start to becoming a bit more saintly ourselves.