

SERMON FOR LENT 5 | PASSION SUNDAY | 24.03.2023

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

“Be creative” said the pottery tutor with some relish

It was a weekday evening at East Warwickshire College, in the late 1980s’s. Maria and I had resolved to do something different and we had turned up for some evening classes. I was quite keen to do some pottery and she was going to develop her dress-making skills; but as luck would have it, my class would close unless there was just one more member and she had valiantly become that person. So there she was, with the rest of us, throwing lumps of wet clay onto a wheel. Just like the Great Pottery Show Down on Channel Four!

Few couples are exactly the same as each other and while I really delight in doing something new, Maria is brilliant at following the rules. There is absolutely nothing she can’t do - in any walk of life – so long as there are proper instructions. Baking, making clothes, putting furniture together, preparing detailed scientific reports or working in Sunday School, once she has the template anything is possible. What she doesn’t want to be told is to ‘be creative’!

This amazing Gospel passage which we have read today, Passion Sunday, has enough material for us to be here until tea-time. Like the story we heard last Sunday, of Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, it is full of apparent misunderstandings, until we cop onto the fact that St John is constantly working at two levels at once – the obvious meaning and the deeply spiritual one.

But on this day when at least some of us put our clocks forward for British Summer Time, I want us to focus particularly on one of the themes - that of ‘time’ itself. And if I had a heading or a title for this little piece, I would remind you of that wonderful Greek word ‘Kairos’, meaning ‘God’s time’.

St John as a writer is a bit like Agatha Christie: he makes us wait for the clues to emerge, one by one. After a near stoning, the other Gospels go straight into the Passion story but St John has one last story to tell: we have had six ‘signs’ that Jesus is who he claims to – turning water into wine, healing the official’s son, healing a paralysed man, feeding the 5000, walking on water, healing a man born blind: but 7 is the perfect number so while these miracles are about restoring people to health, there has to be something greater at the end.

And it all centres on Lazarus - in Aramaic, Eleazar, meaning ‘God is my help’. Well, it might centre on him at the end, but it is really Martha who acts as the mouthpiece for all that St John wants to teach us.

So time: what does Martha do but to get a message to Jesus to say that Lazarus is terribly ill. No begging for Jesus to come and sort out the problem: she simply tells him. And close to Martha, Mary and Lazarus as Jesus clearly was - they were his adopted family for much of his time on the road – Jesus appears to be in no hurry. *This is so that God may be glorified* is as much as Martha gets. And in passing Jesus cryptically describes the difference between light and day, light and dark: he works in the sunshine, everyone else when the sun/Son has gone. We are to see things in God's own time, not according to the hurried pace of life that we normally occupy.

And the misunderstandings continue to tumble out: like with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman last week, there is confusion. Has Lazarus 'fallen asleep' or has he died? It takes several exchanges before Jesus says straightforwardly *Lazarus is dead*. He has been using the common Ancient World euphemism for death as a device for forcing us to work out that that Lazarus would have been dead for three days – John dropping in a reference to Jesus' own time in the tomb. This story is not just about Lazarus is it? It's a foretaste of Jesus own experience, one that would unfold very shortly.

But why has Jesus not gone to Bethany straight away? As Martha reminds him, and Mary also later, if Jesus had got a move on - Bethany being two days walk away - he might have saved Lazarus' life. Now when Jesus does finally return Lazarus has not only died but been buried too.

So when Jesus finally shows up, we have this painful dialogue with Martha. Painful because St John wants to show how it takes Martha some time to go beyond the usual platitudes about Lazarus rising on the last day, to something much deeper: *I know that he will live* is all future tense, but what she really wants is for Lazarus to return to life - now. That's what we all feel when someone close to us dies. Can't we just have them back - even if it is only for a short time? And she goes through those familiar routines, blaming herself for his death: *if only I had...* But she is getting there. Where the blind man had earlier said that he believed that Jesus had healed him, that he was a holy man, Martha now stumbles into the truth: *I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God!*

Now we can see the value of the time lapse: if this event was to give glory to God, it wasn't just in the raising of Lazarus - it was in the wonderful realisation on Martha's part, that she now knew Jesus to be the Son of God. It is the female version of Peter's Confession: *You are the Christ the Son of the Living God*. Male and female, Greek and Jew, slave and free: we are all able (with help) to reach the Light and to know who Jesus is.

But St John hasn't finished with us quite yet. Having got Martha to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, we see the very human side of Jesus. In the Greek the verb used is not just 'Jesus wept' but something akin to *Jesus was racked with grief*. Like us when we are with the bereaved, there is sometimes nothing more than we can do than cry with the crying. This is what the true Son of God looks like, a man who can identify entirely with how we feel.

And one little detail. When Jesus finally calls Lazarus out of the tomb what do we find? Is it like Jesus' resurrection at Easter? No. Poor Lazarus is still bound up in grave clothes so he literally has to shuffle his way out of the darkness and into the daylight. And St John gives Jesus these words: *release him* – the same words as *you are absolved from all your sins...* St John can't help but point us to the fact that sin is death, and forgiveness is the path to new life - now and in the life to come we can receive forgiveness...

But the real final point of this story, as Jesus now moves towards the events in Jerusalem, is the parallel that Jesus wants to make between Lazarus (God is my help) and Jesus himself. This story was written to make clear that just as it had been necessary for Lazarus to die - not just be healed – so that God's glory could be revealed in this final sign, so it would be necessary for Jesus to die so all people could be saved from death.

As in Ezekiel, when the Spirit of God restored the bleached bones of a mighty army lying on the battlefield, so the Spirit of God would bring back to life the one whom Martha and her sister Mary loved so dearly, their brother Lazarus.

At the right time. At the Kairos moment. And only after the Spirit of God had transformed the situation.

Because in the end, it isn't up to us 'to be creative'! We don't do miracles and we don't have anything more inside us than that which God has given. Some will indeed be amazingly inventive and some - like Maria - will be fantastic in applying the rules and making extraordinary things.

But it will all be in God's good time! As God intends. When light has penetrated the darkness of our reluctant minds and we can join with Martha, Mary and Lazarus in being content to wait for God to reveal himself in signs and wonders – even here, now, where we are.

I admit to my own impatience! But whatever this Organ Project has taught me it is that God has a way of teaching us to depend on his grace. And all the delays, disappointments and frustrations have to be seen in that light!