

WORSHIP



BIBLE NOTES

As Lent nears its close, these readings remind Christians that God's people can live a kind of 'half-life', and that we need waking up. What God in Christ offers is far more satisfying than our deepest imaginings.

The Gospel John 11.1-45

The raising of Lazarus is the last of a series of 'signs' performed by Jesus during his earthly ministry ('signs' being John's term for the miracles). In telling the story, John is not primarily interested in the fate of Lazarus, who would have to die again. Rather, his raising is a sign of that deeper, more satisfying life that Jesus comes to bring.

This is another Johannine 'drama', made up of several scenes and highlighting the response of different characters. The disciples, Mary, Martha and the Jews all respond in different ways. The story raises a number of issues:

- Jesus the omniscient Lord may seem a somewhat heartless friend in delaying his visit to Bethany. But he knows what is to happen, and uses the event to point to the eternal life which is found in him.
- The faith of Martha and Mary seems more satisfying than that of the male disciples.
- Jesus' tears are ambiguous. Does he cry, as the Jews suggest, because of his love for Lazarus, or is he grieving at the power of the enemy death, or the unbelief of those around?
- The fact that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days accentuates the miracle. He is well and truly dead, beyond the stage when the spirit might linger near the body. As Martha says, 'already there is a stench'.
- Though Lazarus' raising points to Jesus' resurrection, it is only a sign, and falls far short of it (whereas Jesus will leave his grave clothes behind in the tomb, Lazarus is still bound by his).

The Old Testament Ezekiel 37.1-14

Ezekiel writes while Judah is in exile in Babylonia. This description of his rather

nightmarish vision is one of a number of visions of return from exile and restoration. God will do what his people cannot do, indeed do not deserve.

Ezekiel is taken by the hand of the Lord to what looks like a battlefield in a valley. For a Jew, this scene is doubly shocking – the bodies have not received the dignity of burial, and the prophet risks ritual impurity by coming into contact with them. But God can bring life out of this hopeless mess caused by humanity.

- This passage reminds us how, throughout Scripture, God's people hear God's voice through visions and dreams as well as through prophets and priests.
- All is God's initiative – the bones can do nothing of themselves except lie lifeless.
- Ezekiel's reply to the question 'Can these bones live?' is nicely ambiguous: 'O Lord God, you know.'
- Although later Jewish and Christian interpretation sees echoes of the resurrection, Ezekiel is focused on the 'raising up' of God's exiled people. It is equally a message of hope and challenge for the Church, in constant need of renewal and repentance.

- The focus on the people in exile is a reminder that God's people are on the move, and cannot settle down wherever they are: God's promise remains that 'I will place you on your own soil'.

The Epistle Romans 8.6-11

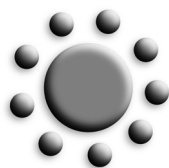
Paul is convinced that the death and resurrection of Jesus have changed human life forever. In Christ, we die to the old way of life, and join a new people. In the Spirit, we are able to live as God intended us to live. Romans 8 broadens the vision beyond the Church and even humanity – God has a plan that includes the whole of creation.

But Paul's own shortcomings, and his pastoral experience, give him a strong dose of realism. He knows that most of us prefer to live lives closed in on ourselves. But there is another way:

- When he talks of 'flesh' and 'spirit', Paul doesn't mean two parts which make up the human person, but two ways of being human.
- One can either live a life closed in on self and therefore hostile to God ('life in the flesh'), or focused on God and open to others ('life in the Spirit').
- Life in the Spirit as a deeper quality of life can be experienced now, though we are still awaiting its fulfilment.
- We cannot live this new life by our own efforts. Only the Spirit of God, by whom Jesus was raised, can make this possible.

Psalms 130





SET THE SCENE

Begin to introduce some of the imagery of Christ's death and resurrection. If you will be making an Easter garden, you could have the tomb ready this week. Use flowers associated with funerals, for example white lilies. If you have a printed order of service, put a funeral-type border round it and entitle it 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.....' (John 11.11). Ask your musicians(s) to play funereal music as people gather (for example, something from Fauré's *Requiem*) and create a more hushed than usual atmosphere by asking those setting up and welcoming to be very quiet and grave. Wear sombre clothes.

See also the Lent liturgy suggestions in Issue 15.

Call to worship

Read Psalm 130 responsively.
Or like this:

When I reach rock-bottom, God, you are the only one who listens.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

My soul waits for the Lord.

I carry so much guilt, God. Only you can deal with it.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

My soul waits for the Lord.

My soul longs for you to ease my trouble and to lighten my darkness.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

My soul waits for the Lord.

Only you can save me, God. Only you can save the world. And you will!

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

My soul waits for the Lord.

(Based on Psalm 130)



PRAY

A prayer of praise

God, whose Spirit is life,
we give you thanks and praise
for your power over death and destruction.
Illness and decay, separation and loss,
hopelessness and grief
are temporary things,
simply waiting for your hand to touch
them and restore life and health and joy.

God, whose Spirit is life,
we thank you that you make your home
with us,
creating new things out of what is lifeless
in us,
reconciling, healing, reconnecting us to
you and to each other,
opening up new possibilities, and
new relationships.

God, whose Spirit is life,
we thank you that you call us into
your future,
asking us to share your work
of bringing all things into the circle of
your love.
Thank you for asking us to share the cost.
Thank you for the peace that is ours when
we set our minds on you,
God, whose Spirit is life.

Amen.

(Based on Romans 8.6-11)

A prayer of intercession

Lord of life and light and love,
we ask you to call out from their tombs
all who are barred from fullness of life,
not only because of the sin that besets
us all,
but because of our inhumanity towards
each other.

To those whose lives are narrowed by
extreme poverty,
who have been compelled to leave their
homes because of war or persecution,
say, 'Come out'.
Say it by showing our world leaders paths

of justice and peace.

Say it through us, our attitudes and actions
and commitment.

To those who live on the margins of our
own society,
whose lives are dogged by homelessness
or unemployment
or who are confined to prison or
psychiatric hospital,
to those who meet discrimination because
of colour or disability or sexuality,
to the vulnerable – children, elderly people
– who are abused or neglected,
say, 'Come out'.

Say it through legislation that will help us
become a fairer society for people to
live in,

Say it through us, through our attitudes
and actions and commitment.

To those we know and love,
who struggle to make sense of their lives,
who face sickness or loss or loneliness
or depression,
or who have to make difficult decisions,
say, 'Come out'.
Say it through us, through our
understanding and our willingness to listen
and to take whatever action will be
most helpful.

To us, Lord,
as we seek to be your disciples, your church,
in our own daily lives and in the life of
this community,
this week and every week,
say, 'Come out'.

Help us to hear, and to have the peace
and the courage and the boldness
to step into the new thing that you are
calling us to.

For the sake of Jesus.

Amen.

There are more prayers on the web site
www.rootsontheweb.com



SHARE THE WORD

Here are two alternative reflections based on today's Bible passages

Christ has power over death

- There is a drama in the course of Lent. Last week we saw how Jesus had power to heal blindness, physical and spiritual. This week we anticipate what is to come in two weeks' time by seeing how Jesus has power over death. We look both backwards – to Jesus' healing ministry among people – and forwards – to his own resurrection, which opens up life in eternity for us all.
- The story links forward to chapter 12 (which we will read during Holy Week) where Lazarus' sister Mary anoints Jesus with oil of nard, traditionally used for burial. She alone recognises that, though Jesus has raised Lazarus, he himself will very soon enter the tomb. Does she sense that he, too, will be raised, or not?
- There is no 'explaining' this miracle in naturalistic terms. The evangelist wants us to know that Lazarus is well and truly dead. It has been four days. The mourners are all in place. There is a stench.' John wants us to know that Jesus has the power of life and death. He is very much in control of the situation. The traditional symbol for John the Evangelist is the eagle, sharp-eyed and incisive, seeing everything from above. Here John is quite clear about the presence of the divine in a human story. And his Jesus tells us the reason for the story – as with the blind man, as with his own resurrection, it is 'for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it'. Everything points back to Jesus.
- However – and again this is typical of John – Jesus is also intensely human. He is 'greatly disturbed in spirit and intensely moved'. Surely this is for his friend's suffering before death, for his

own loss, for the loss of the sisters and all those who loved Lazarus. There is reassurance here for all those who grieve. Jesus himself knows the anguish and brokenness and intensity of bereavement; he shares the sisters' longing that the death might be undone; he is one with the crowd of friends in their lingering about the family and the tomb.

- Prepare for Easter by considering what is dead (and stinky) in our lives and in the life of this congregation. Where have we longed for healing and failed to see it happen? Which part of us and of our life together stumbles out of the tomb when Jesus calls 'Come out!'
- Where in our world is people's talent and zest for life buried because of the injustices with which it is riddled? What human potential is being buried in this neighbourhood? How is Jesus calling new life out of those situations?

Jesus coaches his disciples

- Just as insight came slowly to the blind man of John 9, so this is a story in which Jesus patiently opens the minds of his friends to the significance of who he is. John explains this right at the beginning of the story when he tells us how Jesus stayed away after he heard of Lazarus' illness. The disciples are unprepared both for the fact that Lazarus dies, and that Jesus is walking knowingly towards his own death. Thomas' claim that they will die with him is bravado, rising out of lack of understanding. But the point of the incident is 'so that you may believe'.
- Martha experiences a dramatic shift in understanding during her conversation with Jesus (vv. 17-27). She moves from reproach of Jesus (vv. 21-22) to a

wooden rehearsal of her beliefs (v. 24) to a real recognition of who Jesus is (v. 27).

- Mary is a different person, probably closer to Jesus' heart than any of them, and Jesus treats her differently, even though she begins, as Martha does, with reproach. It is when she kneels at his feet that Jesus is moved to weep. He enters into the human suffering in the situation and moves towards raising Lazarus.
- Again, in what seems like a rather crude addition to his prayer, Jesus explains that he is doing what he is doing in order that the crowd may believe. It's as if it's no use talking to them – they will only respond to a show of power.
- Notice how Jesus uses different approaches with different people and groups, in line with their level of understanding. Probably in the community that first received John's Gospel there were various levels of commitment and understanding, just as there are in our churches today.
- How has God approached us and called us at the level of our understanding during the course of our lives? Who has God used? How has our faith developed under the 'coaching' God has provided through others and through our lives' events? How is God 'coaching' us now? Can we give thanks?
- How do we, as a Christian community, seek to meet each other at the level of commitment and understanding where each of us is? What is our provision for newcomers and children? How do we go on 'coaching' each other in the faith?
- The story is a reminder that God always answers our prayers – not always when and how we wish, but in God's own time and for God's own wonderful purposes.

'I am the resurrection and the life.'



BE CREATIVE

All these ideas may be used with either Share the word outline. Choose from them to help develop thinking around today's Bible passages. Those in italics are particularly suitable when children are present.

- *Make the most of a long but highly dramatic story. The raising of Lazarus was an overwhelming and terrifying event. Use a contemporary translation of the Bible, such as 'The Contemporary English Version' or 'The Message' (see Resources). If using a dramatised version, it would be easy to wrap the person playing Lazarus in (white) loo roll to simulate the grave clothes.*
- Plant a 'reporter' in the gallery, or somewhere high up, and another at floor level and ask them to report after the gospel reading on how they saw the story. The one with the eagle's-eye view will stress Jesus' authority and power; the one observing from the floor will stress his humanity, compassion and vulnerability. Draw out how both aspects are present in the way John tells the story and in how we, too, understand Jesus as the Son of God.
- The story refers to the smell of the grave when someone had been dead four days. Then, in chapter 12, Mary fills the whole house with a beautiful smell. Smell is probably the most evocative of all our senses. Ask people to describe bad, good, or highly particular smells they have experienced and the feelings they evoke – but only if you are able to be unfazed by any jokers in the congregation! What sort of smells would have been around in the story of Holy Week and Easter?
- *Tell the story of Beauty and the Beast (particularly well known in the Disney film version). The bewitched prince appears as an ugly and demanding monster until he is truly loved by a kind woman. How does God transform what is ugly in our lives by kindness and patience? How does God bring to life what has become dead in us?*
- Begin to crack open our current taboo about death. Ask an undertaker to talk about how they go about their trade. Or

invite someone who has done bereavement counselling – even someone who has come through a bereavement – to talk about the stages of grief that people experience. Acknowledge the suffering involved in losing someone you love in a way that will be supportive for whoever in the congregation is presently bereaved. Do all this in the context of our sure faith that it is not death, but God, who has the last word.

- Take the story of Lazarus as an opportunity to list and pray for members of the community who have died in the

last year, and those who have been bereaved. Is there anyone who would appreciate being sent a card of remembrance in time for Easter?

- This story has particular significance for gay people, for whom 'coming out' has a special meaning and is a very risky and courageous thing to do. How would your congregation respond if you asked a gay person to tell the story of their 'coming out'? Alternatively, you might ask the parents of such a person who have come to terms with their child's sexual orientation. What are the parallels with the story of Lazarus?

MUSIC AND RESOURCES



Hymns in italics are particularly suitable when all ages worship together.

Eternal light, shine in my heart (CP, HTC, ICF)
God of freedom, God of justice (BPW, CP, HON, RS)

I lay there in my bed, so sick and dying
(song told from Lazarus' viewpoint)
(Always from Joy, Stainer & Bell Ltd, 1997)
Now is eternal life (AMNS, CP, HON, HP, ICF, NEH, RS)

O Christ, you wept when grief was raw
(Love from Below, Wild Goose Publications, 1989)

O Master, when thou callest (ICH)
Poor Lazarus is sick (Story Song, Stainer & Bell Ltd, 1993)

Tears of sorrow, tears of joy (refers to Lazarus story) *(Enemy of Apathy, Wild Goose Publications, 1988)*

The spirit lives to set us free (HON, ICF, LAU, MP)

When Lazarus lay in death's cold shroud
(Come, you people of the promise, Stainer & Bell Ltd, 1994)

Widely available

Breathe on me, breath of God

I danced in the morning when the world was begun
Now the green blade riseth
Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old
To God be the glory, great things he has done

For Bible readings in contemporary English:
The Contemporary English Version, STL, 1996, ISBN 0840719582.

Eugene H. Peterson (Ed.), *The Message*, Navpress, 2003, ISBN 1576834344.

Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004, ISBN 0802827942 (includes prayers and meditations at the end of chapter 18).

Beauty and the Beast, VHS video widely available, especially in the Disney version.

Mary Batchelor (Ed.), *The Lion Prayer Collection*, Lion Publishing, 2001, ISBN 0745950582, (chapter 12 for prayers around dying and bereavement).

Robin McKinley, *A retelling of the story of Beauty and the Beast*, Corgi Books, 2004, ISBN 0552548634.