

Free to believe?

Planning

LECTIONARY

Ezekiel 37.1-14, Psalm 130,
Romans 8.6-11, **John 11.1-45**

Context The raising of Lazarus is the last and most important of John's 'signs'. We overhear conversations with the disciples and with the dead man's sisters and finally, Jesus' authoritative command to Lazarus to 'come out'.

Common thread – Free to believe?

(John 11.1-45) On this first Sunday of the Passion we read of a death and raising to life, Jesus' final sign before he, himself, becomes the sign. The conversations surrounding the event provide a context of anguish and puzzlement for a denouement provoking belief in its witnesses, prefiguring the resurrection of Jesus himself.

Seasonal pages Introduction to the Bible notes p.1; Year of the Bible p.2; Words we have loved p.3; Lent calendar pp.4 and 5; Moving onwards, looking back: the Last Supper with all ages together pp.6 and 7; dramas for the Gospel readings pp.8 and 9.

PLUS

Hymns and songs See opposite page.

ROOTS resources Look at *ROOTS Children & Young People* magazine for further ideas.

Previous issues See *This week* page [WEB](#) for links to previously published resources for these readings.

Children's Sheet [WEB](#) Downloadable activities for during and after the service.

Pictures An internet image search for 'Lazarus raised from the dead' brings up several paintings of the scene.

DVD *The Mysteries* (2001) The Heritage Theatre (available from Amazon).

Gather

Prepare the space

Display a copy of a picture of the story of the raising of Lazarus (see *Planning*) with a white cloth around it (denoting grave clothes). Or use a stone to symbolise the grave of Lazarus. If your church uses a Lenten cross, place these at the foot of the cross.



Gathering words

As we begin the most solemn fortnight of the Christian year, we explore the story of the raising of Lazarus and the effect it had on Martha and Mary.

Call to worship

Based on John 11.25,27

Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

Come, Lord Jesus, and be among us, for you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.

Prayer

Prayers of intercession, a personal prayer for the week, and further prayers are on the [WEB](#).

A prayer of approach

Inspired by Psalm 130.6-7

Creator God, give us hope in you as we wait for you in worship today, that we may learn of your steadfast life and of your great power to redeem.

Amen.

A prayer of praise

Eternal God, source of all life and love, we praise you for your gifts to us and to all people.
In creation you gave life to the world.
In Christ you redeemed the world, offering the promise of resurrected life for all,
foreshown in his rising from the dead.
In the Spirit you give us new life here and now,
and challenge us to live as resurrected people
in the Church and in the world.
Give us hearts and minds
ready to hear your voice
and to do your will,
day by day. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

> READ PSALM 130. THEN AFTER A SILENCE, USE THIS PRAYER:

As our souls and minds wait for you,
O God,
we offer all of our lives;
the things we have done and the things
we have not done,
the things of which we are ashamed and
the ways in which we have hurt other
people.
In your steadfast love,
forgive and redeem us,
as we claim the promise
that in Jesus our sins are forgiven.
Amen.

Sending out

May all that binds you fall away
so that you may believe and see the glory
of God.
Then go out, and declare the good news.
Amen.

Ways into prayer

> USE PSALM 130.4-5 AS AN INTRODUCTION TO SILENT PRAYER BEFORE GOD.
END THE SILENCE WITH:

The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you.
He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to you through his Spirit that dwells in you.
Amen.

Adapted from Romans 8.11.

Bible notes

When hopeless situations face us, we can trust in the God of the impossible who never fails to come through.

The links between the readings

All the readings attest to the God who does the impossible. He promises to bring the dead bones of Israel to life – to return from exilic abandonment and prosper in the land of promise (Ezekiel 37.1-14). The psalmist trusts in the God who rescues him from the hopeless deep (Psalm 130). Jesus walks up to a tomb concealing a putrid corpse and calls this man out of the darkness and restores his life without lifting a finger (John 11.1-45). Paul stands on the other side of the victory of Jesus’ resurrection and confirms God’s power through the Spirit to do the impossible – and that this work will be final when Christ comes again (Romans 8.6-11).

Old Testament Ezekiel 37.1-14

The socio-historical context of this familiar prophetic vision is the exilic desperation of Israel, which has given up on its mission and destiny (see 37.11). In the vision, this is represented by the bleak desert-like scene of a valley full of sun-scorched bones – long past the remembrance of life. That the image evokes the (distant) aftermath of a battle scene is confirmed by the later portrayal of the reanimated skeletons (in the Authorised Version) as ‘an exceeding great army’.

The depiction of the Lord drawing together and forming the life, and especially the language of breathing life into the dead bodies, is reminiscent of Genesis 1-2 and the ‘inspiration’ of the first people of God. With this new scene, the God of creation promises to work in his people to give them life and to restore them. A key to this passage is the

use of the term *ruah*, which is variously translated ‘breath’, ‘wind’, and ‘spirit’. Again, every time Israel breathed a breath, it would be a reminder that the God who made their physical life was already working out his plan to place his divine spirit within their community, not only to bring them basic life functions, but to make them very strong.

Psalm 130

The psalmist cries out to God from the ‘deep’ (v. 1). This abyss was often portrayed as deep water, which represented chaos. In Isaiah 51.10, Yahweh is praised as the personal God that rescued his people from Pharaoh and dried up ‘the waters of the great deep’. Whenever Israel finds itself again in deep waters (see Psalm 69.14), though it can be a time of penitence and lament, there is hope in the God of the waters who is ever merciful and faithful to his covenant (Psalm 130.7).

New Testament Romans 8.6-11

Jews in Paul’s time generally believed in two phases of time. The present ‘age’ was an evil one marked by sin and trials. Jews hoped in the appearance of the age to come (the oft-referred to ‘latter days’) when God’s Spirit would be among his people and sin and affliction would be a thing of the past. However, Paul came to realise that he was living in the ‘overlapping of the ages’ and you had to choose whether to live in sync with the ‘present evil age’ (Galatians 1.4) or in step with God’s eschatological Spirit that was at work in those who believe in Christ.

In this part of Romans, Paul has been demonstrating that the Mosaic law was necessary to preserve God’s people for a time, but now they have the Spirit. To go back to the law would be to remain stuck in the present age. Paul’s continual appeal to living in ‘the flesh’ was not just a criticism of hedonism, but also of an obsession with keeping the Mosaic law and clinging to circumcision as a demonstration of fidelity to God. Instead, Paul points out that the Spirit is the real indicator.

Gospel John 11.1-45

The story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus is the last of the ‘signs’ that he performs in John’s Gospel and the most important and powerful one. The close relationship Jesus has with Lazarus is underscored by the description of him as the one Jesus loved

(11.3). It is all the more striking, then, that he waited two days before setting out to the village where Lazarus was. Why would Jesus delay his journey to mourn there over his friend? He states explicitly to his disciples that this illness came upon him to show God’s glory. Evidently, Jesus wanted Lazarus to be dead long enough that the miraculous sign of his resurrection would not be mistaken for a natural remedy.

We learn that Jesus finally reaches Bethany four days after hearing of the death. Some rabbinic sources attest that the soul hovered over a dead body for three days. One need not look too far for evidence that Lazarus was really dead – his corpse carried the stench of decay (11.39). Nevertheless, Jesus bids him to come out and the scene foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection. However, while Lazarus walks out bound and goes on to live as a normal human again, Jesus apparently removes his own grave clothes and lives, not just after death, but in victory over it.

HYMNS AND SONGS

Songs in *italics* are suitable for all ages.
Beneath the cross of Jesus
Beneath the cross of Jesus, I find a place (SOF)
From heaven you came (The Servant King)
How deep the Father’s love
I cannot tell why he whom angels worship
It is a thing most wonderful
Jesus comes with all his grace (HP168)
Lift high the cross
My hope is built on nothing less (MP, TS)
My Lord, what love is this
Such love, pure as the whitest snow (HON, MP, SG, SOF, TS)
Out of the depths I cry to thee (HP)
Praise to the holiest in the height
There is a Redeemer
To God be the glory
See inside front cover for key to abbreviations.

Word & response

WITH ADULTS

Free to believe?

John 11.1-45

Martha and Mary learn how to be free to believe as they experience a sign.

■ This story is unique to John. In John's Gospel, the 'signs' are events with clear purposes. They are not chance events; nor do they reflect a Jesus who is simply sorry for the people he meets. This week Lazarus is raised 'for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through' this sign (v. 4). The fact that Jesus does not rush to the scene, but deliberately allows at least two days to pass is John's scene-setting device. So often we want instant answers. But Jesus waits to respond in this story, perhaps to underline his authority and perhaps because only after some delay will God's glory be truly seen.

■ Martha and Mary, and the intimate dialogues that Jesus has with each of them, are central. The conversations are related but distinct. The sisters have gone through the difficult process of seeing their brother die. They have, as we might put it, gone through hell. With her enigmatic assertion that 'God will give you whatever you ask of him', Martha seems to think that Jesus can still resolve the situation, but does not know how. She believes that God can transform situations, but the notion of a stinking corpse coming back from the dead was beyond the wildest expectations of a pragmatic woman. Today's psalm, 'Out of the depths', could be used to illustrate how she might have felt. What she learns is that God can transform a situation in more ways than she expected. This raising is, in some sense, a foretaste of resurrection for all, in which Martha firmly believes. It is also a foretaste of what is to come for Jesus himself, a point that is particularly relevant as we mark today the beginning of Passiontide, the most solemn fortnight in the Church's calendar. The conversation with Mary is briefer but more emotional and less theological.

■ It is no accident that the core saying, 'I am the resurrection and the life' comes at the heart of this passage. We hear those words most often as a public proclamation at funeral services. The story makes the point very clearly that Lazarus was not just dead but stinking (v. 39). This point is

made another way in the South African version of the Mysteries (see *Planning*) in which the Lazarus who rises is dressed as a spirit returning from another world.

■ We need to be careful not to suggest that this story is normal. It was no more normal in the first century for stinking corpses to reappear from the grave (or for the dead bones described by Ezekiel to reassemble) than it is today. Equally death is surely not to be seen as entirely negative. Death and life are both integral to creation. Without death there would be no compost or renewal of fertility in the ground. The intimate integration of life and death, inextricably intermingled in the story of creation, is part of the background to today's Gospel story. The raising of Lazarus is the last and most significant of the signs in John's Gospel. Its very abnormality is the central feature of the story. Yet the reactions of the people are very similar to those we could imagine people having today, were such extraordinary events to occur. Above all in the unexpected there is a sign of God's power.

Another angle

Lazarus' freedom is not something he can grasp alone. He needs to be helped towards freedom, to be unbound. How much are we bound by metaphorical grave clothes as we seek to live out a Christian life in the 21st century? Are we as free to believe as we think we are?

Living faith

How do we, in this generation that sees very few 'miracles', react? Are we equally angry that God seems to have selected a few people in a particular time to benefit from such miracles?

Alternative thread

From the depths

Psalm 130

True faith is hard won.

■ Here we have another psalm that utters one of the most primeval cries of the human heart. 'The depths' (v. 1) are literally those of the sea, and

metaphorically an image of despair: it stands for all those 'depths' that most, if not all, of us experience at some time in our lives.

■ The Jewish people have experienced many such times, and the question has always been the same: how can the God who promises loving care and protection allow such things to happen to his people? Certainly for some Holocaust survivors, such as the writer Primo Levi, their experiences made faith in God an absurd impossibility; and who are we, in our relative comfort, to say that they were wrong? In biblical times, atheism in the modern sense was not a live option; but much of the Hebrew Bible might be described as a running argument with God (an over-simplification, but one that makes its point). Biblical faith, from Moses to Jesus, was never easy or cheap, neither was it a spiritual plaster or a holy duvet; rather it searches beneath the cosy music for something deeper and more hard won – a faith that can only come *ex profundis*.

■ Christians may be reminded of the parable of the girls waiting for the bridegroom (Matthew 25.1-12). The nocturnal vigil is rewarded, but only for those who took the precaution of bringing sufficient oil for their lamps. The gospel-writer appends the stern warning: 'Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour' (v. 13; cf. Psalm 95.11)

■ Robert Alter suggests that 'The force of the image is evident. The watchmen sitting through the last three watches of the night, peering into the darkness for the first sign of dawn, cannot equal [our] intense expectancy for God's redeeming word to come to [us] in the dark night of the soul' (p. 456).

■ If the psalm ends on a note of hope, this is no conventional resolution. In Lent particularly, we are reminded that there can be no resurrection without death, no promise of redemption without the dark night of the soul.

Word & response

WITH ALL AGES TOGETHER

Free to believe?

John 11.1-45

Open the Word

The text of this presentation can be found on page 9 and on the [WEB](#).

Explore the Word

How an expected event might free someone to believe.

If it is appropriate, consider stories about near-death experiences, which often seem to involve a feeling of calm and peace and even a reluctance to be drawn back to life. How might such stories relate to the experience of Lazarus?

Consider unexpected things that may have happened to us or to other people. Sometimes the weather can change unexpectedly and trap people, as when fog comes down while people are hill walking or simply you go out on a lovely sunny day without a waterproof, but the weather changes and you have to walk home in a cold downpour. A more sinister example is when the tide comes up unexpectedly (because no one checked), trapping people on a island of sand. A more urban example might be the first time you experienced the hot damp towels offered in some Indian restaurants?

Consider the unexpected in films and books, such as the ending of *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe*. In traditional murder mysteries, readers are kept in suspense until the last minute when the murderer is revealed. Apparently most people who go to see the *Twilight* series of films already know the ending; does it matter if you know the ending before you see the film or read the book?

How does something unexpected help to reveal God to us? Could some of these feelings help us to understand how Martha and Mary might have felt?

The God we worship is so much more than we can imagine. God is not one who does what we want when we want it but rather one who loves and cares, giving us freedom; and this will involve

the need to experience and observe pain and suffering. As we watch Jesus complete his journey to Jerusalem next Sunday and then follow him to the cross we will reflect on this. Sometimes we can't put our feelings into words ourselves, and the people who do this for us are the poets. Think of Graham Kendrick's words: 'hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered'; or for a different flavour, Charles Wesley: 'Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.' What are your favourite words from a Passiontide hymn or song?

Respond to the Word

Bind: This is not a particularly original activity but that does not diminish its value. Ask a volunteer to stand in a (remote and confined, if possible) corner of your building and then invite a group of people to bind up him or her in toilet tissue until their whole body is covered. Then gather everyone around the bound body in the tomb-like corner and invite them to shout, 'Lazarus, come out!' The bound person then moves, breaking the bindings. However, they will not all fall away and people will need to help, and gather up the resulting mess. Invite the bound person to share how it felt to be confined in this way and ask people to reflect on times when they have felt constricted and bound.

Search: Invite people to read through the Passion section of your hymn book and select phrases they particularly remember or identify with. Write these out on slips of paper with fat felt pens, then stick them on a large sheet of paper or board to create a passion graffiti wall. Anyone who prefers drawing to writing might contribute diagrams and doodles so that you have a mixture of word and image.

Model: Give people a ball of clay or some other modelling medium and invite them to make a tomb.

Build: Build a tomb out of stones or whatever else is available. Leave this in place throughout the next two weeks. It might be used on Good Friday and can form the centre of an Easter garden, transformed with flowers, plants and joyous images for Easter Day.

Pray: Pray for those who watch and wait with people who are seriously ill.

Listen: Invite people to share stories of unexpected events in their lives that left a lasting memory.

Write: Invite people who enjoy writing to write a reflection on the events described in the Gospel passage as though they were one of the participants.

Don't forget the Children's Sheet [WEB](#) which has activities that can be used during the service and at home.

A prayer for all ages together

When we hide away because we don't want to do what we should be doing: > SHOUT **come out!**

When we hide away because we are sorry and ashamed: > SPEAK REASSURINGLY **come out!**

When we hide away because we are afraid: > WHISPER **come out!**

Jesus loves us: > SHOUT **we are free!**

Jesus saves us: > SHOUT **We are free!**

Jesus gives us life: > SHOUT **We are free! Amen.**