

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Unbind him, and let him go

A question which occasionally pops up in a pub quiz is: “What is the shortest verse in the Bible?”. The answer is John 11 verse 35 – “Jesus wept” – and it occurs in what is by contrast the longest Gospel reading on any Sunday of the year (apart from the traditional reading of the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday). John 11 verses 1 to 44 contains the account of Jesus’s relationship with three of his closest friends – a man called Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha, who lived at Bethany in a house which Jesus clearly often visited. Like so much else that John writes, this story is unique to him, and indeed it is like nothing else in the whole of the New Testament. The illness to which Lazarus succumbed, his subsequent death, and then his being summoned from the grave by Jesus – all this makes the story the most powerful of the ‘signs’ with which John, throughout his Gospel, points us to the greatest sign of all, namely the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and the consequent triumph of life over death, all brought about through God’s undying love.

This immensely rich Gospel passage contains so much material for our reflection that it would be impossible to do justice to all of it here. Let me instead concentrate on just two verses, and first of all that shortest verse – “Jesus wept” – with which I began. Jesus taught his disciples to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep”, and we can scarcely doubt that he himself does what he teaches and encourages others to do. In other words, he is weeping with us now – weeping for a world in which, for most of the time, only one topic is on everyone’s minds and lips. The fear and uncertainty of being in an utterly strange and unpredictable situation is something which (probably) most of us have never before experienced, and Jesus is weeping with us and sharing our present pain and helplessness and loneliness.

The other verse which strikes me as particularly significant is the one with which the passage ends: “Unbind him, and let him go”. (Some versions have “loose him”, which is probably a better translation.) When Lazarus emerges from his tomb John appears to make a great deal of the fact that his body is bound in graveclothes, and that there is a separate cloth wrapped around his head. He is preparing us for his description, a few chapters later, of what was found in Jesus’s empty tomb on the first Easter morning – namely graveclothes which were no longer needed, including the separate headcloth.

But Jesus’s direction to those standing by that they should loose Lazarus had less to do with the graveclothes in which he was wrapped, and much more to do with the glorious freedom from sin and darkness and decay which Jesus has won for all of us through his life, death and resurrection. “Do not be afraid” is a central theme of his teaching, for, he says, “I am with you always, to the end of time”. St John, who gives us this week’s overwhelming Gospel passage, also wrote “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear”, and it is our Lord’s perfect love which causes him to weep with us and walk with us, even through the valley of the shadow of death, while at the same time loosing us, unbinding us from the grip of fear, and setting us free to experience the life in all its fullness which is his gift to us.