

## Jesus and the grieving sisters

We are certainly living in extraordinary days. We are all in lockdown as we seek to work together to stem the tide of the Coronavirus that is spreading around the world. What we are allowed to do and where we are allowed to go have been changing daily, leading to uncertainty, confusion and anxiety. Churches are closed everywhere and today is the second Sunday when we are worshipping at home rather than together in our church buildings. Of course, our concern and prayers are especially focused on those who are particularly vulnerable in these days; the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. I have heard some speak of these times being like a war where we are all fighting an unseen enemy.

It is understandable that in this climate many are frightened, anxious and scared. The reality of illness and death are on the horizon like never before. How appropriate it is then that we should spend some time considering John's account of Jesus raising his dear friend Lazarus from the dead, which is our Gospel reading for today. The human reality is that none of us can escape death. All of us are born and all of us will die. I am sure that many of us know the pain and grief associated with death.

Death surrounds Jesus at every turn at this point in John's gospel. He reveals himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep; we are told about the thief seeking to destroy the sheep; the Jews trying to stone Jesus because he claims to be God; now his dear friend Lazarus is dead; immediately after raising Lazarus from the dead we read that the religious leaders are hatching a plot to kill Jesus; next Jesus enters into Jerusalem on a donkey – riding to his death. Death was all around Jesus, so much so that that is probably all he thought of, all he smelt. Don't let anyone tell you that Jesus does not understand what it is to be human – what it is to face death and to know its reality.

It is into this context that Jesus speaks words of life and resurrection. He reveals himself as the Life and the Resurrection. The Resurrection is no longer simply a doctrine it has a living face and a name. Jesus speaks to the very core of every human being, to the one thing that frightens us most. All those who believe in him will die physically but not spiritually, those who believe in him will live with Jesus for ever, a relationship which begins now and goes on beyond the grave and death will not bring this relationship with Jesus to an end because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.

Words of enormous comfort surely to the grieving sisters and to all believers today as they realise that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Two things to note about this famous 'I am' saying of Jesus:

- Jesus is the Life because he gives up his life for others – the raising of Lazarus leads directly to the death of Jesus – it is at the cost of life that he gives life – the abundant life that he gives is life through death.
- He is the Life only because he is the Resurrection from the dead – in this sense the raising of Lazarus is a sign that reveals that Jesus has power over death and that it cannot and never will defeat him and it of course points to Jesus own death and resurrection.

In 1944 the Jews in Nazi Germany were being exterminated and in the rest of occupied Europe they were being hunted down, rounded up, herded onto trains and shipped off to concentration camps. But in the Hungarian capital, Budapest, one man, a 32-year old Swedish businessman named Raoul Wallenberg decided that something must be done to stop this. He realised that he

was one of the few people who could do this. That October, as hundreds of Jews were being forced onto a train bound for the death camp at Auschwitz, Wallenberg stood on the platform handing out documents which said that these people were Swedish citizens and therefore could not be deported. In the course of the next 3 months, Wallenberg gave these special passes to thousands of men, women and children – all of them Jews. Without these documents they were as good as dead: however, with them they could live. In the New Year, even though the fighting was drawing closer, Wallenberg chose to stay in Hungary to carry on his life saving work. When the Red Army reached Budapest in January 1945 he went to see the Russian commander but he was never seen again. The Soviet authorities later admitted that he had died in a prison camp. He gave his life so that tens of thousands of others might live.

In a much greater and more profound way, Jesus gives us eternal life because he gave up his life and in so doing defeated, sin, evil and death itself. So, as we prepare to enter Passiontide in a week's time and travel alongside Jesus once again in the extraordinary final hours of his life, let us remember his sacrifice for us; that through his death we might have life in all its fullness.

SO WHAT?

- Have you placed your trust in Jesus the Resurrection and the Life? In our current climate are you frightened about death and worried about what lies beyond the grave? Jesus is speaking to all of us this morning – he is offering us his gift of life that never ends – take Jesus at his word – he won't let you down - as the Psalmist writes – 'Commit your way to the Lord, trust him and he will act' (Ps 37:5).
- God calls us to follow Jesus and to give up our lives so that others might live. We need to live radically for Jesus just the way that Raoul Wallenberg did. We are called to love with a sacrificial love, a love that goes beyond explanations, a love that cannot be worked out and a love that is totally unconditional. We are called to love, as we have been loved. What does it mean for you and me to love others today in this time of Coronavirus lockdown? Today is a day for reflection and prayer, so let us reflect on whom we are to love and how we can love them and then let us act in the name of Jesus who is the Resurrection and the Life.

***Ven. Martin Breadmore, Archdeacon of Dorking***

*Sermon at the Leith Hill Benefice Service that was planned to take place at St Mary's Church, Holmbury, on Passion Sunday, 29 March and is, instead, delivered online.*