

## **I am the resurrection and the life**

A sermon from Revd Charles Draper for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Sunday 29 March

*Refs: Ezekiel 37.1-14; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45*

*“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” John 11.25*

The story of the raising of Lazarus may feel a bit too close to our reality at present – a story that may bring to mind our worst fears and anxieties.

I am glad that our government, like all governments today, is taking the attitude that it is better to face an economic crisis for the sake of saving lives. And we can be hopeful that the strategy will be successful and that the mortality rate will in the end turn out to be relatively low.

Certainly I feel very safe at the moment – cocooned in the vicarage! And I hope that most of us feel the same. But all the more, do pray for our NHS staff who put themselves at risk every day. I believe at least two doctors in our country have already given their lives for those they are caring for. And pray also for carers, and for teachers who are still in school, at risk and often with no protection.

So our gospel story is sharply relevant. But the message of the story may actually be just what we need to hear – that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life – that Jesus in his resurrection has conquered even death, and that ultimately our future is safe in his hands.

In practice, what most of us fear most of all is the pain and grief of bereavement – the fear of loss and separation. And perhaps even more we fear causing pain and grief to our loved ones.

And this story acknowledges the reality and depth of this pain and grief. Martha and Mary both say to Jesus *“Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* Their anguish is deeper because they feel that it could have been avoided.

Jesus feels their grief and pain, perhaps all the more because he loved Lazarus too:

*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep.*

Words that have meant so much to so many Christians through the years – Jesus so clearly sharing with us in the experience of sadness and grief.

And in many ways the story of Lazarus prefigures the death and resurrection of Jesus that will follow soon after. In both, Jesus shares in the pain and grief and suffering of the world before he goes on to the resurrection.

There are no answers to the pain of grief and bereavement. Grief is the cost of love. But at least we know here, and on the Cross, that God in Jesus truly shares in it with us.

But we can also remember that the promise of Resurrection is not just for us as individuals, but for us together. The Resurrection is something that we will share in together. Our separation is temporary – our reunion will be forever.

The speaker on my recent retreat, Sister Carol, mentioned that someone had recently asked her whether she believed in life after death. What a strange question, she said, of course I do!

Our belief in life beyond death is not based on some tenuous idea of whether we have immortal souls. It is based on the sure foundation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

As time goes on, I realise more and more that this is the most important event in human history. How fortunate we are that it is so well attested. Even in the most rationalist and sceptical times, it is the central fact of Christian faith that we cannot let go of.

And this was the message of the early Christians that changed the world. Jesus rose from the dead. And therefore, as St Paul put it, in those words we say in the Easter anthems:

*Christ has been raised from the dead:*

*the first fruits of those who sleep.*

*For as by man came death:*

*by man has come also the resurrection of the dead;*

*for as in Adam all die:*

*even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*

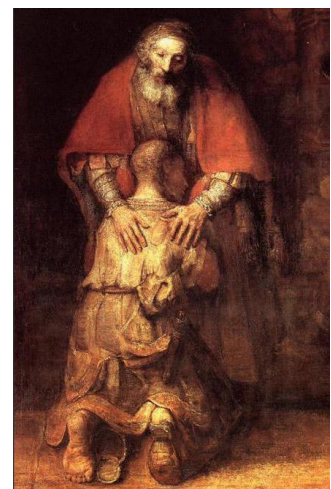
(1 Cor 15 v 20-22)

It is a wonderful hope that God has given us in Jesus. But can we know that we will share in this resurrection – even us, often so lukewarm and half hearted, with all our doubts and our fears?

For me the prodigal son story is where the answer is shown most clearly. As the Father stretches out his loving arms to welcome his prodigal son home, so I can know that he will welcome me home too. There is no nonsense here about our merits and achievements – God forbid! – there is only God's loving acceptance, forgiveness and unconditional love.

Nor do we have to try to impress God with the depth of our contrition and penitence. Remember how the Father cuts short the son's attempt at penitence and contrition. He interrupts him before he is half way through – he cannot wait to show his love – more, his excitement that his lost son has come home:

*“Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate!”*



As Jesus says, very simply:

*"...anyone who comes to me I will never drive away... and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6 v 37, 40)*

All we have to do is to trust in his love and forgiveness.

But if you're like me, by now you'll be thinking – that's great, but not yet please! That's how I feel - I love life, I love my family, I love my friends – and I want to enjoy many more years with them! Is it wrong to feel that way?

Not at all. As the great theologian and preacher Karl Barth said:

*"the man who has perhaps not enough joy in life and so does not know the fear of the end, who has not understood that this life is a gift of God, the man who does not grasp the beauty of this life, cannot grasp the significance of 'resurrection'."*

*"So Christian hope affects our whole life: this life of ours will be completed."*

That is important. Resurrection life - the life to come - is not about leaving behind our present life, but about completing and fulfilling it.

To give one example of this. It was in March 2018 that I suddenly remembered something that up to then I had forgotten: I won't have Parkinsons in heaven! All our illnesses and our weaknesses are temporary. That IS good news.

And yet... everything I feel I have gained through having had Parkinsons – this sense I have of seeing life a little more clearly, sharply and more brightly than I had before, that sense of seeing life more simply and yet with more depth – all of that I will keep. Nothing is wasted.

So we may not feel ready at present. But whenever our time may come, be very sure that when we enter heaven, we will have no regrets.

On my last afternoon at Lee Abbey, I walked down to the bay. I love to feel the rocks and sand and pebbles under my feet and to hear the roar of the waves. This time the waves were not large and fierce, but looked friendly and splashy and fun. And they were a beautiful dazzling white in the sunshine.

Unfortunately, having had a sleep after lunch, I was a bit late down to the beach, and the whole beach was in the shadow of the headland. I wanted to get to the sunshine and the bright sparkly waves, but I couldn't. I was stuck in the shadow of the beach – itself a place of beauty, but still in the shadow.

Life can sometimes feel a bit like that – beautiful, yet in shadow. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of the bright sunshine on the dazzling white splashy waves that almost seem to be leaping with joy. We can't get to them now – yet the sight of them entices us with a sense of hope and excitement.

It is true that most of us, being fortunate, love life ... and no, we're not ready to go yet. And so we are very glad of the great care that is being taken to keep this virus well under control.

But whatever may happen, we do not need to fear.

*“For the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”*

(Isaiah 51 v11)