

Fullness (John 11: 17-27; 38-44)

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May the meditations of all our hearts be open to the fullness of your life.
Amen.

Last week I spoke of humility, and how the path of humility includes letting go of pretensions that we are more than what we are: finite earth creatures who came from dust and to dust we shall return. Humility also involves acknowledging our sinfulness before a good God, our resistance to doing the good, our failure to act when we should. Finally I spoke of humility as letting go of the things that give us status and honour in the eyes of others, or that prevent us from being in right relations with others, in order to live instead by the honour that the humble God gives us, who stoops below us to wash our feet.

Humility is a path that involves shedding, letting go and self-emptying. Yet Jesus also calls us to fullness of life. How, then, are we to put these two things together – emptying ourselves and being full of life? This is what I will address tonight.

You may have noticed that the reading for last week, on Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and the reading for this week, on the raising of Lazarus, are both from the Gospel of John. This Gospel holds together both the call to humility and the call to fullness of life. It is in John 10, for example, that Jesus likens himself to the Good Shepherd, who calls his sheep by name, and who has come that they may have life, and have it in abundance (John 10: 1-10). Humility and fullness are not contradictory. Rather, they each speak of the quality of the life of God into which we are welcomed and by which we are saved and sustained.

The Gospel of John was most likely written for a community of Christians who were suffering threats and persecution. It offers 'good news', not only because it enables faith in Jesus as the light of the world, but encourages believers to keep up their faith and hope under difficult circumstances. It does so by a

series of 'signs', which authenticate Jesus as God's 'Word' in human form, and by giving glimpses into the generous, abundant and extravagant life of God, even if believers are having trouble seeing this in their particular circumstances.

Let me give you an illustration of what I am getting at. I remember once catching a plane from Canberra to Melbourne and it was a cloudy, dull day. I said to myself: 'The sun's not out today'. But once my plane took off, and we went above the clouds, of course the sun was out! The sun never stops shining, even if we are in darkness on our side of the world, or there are clouds covering our view of the sun. The only reason we can't see the sun shine, or we lose faith that it is shining, is if there is something in the way.

These 'signs' in the Gospel of John are like Jesus parting the clouds and showing the struggling community of believers that indeed God continues to shine, even if they can't see it. More than showing merely that God is still there, these signs show the quality of God's life that:

- provides (as in turning the water into wine in John 2: 1-11, the feeding of the five thousand in John 6: 1-14);
- heals (the official's son in John 4: 46-54; the paralytic in John 5: 1-9; the man born blind in John 9: 1-9);
- calms troubled waters (Jesus walking on the water in John 6:16-21), and
- restores the dead to life (the raising of Lazarus).

The raising of Lazarus is the culmination of all these signs and one which foreshadows Jesus' own death and resurrection. In fact, this story is a turning point in the drama of the Gospel. After the raising of Lazarus, the authorities, fearing Jesus' influence on the crowds who believed, and the possible Roman reaction to this growing movement, plot to kill him. The life-giver is about to die.

As we now know, and as the writer of John's gospel knew, nothing could cloud the love of God for us in Jesus, or quench his life. As the prologue to the Gospel of John says, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5). It goes on to refer to the light and life of God, as revealed in Jesus, as 'fullness': 'And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace' (John 1: 16).

Fullness, or abundance of life, refers first to the life of God, that shining light and healing grace. It also refers to our journey into God, our being filled with

God's Spirit. And third, it refers to us becoming fully ourselves. It is on these last two meanings of fullness – being filled with God, and becoming fully ourselves, that I would like to spend a bit more time. Discerning how these things fit together has occupied me this week. Here is my best shot for an explanation.

When you experience being loved, you feel loved *because* of who you are, not in spite of. The love of another does not obliterate you, but rather makes you feel better about being who you are – even though the ones who love you the best are the ones who know your faults. Because God is love, God's Spirit does not obliterate us, but calls us forth to be fully who we are. The third century theologian, Irenaeus, taught that 'the glory of God is the human being fully alive'.

Being fully alive is different from being full of yourself. A great example of someone being full of themselves, is from the film *Beaches*, with Bette Midler. In one scene, her character is talking incessantly about herself, then stops to draw breath and says 'Well, that's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do *you* think of *me*?' She is so full of her own self there is no room for anyone else in her field of attention.

Being fully alive is different from that. It means living as our whole self, not just a part of it. Often, our selves are contracted through anxieties or fears, from experiences of hurt or trauma, shame or guilt. We hide parts of ourselves that we don't like or don't want to know about in dark corners, wrapped and entombed, and hope that nobody notices. We then live our shrunken lives. The Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, said that 'unfortunately, this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of [people], that in their own house, they prefer to live in the cellar.' (*A Sickness Unto Death*).

To live this way, however, is to live as a divided or fragmented self, not a whole self. So being fully alive means that we must find healing from past hurts and wrongs, so that we are no longer driven by anxiety or fear, and instead live fully and authentically as our whole self.

I could say that much, and still be in the field of psychology. What makes being fully alive a theological matter is that our healing and wholeness are in relation to God's calling, and the fullness of God's life in which we are invited to participate.

In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus calls him out by name: "Lazarus, come out". This is done for the glory of God, to reveal to us the fullness of God's life, having power even over death. Lazarus is unbound, both from death and from his bandages, and called into new life.

St Augustine captures much of what I have been saying about fullness of life in relation to God's calling. In his words:

'Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new,
Late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within
But I outside, seeking there for you...

You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
You lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;
You touched me and I burned for your peace.

When at last I cling to you with my whole being...my life will be alive indeed, because filled with you.' (*The Confessions*, X. xxvii.38).

The path of humility is an invitation for us to get over ourselves, over being full of ourselves. The story of the raising of Lazarus is an invitation to hear ourselves being called by name into fullness of life. Amen.