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Death Relativised (John 11: 1-45)

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It comes as a bit of a shock to realise that the story of the raising of Lazarus occurs only in the gospel of John. As in fact, do all the stories we've heard over the past four weeks – Nicodemus visiting Jesus by night, the Samaritan woman at the well, the healing of the man born blind. Although there are parallel stories in the other gospels – other people raised from death, other encounters with foreign women, other blind men restored to sight – the particular genius of John's gospel is to work with these stories so as to generate comprehensive theological meaning. John is interested, not solely in the events themselves, but in what they show us about God and so about our own journeys of redemption.

How do we know this? Because John's Jesus explicitly tells us to 'read' the stories this way, with this interest in mind. At the beginning of the passage about the healing of the blind man, for example, when the disciples ask about the cause of his blindness, Jesus says, 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him'. Similarly, with the story of Lazarus, Jesus is portrayed as deliberately letting him die, since it is 'for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it'.

At first glance, these words seem pretty chilling. As if Jesus is perfectly happy to countenance another's suffering, distress, even death, just to prove a point – to make of some poor schmuck's vulnerability the occasion of an edifying example. But this is where we need to keep in mind the sense in which this gospel is a literary creation, an expression of faith. John is explicitly setting up his narration of these events so we don't lose the wood for the trees. He doesn't want us to focus solely on the miracle, because for him, these events aren't simply 'good news' for the particular individuals healed or raised or restored. They're occasions which make God known; they reveal God's nature, manifest the way God works and is. Glory is to

do with reputation. So when Jesus says that Lazarus' illness is 'for God's glory', he means it's an occasion for giving God a reputation for being a certain way, doing a certain kind of work. What *is* the reputation that accrues to God and to Jesus in the light of this event? How is God glorified by it? Essentially, this is a story signifying God's freedom in relation to death, God's power over death and God's deathless life.

But what exactly are we to make of this? Especially in times such as these, when the threat of death seems suddenly more immediate for many thousands of people, and the body count rises appallingly around the globe, how does this vision of God connect with the real world? Rowan Williams once said that Christian speech becomes mere platitude, incapable of transforming the world's meaning or pain, when it 'neglects or trivializes or evades aspects of the human'. One of the ways this happens, he says, is a tendency among Christians to be 'unserious about death' by speaking 'too glibly and confidently [of] eternal life'.¹ Is that what's going on here? Well ... I don't think so.

A striking feature of this text is that it goes out of its way to emphasise the impact of death in human experience. We hear of Martha and Mary's grief at the loss of their brother – Mary weeping inconsolably, their friends and community weeping with her, and witnessing their grief, Jesus himself deeply moved – weeping, disturbed, perhaps even angry. We hear too of the mourners' sense of powerlessness in the face of death. When Jesus finally turns up, Martha comes out to meet him, saying, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. And Mary repeats these words exactly: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. It expresses faith in his capacity to heal, but also reproach. They'd sent a message asking him to come, and he hadn't. Implicitly, then, it's a confession of their helplessness. They *had* been there, *with* the brother they loved, but could do nothing to avert the worst. And lastly, the text refuses to prettify the process of dying or its aftermath. Lazarus has been four days in the tomb, and is assumed to be already decomposing. Martha warns Jesus directly of the stench. The

¹ Rowan Williams, 'The Judgement of the World' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.29-43, p.40.

indignity, the distress of the physical dimensions of our mortality is here starkly named.

So in this story, there's no evading or trivializing the magnitude of death in human experience – its sorrow, its power, its materiality. And yet, from the outset Jesus assumes authority over it. He allows it to happen – not seeking to forestall Lazarus' death as if it cannot be reversed. When he arrives at Bethany, he tells Martha: 'Your brother will rise again' – not in some far distant future, 'on the last day', but through relationship with him. For 'I am the resurrection and the life'. And when he comes to the tomb, he orders the stone rolled away, despite Martha's objections. He prays aloud for Lazarus. This, he says, is so the crowd might come to believe that what's about to happen is the work of God and that Jesus himself is sent from God. This is the moment of 'glorification'; Jesus cries 'with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"'. Out he comes, 'his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth'. And in one of the most beautiful and tender commissionings in Scripture, Jesus commands them: 'Unbind him, and let him go'.

This is a story of liberation. So much of human experience *is* bound by death – death has so much power in and over life. Think of all the ways the threat of death controls our choices, runs our social systems. Think of all the ways we fail to give ourselves wholeheartedly to life, because of fear of death and its precursors and proxies – such things as humiliation, shame, rejection, sickness, isolation, diminution. What Jesus is communicating, what he wants to make known, is that this sense of threat, this fear of death, is ultimately non-necessary. Through him, in him, we're connected to a life that encompasses and transforms human death in all its forms. And this connection is what makes possible a whole new way of being alive now – unthreatened, peaceable, generous, joyful. 'Unbind them, and let them go'.

But is this true? Or is it just another form of denial, avoidance, false consolation? How can we know? According to John's gospel, our access to the truth, our access to this life promised beyond death, is 'believing'. Jesus tells his disciples the events are being played out 'so that you may believe'. He tells Martha, 'Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and

believes in me will never die'. He asks her, 'Do you believe this?' She says she does, but then has the advantage of being offered proof. Lazarus himself emerging from the tomb. But what about us? Are we just supposed to swallow it whole? I've said before that the word 'believe' in John's gospel is much more to do with trust, than with what we happen to think. It's about coming to know something for ourselves, in our own experience. But how might we come to know this?

Well, it seems to me this 'knowing' is something that grows in us. It emerges as we discover that in the deepening of our relationship with Jesus, with God, our sense of death does in fact change, it's relativized; our fear of it becomes less overwhelming and determining of our lives. Of course, death is always going to be big for us; it looms on the horizon of our lives as a great unknown and the process of dying can be agonized and distressing. Death truly is an end of sorts. Our sorrow at the death of loved ones is rightly profound; our responsibility for preserving life rightly shapes our care for each other. And yet, as the sense of God with us, God within us comes more and more alive, it seems to me that we do touch into a life larger than ours, one that we sense encompasses both our life and our death. In our prayer, in our receptivity, in our experience of being loved and called, we encounter a presence that endures, that connects indissolubly and sustains us in being.

Jesus never says we will not die; he says that even though they die, those who believe in him ... will live. That is, those who entrust themselves, who allow God's love to suffuse and sustain them, will be connected to life beyond their own. And this means that though fear and grief will remain part of our experience of mortality, it's not all there is to it – we can also know continuing communion and sense God's deathless life beckoning us on.

In the story of Lazarus, this gift of life beyond death is acted out – its power breaks through and is made visible in the material world to reveal God's glory. It's true that Lazarus will one day die again, his earthly existence will cease. The difference is that now he knows, Martha and Mary know, and we too may come to know that this dying is into life, and this life is without end.