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Lent 5 Wake up (John 11:1-45)

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What a drama! And it is in John's Gospel, so it has layers and layers of meaning way beyond the literal. We are heading toward death and resurrection. I weave together a number of levels of meaning and interpretation.

Years and years ago, I was involved in a CSSM beach Mission at Eden on the south coast of New South Wales, and I always think of that time when I read this story of Lazarus and Jesus and Mary and Martha and the crowds. On that beach mission, we offered a dramatised reading of the story. We came to the part where Jesus commanded, "Lazarus come out!" Now, we had a Lazarus character wrapped up in toilet paper I think, lying under a table with a cloth on it, in the summer heat near the beach. And when the Jesus figure called him out. There was no movement, "Lazarus come out". Silence. "Lazarus come out". Nothing, and again, "Lazarus come out". The tension was rising. There are a few crinkled brows. Then one of the team had a look under the table, lifted the sheet, and there was the Lazarus figure sound asleep. He was duly roused and helped out of the tomb!

That's all I remember of the story of that time, except that some of the players helped unwrap the toilet paper from around Lazarus.

The fact that this story has stayed with me for maybe 45 years, and just this bit of the story, is amazing and telling.

The Lazarus figure had fallen asleep, content in the dark space until he was roused and called out. I wonder if that is how Lazarus felt? I have no idea. He doesn't speak.

I wonder where you would place yourself in the story?

Are you content to sleep and rest?

Or are you willing to be called out back to life again?

Another part of the story that strikes me is that Jesus engages the community. "Unbind him and let him go", he says. unwrap the toilet paper..

We are all in this together. This business of life and death, and community is important. It can be enlivening or deadening. We can unbind and free, or we can bind and constrict each other.

But what is the purpose of this long story in John's gospel? We are getting close to Easter and we have in the back of our minds and hearts, Jesus' death and coming alive again. Maybe it is a hint, a challenge, but it certainly got the powers that be going. They didn't like it at all, that maybe Jesus is resurrection and life, and they begin seeking a way to get rid of Jesus, and Lazarus..

We don't have to go very far into the story before we realise something more is happening here.

'This sickness will not lead to death' says Jesus. It has a theological purpose, difficult though that may be. Eventually this does become true, but, it seems it is true, only to glorify God. Jesus' path of suffering and death lead back to God's glory, ie. Jesus so called glorification. Jesus knows that. The hearers of the gospel know that. His disciples and others in the narrative do not.¹

I also notice the sisters, dear Mary, and Martha, send out to call Jesus home and admonish him 'if you had been here this wouldn't have happened!' And even that, Jesus turned on its head.

They believed in Jesus and his connection with the source of life but here they are challenged to go even further.

' Jesus declares: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone believing in me, even if they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (11:25-26). At the basic level it is not true: Lazarus will eventually die. But I don't think this is meant to be understood on the

¹ <https://billloader.com/MtLent5.html>

literal level. Rather, like the statements that Jesus is the bread of life and the light of the world, it is making a different point.

Because it uses the words, 'even if they die', we might think of what happened to Lazarus. 'Will live' introduces the point of ambiguity. At the level of the narrative this is also true of Lazarus (until he dies again!), but the implications of such a statement would be that any believer who dies will be similarly brought back to life for a while in a literal sense. That is about as absurd as when Nicodemus thinks literally about being born a second time (3:3-5).²

The point of the saying, 'I am the resurrection and the life' and ultimately of the narrative as a whole, seem to suggest that Jesus offers life, eternal life, a quality of life which includes timelessness or eternity in the temporal sense, a sharing in the life of God here and now and forever.³

And then 'Jesus wept'. This human man loved his friends, and yet that seems to be in stark contrast to the beginning of the story, where he waited a few days before going back. Why did he do that? It is an enigma to me. Maybe he had complete confidence and trust in God that it would be okay, or maybe he was too busy and waiting for it to sink in? Who knows but it seems a bit cruel.

For the purposes of the story, it is certainly striking, and when he does eventually get back, he lets out the emotion, he weeps.

And so, what do you take away from this story for yourself?

Why was this man raised to life and not others?

How can this be, someone coming alive again after they have died? What is the theological point?

Maybe you're struck by the tears of the women or Jesus, or wonder about Lazarus, the central character who doesn't say a word? Why is that?

What resonates? What strikes you?

Where is life, what is truth, resurrection and life?

² <https://billloader.com/MtLent5.html>

³ *ibid.*,

'To acclaim Jesus as resurrection and life is ultimately to say something about God and to do so we need to ensure we think theologically. How do we understand this God who through Christ is shown as life and nourishment: God so loved the world; God is compassion. That is the light that challenges the darkness, the truth that challenges the falsehood, the caring that challenges the abandonment - and so leads from death to life,'⁴ says Loader.

Frederick Buechner writes:

Recent interviews with people who have been resuscitated after being pronounced clinically dead reveal that, after the glimpse they evidently all of them get of a figure of light waiting for them on the other side, they are very reluctant to be brought back again to this one. On the other hand, when Lazarus opened his eyes to see the figure of Jesus standing there in the daylight beside him, he couldn't for the life of him tell which side he was on.⁵

⁴ *ibid.*,

⁵ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/7/lazarus>