

We have read as our Gospel reading this morning, John's account of the raising of Lazarus. It is a well known passage. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary has died. Jesus comes to visit the family.

We hear of Martha and Mary coming out to meet him. Each says to him: 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.' You can sense the pain, the feeling of absence, of disappointment, of confusion. Death, the death of their brother has brought everything into question.

But what of the central figure in our story, Lazarus. We hear of Martha and Mary at two other points in the Gospel story. We come across them in Luke's Gospel. Jesus, we are told, visits the home of Martha. Martha is busy getting everything ready, Mary is sitting listening to Jesus. We hear of Martha complaining about Mary not pulling her weight but no mention of Lazarus. Then, just after the raising of Lazarus, we come across them again. Jesus is visiting their home in Bethany. Martha is serving, busy as usual, and Mary anoints Jesus. We are simply told that Lazarus is there at the table.

Lazarus is there – but he doesn't speak, he doesn't act. In the society of that time, we would have expected that in a house occupied by a brother and two sisters that Lazarus, the man, would have been the lead character – but Lazarus is silent.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche Community, a family of communities in which the able and those with physical and mental challenges live together in simple fellowship, makes an interesting suggestion.

He starts with the description of Lazarus as ill in our Gospel reading. In the Greek in which John was writing, the word that we translate as ‘ill’, *ajsqenh*", carries a range of meanings – not only sick, but also weak, feeble, insignificant.

So, Jean Vanier asks, was Lazarus handicapped, disabled in some way, looked after by his two unmarried sisters, something of a nobody in the society of his day?

There is another thread running through this story. It is that of love. The sisters send word to Jesus: ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ A little later on we read; ‘Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus’. This is the first point in John’s Gospel where we hear of Jesus loving another individual. So we are presented with a picture of Jesus having a particular concern for Lazarus, one who is of no consequence except to his sisters who look after him.

We began with Martha and Mary coming out to meet him. Each says to him: ‘Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.’ As I said, you can sense the pain, the feeling of absence, of disappointment, of confusion. Death, the death of their brother has brought everything into question.

Which of us at some stage, however strong our faith, has not felt that sense of aloneness and isolation and asked ourselves ‘Does God even know? Does God even care?’

I want to set alongside that reality, this understanding of Jesus as one who cares not for people in general, but for people in particular. As we read our Gospel passage, there was a lot of emotion around the tomb of Lazarus. You sense it in Jesus, moved to tears, In Mary, in those around them. Even in Martha's revulsion, as Jesus orders the stone of the tomb to be taken away.

As we read the text, we are invited to look beyond the text. We have read of Martha and Mary, their pain, their questioning and we see in them something of our own pain, our doubts and confusion when things go wrong and we seem to know God only in his absence. I sense in all this a Jesus who sees our pain, who feels our pain, who heals our pain.

But again the attention is moving away from Lazarus – silent, ignored in life, ignored in death. Jesus' will for Lazarus is life. Again as we read the text, as we look beyond the text, are there ways in which we can identify with Lazarus; things in life that hold us back, that imprison us in our own inner tomb? Maybe those bits of us we don't like – a willingness to condemn, to put people down; a lack of willingness to listen to those who are different, different class, different creed, just different – and in the process people can be hurt. All these have their origin in all that is dead within us.

Jesus' desire for us is to rise up and be the people he wants us to be. He calls us out of these inner tombs, just as in our Old Testament Lesson, God called Ezekiel to raise up from the dead all those people of Israel: we read:

Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; ..... .<sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, *Ezek 37:12,14*

To each one of us, Jesus says, ‘Take away the stone!’ Maybe we are a bit embarrassed about what will be revealed. Jesus calls us by name, ‘Come out!’

We can then rise up with the Spirit of Jesus within us. We can let the light of Jesus penetrate all the darkness within us. As we find a greater peace within us, we bring a greater peace to those around us. The story of Lazarus is a story for each one of us, a story of each one of us. In this we see that Jesus came to call us to rise up, to become fully alive in order that we might bring life and light into the world, the world of people’s doubts, worries and emptiness.

I’ll close with words of Jean Vanier:

This resurrection is a process that begins every morning, every night, every day.

We are called on a journey of resurrection  
to do the work of God,

to bring love into our families, our communities and the world.

*Jean Vanier*

*Drawn into the Mystery of God through the Gospel of John*