

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of the Year (A), 5th/6th April 2014

Today we have the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. This is a story occurring only in John's gospel, and its inner meaning is clear – Jesus is the one who is able to control life and death, the power of God alone, and therefore Jesus is the Son of God.

But for John it is even more than that – this is the season when the church is preparing for the memorial of Jesus' death on Good Friday, leading to his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Here surely, then, is a story springing us forward to Jesus' own death and resurrection. Look, for example, at how the details of this story correspond with that of Jesus' own story: Lazarus is placed in a cave/tomb with a stone rolled over the entrance; he is there for three days before Jesus hears of it; and he appears with cloths and bindings around him. All these details are replicated in the story of Jesus' burial and resurrection.

So the church today uses the story to focus our minds on that saving act of Jesus' death on Good Friday and his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. And this is complemented in the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel: "I am now going to open your graves; I mean to raise you from your graves, my people, and lead you back to the soil of Israel. And you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people. And I shall put my spirit in you and you will live ..." This is exactly what we experience in the faith of the church – the death of Jesus, the beloved son of the Father, the innocent man, is the ultimate piece in the revelation of God's love for us.

Jesus' death is astonishing – there were thousands of deaths in and around Jerusalem during the Roman occupation, and many of them just outside the city, dying in the same way as Jesus. The difference was that here was an innocent young man, a man of God, one who had gained a justifiable name for himself as a preacher of wisdom and a healer. In fact he was the image of God, deeply loved by his Father. See what a tremendous sacrifice it was for this wonderful specimen of a human creature, the apple of his Father's eye, being sacrificed in such a horrible way. His followers, soon after, saw this as the final chapter in the story of God's love in the scriptures; and in faith, the Church sees Jesus' death as the ultimate moment of God's love being revealed, of our being saved from our guilt and shame, and brought into the presence of God's love.

And three days later Jesus is experienced risen from the dead. This was so powerful, a man dying in such an extraordinary way, that the earth couldn't

contain him. A person of his power, dying such a dramatic death just didn't disappear, and couldn't just disappear. You sense that the Resurrection was inevitable. Jesus would be experienced present in the midst of his friends simply because he was so powerfully among them during his lifetime. And Jesus' Resurrection leads us to acknowledge that our lives too will find their end and fulfilment in our own resurrection from the dead. We too are significant in God's eyes, and just as he would not allow his son to remain in death, neither will he allow us to remain there.

So Lazarus is the precursor of Jesus – he dies and returns to life. So too Jesus dies and rises to new life, and it is precisely his death which, through faith, brings us life and confidence and increased faith in the Fathers' love. We are saved in this moment, and our final salvation is in the reward of eternal life.

