

The raising of Lazarus

Brian McKinlay
5 November 2006

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 24:1-8; Revelations 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Thinking about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, a question that occurs to me is “Why?” When someone dies, our hope is that they are in a better place. Why did Jesus bring Lazarus back to the troubled life of Palestine?

When Jesus saw Mary weeping because of her brother’s death, and the people with her also weeping, the Gospel says he was “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

The weeping wasn’t a gentle sobbing. It was wailing, the sort of wailing you might hear at a Middle Eastern funeral — gut wrenching and disturbing.

Our translation says that Jesus “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved,” but the translation is too gentle. The expression “greatly disturbed” refers to an animal snort; the sort of body-shaking snort that might see in a horse. In humans it refers to anger — a deep body-shaking, almost violent anger.

Jesus was also “*deeply moved*,” it says. Literally it means that he “troubled himself.” He became agitated and downright angry, the sort of anger that makes you shake, inside and out.

Jesus was deeply shaken and angry — angry at death itself and the pain and sadness it causes. And as began to go to the tomb he began to weep.

This time a different word is used for weeping — *dakryo*. (δακρῶ) It’s the only time the word is used in the entire New Testament. It’s not wailing. It means to shed tears because of inner feeling.

Jesus didn’t wail like the others, he shed tears. He wasn’t in despair over the death of Lazarus. But he was sad because of the pain of Lazarus’s family. He wept with those who wept because he loved them.

Jesus is also with us in our grief. And his response is to give life, as he gave life to Lazarus and also to Lazarus’s family.

In this commemoration of All Saints and All Souls, we are sad because of the deaths of people we have known and loved. We shed tears, but we don’t wail in despair as those whose have no hope. Rather, we look to Jesus to give life.

When Jesus finally came to the tomb, verse 38 says that he was again greatly disturbed, angry. Life is one of the great themes of John’s Gospel and death is the great enemy. Jesus was disturbed at death and its challenge to him as life-giver. He came to the tomb stirred up in his spirit, ready to take authority over death. Calvin wrote of this that “Christ does not come to the sepulchre as an idle spectator, but like a wrestler preparing for the contest. Therefore no wonder that he groans again, for the violent tyranny of death which he had to overcome stands before his eyes.”

Jesus confronted death and overcame it. Soon after this he was to confront death, his own death, all death, on the cross — and, by the power of the Spirit of God, was to rise up triumphant over death — just as he had given life to Lazarus.

So why was did Jesus bring back Lazarus from death? Because of family, because of Jesus’ love and compassion for the family of Lazarus, who faced an uncertain, sad and troubled future without Lazarus. And because of Jesus’ anger at the disgrace and shame of death. It is not disgraceful for an individual to die — sometimes quite the opposite. It comes to each of

us “once to die and then the judgement.” But the fact of death and the pain it brings is a disgrace against humanity and in the sight of God. “Then the Lord God,” Isaiah says, “will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, ‘Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation.’ “Let us be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation.” We could say a lot about God’s salvation — it’s a large and rich salvation, a wonderful salvation. The raising of Lazarus and the feasts of All Saints and All Souls remind us that God has redeemed us in Christ as a family, as a community — the communion of saints.

Today’s celebration says that through Jesus Christ, God has defeated death for all our sakes. We are a people of the resurrection. We are persuaded that life, creation and hope overrule death, despair and destruction. Today we remember those who have died, we give thanks for them and in prayer continue to entrust them to God’s mercy and keeping. In a few minutes we will remember those we know in this parish especially, mentioning each one by name.

Today, we remember that we are at one with thousands of others who with us are saints of God — a great cloud of witnesses, as they are called in Hebrews. In God’s new creation, this morning’s reading from the Book of Revelation says that “the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” “...they will be his *peoples*” it says. “... he will wipe away every tear from *their* eyes.” We share God’s promise as a body, as a communion, the communion of saints.

Today we give thanks for the life that God has revealed in Jesus Christ and given to us, to those who have gone before us and to those who will come after us — life God has given to all the communion of saints.