

Lenten Evensong Sermon: Crossroads Sunday 9 March 2014 5.45pm

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

In nomine...

We all use euphemisms. There's "The Other Place", or, "The Fenland Polytechnic". There's "The Scottish Play". There's "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" – or Voldemort. We say "on the streets" instead of "homeless", "fell off the back of a truck" instead of "stolen".

Euphemisms may be witty, or they may be trying to describe something that is difficult in a more optimistic light. Or they may be a way of avoiding the elephant in the room, a way of addressing a taboo, or an attempt to speak the unspeakable.

"Passed away", "departed", "gone to the big place in the sky", "pop one's clogs", "meet one's maker", "go to a better place", "be in the next door room" are just some euphemisms related to death and dying. And there's another one, "fallen asleep", which is one that even Jesus uses in our reading today.

Lazarus has "fallen asleep". Jesus' disciples take him literally. But Jesus is talking about death.

Death is something we don't like to think about. Sometimes we can't avoid it, if a grandparent dies, for instance. But it is something that is a part of who we are. We are all going to die. And poor old Lazarus will end up dying not once, but twice.

Because the thing about Lazarus is that he's resuscitated. He's not resurrected as Jesus will be a little while later. Lazarus on this occasion is brought back from the dead. But Jesus lives beyond death.

I heard a story once that there was an appointment of a rather eminent scholar to our college (well, they all are, of course!) and there were political machinations at play. The successful candidate found a graffito in a departmental common-room, which read "John 11:35". Which is to say, "Jesus wept".

That's the shortest verse in the Bible. And it's a pretty powerful one too. Jesus, the Son of God, weeping. He's shedding tears - in a way that contrasts with Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha. They are crying out loud, wailing, lamenting noisily, as was traditional for mourners. But Jesus's sadness is quiet, gentle, deep, personal.

Jesus has other emotions. In 11:33, he is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved". Literally, he's physically shuddering, from deep within his heart. *Enebrimesato*.

Why does Jesus shudder? Why weep? It's his reflection, his deep understanding, of what death is, what it can do to us and those around us. Death is the representation of all that is evil. Death is the final worst thing that can happen to us. Death tears apart families, homes, lives, relationships, hopes, communities. Death is something to shudder at, something to weep about. Death is something that is rightly hard to talk about.

And death was something that Jesus too knew full well was facing him soon. And not just any old death, but the totally wretched one of the Cross.

My title today is “Crossroads”. It envisages standing at a place where three roads meet. For you Classicists, that sounds like Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. Three roads – did you ever realise that’s where our word “trivia” comes from? But this is not trivial. This is life or death. Jesus is apparently heading straight for death. And he knows it. Moreover, he knows just what’s in store. But he sets his face towards it. It seems that he’s taking the road signposted “Death”.

But no. Jesus is actually on the cusp of taking the road signposted “Life”. But what kind of life is this? It’s not like Lazarus, where there is a temporary reprieve from death and bereavement, all of which will happen in due course. It’s more like Ezekiel’s dry bones – despite the rather ghoulish way they are gradually described as taking on new life and spirit.

The life that is the road that Jesus takes, and invites us to take, is *something more than* Lazarus’s resuscitation. It’s not just a “coming back to life”. Lazarus had been in the grave for four days – his body was beginning to decompose. And like the coming together of Ezekiel’s dry bones, it doesn’t sound comfortable, easy, or neat. Perhaps that was another reason why Jesus wept, knowing the pain, difficulty, and messiness of both death and resurrection that would be in store for him himself. Moreover, it’s a miraculous, awe-inspiring life, that seems to surpass all possibility as we know it. From dry bones to living human beings. Accepting death, going through death, going through resurrection. To Life.

And it’s a life that, once we partake of it, will be the most perfect life possible. Pure life, where there is no more death. Jesus’s life takes both death and resurrection into account. And shows that that’s not the end of the story.

Physical impossibility? We cannot explain it. But what we can see is that the evidence points to resurrection life, to life after death and life after resurrection.

We can see in Old Testament writings the promise of ever-deepening, everlasting relationship with God. We can see in these Scriptures that Jesus himself read and taught, the promise of something better, something yet to come. God’s breathing life into these very dead bones, dry and scattered, hints at God’s power over even death.

We can see in the Gospel accounts a story of Jesus’ awful death, the weirdness of the empty tomb, the grief, despair, disappointment, and embarrassment of the disciples. None of which would have been recorded and perpetuated if it wasn’t for all that came after. Jesus’s raising of Lazarus hints how Jesus could relate to death – as someone who would suffer death but also be Lord over it.

We can see in the rest of the New Testament, and in early church traditions and stories, that something happened that was hard to believe but absolutely worthwhile believing. Something that changed lives – and changed the very nature of human mortality.

More on the resurrection at the beginning of next term.

But for now, what these readings tell us about death. Death is something to grieve at, something that is the final worst thing of life, something that causes the deepest pain. Jesus has gone through that final worst thing, he knows about it. He has been subject to it, and he

has been Lord over it. He knows it intimately, and he has overcome it. And he wants to be with us when each of us face not just this final worst thing in life, but also every bad thing in life. He wants to show us our ways through suffering, knowing that the way through the very worst, final, suffering, ends up with perfect life.

So how can we follow that path, how can we choose that road when we stand at the cross roads of life? Martha, Lazarus' hard-working sister, answers this for us.

Martha: If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But God will grant what you ask.

Jesus: Lazarus will rise again.

Martha: I know he will, at the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus: I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this?

Martha's response: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And what's *your* response?