



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-En-Provence
and the Luberon*

*29th March 2020
5th Sunday of Lent – Passion Sunday*

Reflection for Passion Sunday

by Revd John Smith

Today is Passion Sunday, the start of Passiontide. Passiontide marks a turning in the Lent season. Moving away from experiencing Christ's temptation in the wilderness and his preparation for His ministry, our eyes look toward the climax of His ministry, the cross and beyond that to the empty tomb. But first the cross has to be endured and our salvation secured.

In several ways the gospel reading set for today presages Christ's death and resurrection. We have a death of a loved one, weeping (wailing) women, a stone over the entrance of the cave to be rolled away, linen wrappings, the empty tomb and new life. Both cases demonstrated Christ's power over death and gave glory to God but for all these similarities the resurrection of Lazarus and Christ are not the same. With Lazarus it was more a case of being restored to life; restoration rather than resurrection. Lazarus was returned to his former self, perhaps psychologically changed in some way, but otherwise as he was before he died. After his resurrection Jesus appears as a human being with a body but with a body that has been transformed as ours will be - but that is a story for another day, Easter Day.

Our reading from the Old Testament also speaks of resurrection. Ezekiel, speaking for the Lord, says, "O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them ...Then you shall know that I am the Lord" Resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy spirit are tied together as Ezekiel continues "I shall put my spirit in you that you may live". If Christ's coming to this earth to die for us was God's great gift of Himself to us in bodily form, the second great gift of God of Himself was when He came in spiritual form.

The overarching lesson from this miracle is that Christ is the regenerator of the dead, spiritually and physically. He is able to regenerate the hearts and minds of those who are spiritually dead in their waywardness, lostness and sin. Christ's life-giving miracle of grace is as remarkable as His miraculous ability to resurrect. And it is in the resurrection that Christians hope and believe.

Looking at the gospel for a lesson for today I am struck that Christ gave Lazarus more than life. He also gave him time. And this is a gift that many of us have been given at this time. So how are we using this unsought gift of time? Probably one of the most frequently said statements in this modern age is 'I don't have enough time'. Or 'there are not enough hours in the day'. How many people have wished they had more time I wonder? Well now we have got it. We have got free time having had all those things that we were planning to do removed from our calendars. For sure it has forced us to reorder our priorities, for priorities are what the shortage of time has always been about. We all have 24 hours in a day. It is how we choose to spend those hours that is the difference. Let us begin by allocating more time to God through prayer, reflection, worship and service. There are new opportunities to serve Him through serving others and so many fabulous resources available to enrich our daily walk with God.

I was also struck by the last words of our gospel, "*Unbind him and let him go*" or 'take off the grave clothes and set him free', for this is the condition we find ourselves in as believing Christians. We have been freed from the grave.

We wait to see if the period of our home confinement is extended again beyond April 15, but if you are praying for an end to this time and feel your prayers are not being answered just remember the distressed sisters, Mary and Martha, in our gospel. God's delays are not denials. We know from experience that unrelieved suffering can and does produce growth. Jesus Himself "*learned obedience by the things that He suffered*" (Hebrews 5:8) And Paul says to the Romans "*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope*" (Romans 5:3-4) And one thing that we need at the moment is hope.

We take comfort and hope from God's words recorded in Jeremiah "*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope*". (Jeremiah 29:11) And the reassurance of Paul, though it may be hard for us to see at this place and time, "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28)

I have to smile when I hear people (including myself) say that these are uncertain times. Whenever have we lived in certain times? Whenever were we certain what would happen in the next hour let alone the next day, week or month? Yes, it is unusual to have the world turned so completely upside down but there is only one thing certain in this life and that is God's love for us. I am equally struck when I hear speak about these "troubled times", as it is not the times that are troubled but the people experiencing the times. This is not to be unsympathetic to those who are troubled by the times (far from it - they are of deep concern to all of us) but we must remind ourselves that Jesus gives us the answer "*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me*". (John 14 v 1) And if we are anxious, Jesus also tells us "*do not be anxious about your life*" (Matthew 6:25). Let us hold onto his words through these times. As Paul writes to Timothy: "*For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love*". (2 Timothy 1:7)

So, let us commit to face the coming days and weeks turning fear into faith, panic into prayer and worry into worship.

Amen