

Lazarus
All Saints Highfield, Headington
2nd April, 2017
John 11.1-45

Thank you for your welcome. It's very good to be with you. I have now been in post as Bishop of Oxford for just over six months. So far so good. I have made home visits to all the incumbents in the Oxford and Cowley Deaneries, including your own vicar. I'm in the process of spending a day in each of our 29 deaneries. This week was visit number 17. I was in Mursley, a very rural deanery between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. I was taken to a farm to see new born lambs. I was also chased across a field by a large black pig named Nuke who was the size of a small car. "He's got a bit of boar in him" said the farmer as we ran across the field, preserving what dignity we could

Today is Passion Sunday. We look ahead now to Holy Week and Easter. And we read together the great story of Lazarus. Lazarus stands at the very centre of the gospel of John. John's gospel offers us seven signs, miracles which point beyond themselves. The raising of Lazarus is the final one. It points to the great truth that Jesus Christ brings life and has conquered death.

The story shows us more of the character of Christ – the person Jesus is. John invites us to know Jesus better through this story. As we know Jesus better, so we come to know God better, for Christ comes to reveal to us the Father.

As we know Jesus better, so we come to understand what kind of Church we are called to be. For we are called to be like Christ together as we gather and as we are sent into the world.

So what does this story show us of Jesus?

I have three words in my mind at the moment. As I travel across the Diocese in these early months, I am trying to discover three words which might describe the kind of church we hope to be in the Diocese of Oxford at the present time. I believe our goal should be to become a more Christ like church in every way.

Because we are such a large diocese, I would like us to have a very simple vision and ethos rooted in becoming a more Christ like church. I think I have my three words now and I am testing them out in various places. I would like to offer them to you today as ways into this story of Jesus and Lazarus.

I believe we are called to be a Church and a Diocese which is Christ like in these ways. First I believe we are called to be more contemplative as a Church. Second, I believe we are called to be more compassionate. Third, I believe we are called to be more courageous.

Contemplative, compassionate, courageous. A Christ-like Church.

How do we encounter Jesus in the story of the raising of Lazarus? First we encounter Jesus who is contemplative: who spends time with God, who reflects deeply, who prays, who is able to see beneath the surface of events and respond to them.

In this chapter and in many other places in John's gospel, Jesus does not do what is expected of him by the crowds or by his friends. Most of us respond all the time to other people's expectations. We do what is asked of us.

But Jesus directs his own course always. He does this not because he is rude or difficult. He does this because his ear is tuned to a deeper reality and a different voice. His life of prayer and reflection and contemplation means that he knows and understands what the Father is doing.

For this reason, when he hears Lazarus is ill, when all his disciples want him to go, he waits for one day and then for a second day. Only on the third day does he begin his journey.

Jesus has good news to share because he is a contemplative: he is deeply rooted in the life of God, able to see God's purposes and reality and follow God's call.

If the Church wants to be good news in our generation, we must first deepen our sense of spending time with the living God in worship and in prayer. Only a contemplative church will be able to understand and live and proclaim the gospel in a changing world.

Second we encounter a Jesus in this story who is profoundly compassionate: who is motivated from beginning to end by love. Jesus' encounters with Mary the sister of Lazarus are marked by tears.

Here it is Jesus weeping with Mary. In the next chapter, as Mary anoints Jesus with oil, she will wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. There is great love here.

"When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved". When they show Jesus the tomb, he began to weep. He comes to the tomb greatly disturbed.

Jesus is fully human, a real person, with human affections and love. His life is marked by compassion: the ability to be moved, to suffer with another and to act in that suffering.

On this Passion Sunday we need to remember this call to compassion: that our hearts should be touched by the love of God and moved such that we are bound in love to others, hurting where they hurt, weeping with those who weep, and that compassion should lead to action.

We are to be a contemplative church, a compassionate Church, like our Lord. Finally we are to be a courageous church.

Jesus displays in this story a great courage which inspires us. He shows courage in travelling to Bethany, near Jerusalem, for he is a wanted man there. This journey is one which will lead eventually to his own passion and death. His own conquest of death will make possible the raising of Lazarus and all of us.

Jesus displays courage in confronting grief and pain. He does not run from suffering or from difficulty or from questions and throughout this story walks towards them not away from them.

Jesus displays courage, finally in standing before the tomb and ordering the stone to be rolled away and calling in a loud voice: Lazarus come out.

Jesus calls us as a church to a similar courage: not to be afraid for our own life, to walk towards questions and pain and difficulty and doubt and to be bold in our words and in our actions for God.

Like the Church in every generation, we face many challenges in our own.

The way through those challenges in every sense is to return to the centre, to aim to become more and more a Christ like Church.

The Jesus we see in this story of Lazarus is contemplative, deeply rooted in God.

The Jesus we see in this story of Lazarus is compassionate, moved by the suffering of others

The Jesus we see in this story of Lazarus is courageous, walking into difficulty and towards the cross.

May we in our generation learn how to be a contemplative, a compassionate and a courageous church once more.

May God bless you and the community we serve in these coming days

Amen.