

Sermon for Evensong on the Second Sunday after Easter,  
5th May 2019

*Isaiah 38:9-20, John 11:17-44; see*

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=423915548>

If you had to say just one thing about our Christian belief, I think that it would have to be that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. There are all sorts of striking things, miracles and sacred truths, rules to live one's life by; but there is nothing like the resurrection from the dead. It is the most amazing thing – the most challenging thing - but also the most reassuring thing.

Last week we were reading the story of doubting Thomas. This week, the second Sunday of Easter, we have the story of the raising of Lazarus, coupled with an Old Testament lesson about King Hezekiah, recovering from illness after his triumph over the Assyrian king Sennacherib, a passage in the Bible sometimes called the Psalm of Hezekiah, in which Hezekiah gives thanks for his recovery from what he had thought was terminal illness.

Hezekiah was ill in the first half of the 8th century BC. Isaiah the prophet, who was also one of the king's counsellors, at first said that God had told him that the king would definitely die; but after Hezekiah, who had been a good king and faithful in his worship of the one true God, had prayed to the Lord and shed tears, Isaiah received another prophecy to the effect that the Lord had heard his prayers: after all, the king would not die, but would live another fifteen years. The proof of this was that time on a sundial would run backwards, the shadow would go back on itself. So Hezekiah did not die, for another fifteen years.

But the story of Lazarus is much more like the story of Jesus later on. Lazarus clearly was dead. He had been in the tomb for four days and his corpse had begun to decay and smell; but nevertheless Jesus asked for the stone sealing up the tomb to be

rolled away, and he commanded the dead man to come out, which he did, still wrapped in his burial shroud. This is different in detail from what happened to Jesus, in that he had left the tomb and his burial clothes were neatly folded and left in the tomb for Simon Peter to find them.

Just as the Lord was moved by Hezekiah's prayer, 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears', said the Lord, and the Lord was moved to spare Hezekiah, so 'Jesus wept', which is supposed to be the shortest verse in the King James version of the Bible, but more importantly is a sign that Jesus was moved by ordinary human compassion and by the sadness of the occasion. His friend Lazarus seemed to have just been snatched away in death. So Jesus asks God to help him, in effect; to give people a reason to believe, in the same way as Hezekiah asked for a sign.

You know sometimes, when I'm in church, listening to someone preaching, I feel that they are saying extraordinary things rather too easily. How can we just talk about people being raised from the dead, sundials being reversed, and so on, without at least to some extent acknowledging that this is far from the sort of thing that we come across in our normal lives? And indeed, as Doubting Thomas dared to say, these things are, on the face of them, actually incredible, not believable: so why are we able just to take them in our stride?

Or to put it another way, are we right just to take them in our stride? Is it one of those things, like how old Methuselah was when he died, that we can explain away as being a metaphor, a figure of speech, just a graphic way of illustrating a profound truth, rather than being literally true?

I must confess that those sort of thoughts do occur to me when I read about the sundial: 'I will bring again the shadow of degrees ... ten degrees backward'. Frankly that looks to me more akin to a

magic trick than evidence of the existence and power of God. But then again, the story of Hezekiah and his recovery from illness is not such a massive miracle as the story of Lazarus - or indeed, as massive as the story of Jesus himself. And it is 3,000 years old. So perhaps we can allow some licence there. Nothing very big turns on it now.

But Lazarus is different. The story of Lazarus comes in St John's Gospel but not in the other gospels. St John's Gospel has an overriding theme, or a dominant purpose, if you will, which you'll find in the words at the end of chapter 20: 'But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God .. and that believing, that ye might have life through his name'.

There's a version of that, in a way, in what Jesus says to the disciples at the beginning of the story of Lazarus. 'Then Jesus said unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there'. It's almost as though Jesus is saying, 'If I'd been there, when Lazarus was about to die, I could have stopped him dying; I could have healed him. But then you disciples wouldn't have had such a dramatic demonstration of my divinity as I'm now going to give you'.

I do slightly wonder whether that's something which the gospel writer has added, rather than it being a verbatim quote from Jesus himself. It doesn't seem to me to be too likely that the man who told the parable of the Good Samaritan would have said, 'You know, it's better that Lazarus should actually be dead; because raising him from the dead makes for a more cogent proof'. I think Jesus, indeed the Jesus who 'wept', would really have cared much more about Lazarus himself, than about whether he was making a great theological proof or not.

I don't think that these stories need any extra embellishment. There are a number of factual details - whether the grave clothes

were left in the grave or whether the dead person came out wearing them; rolling away the stone; how quickly dead bodies decay in the Middle Eastern heat. And Doubting Thomas's story itself, with the explicit challenge not to resort to rationalisation, to plausible explanation - because Jesus is not a ghost. Thomas can touch him. These are amazing things. Maybe they are so foreign to our normal way of thought that very often we just keep them out of our minds.

But if we do that, we are keeping the essence of Christianity out of our minds at the same time. For much of our lives we can, I suppose, somehow manage without really worrying too much about God, if I can put it that way. I know that you might well be affronted if I said to you that we don't bother with God much in the normal course of our lives. What I mean is, we don't very often focus on what the resurrection to eternal life might really mean. That is, except when we are confronting somebody's death; maybe our own, maybe someone dear to us whom we've just lost, or whom we're about to lose.

Then of course the church's teaching about the 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life' is something that can give us real comfort. You may be a bit challenged by that expression 'sure and certain hope'. On the face of things, if something is something we hope for, that's not the same as something which we confidently expect, or have rational grounds for being certain about. If we hope that something will happen, that something will be true: then we want it to happen, but we aren't certain about it. St Paul makes a similar distinction in his letter to the Romans [8:24f]: 'For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.' If something is right there in front of you, then you can't say you are hoping for it to be there.

But I wonder whether that is a real, genuine distinction, between things hoped-for and things actually experienced. We expect confidently that we will wake up tomorrow morning, and that our world will still exist. Could we not say that we have a sure and certain hope of our waking up tomorrow, in Stoke or Cobham or Oxshott, in the normal way? Some of the great Bible passages which are used at funerals come to mind here. From St John's Gospel, from his 14th chapter, 'In my father's house are many mansions', where again he's talking to our hero Thomas; and St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15.

'But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body.

All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds.' .... And

'So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: ....

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.'

This is a mystery. Indeed St Paul says it. He writes:

'Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.'

Before it goes off iPlayer, I should mention to you that in Holy Week Radio 3's Composer of the Week was Georg Frideric Händel. George Frederick Handel. One of the delights of those Holy Week programmes is that pretty well all the 'Messiah' was played. Maybe if you don't get round to reading the various passages in the Bible which I've spoken about, you can listen instead to some of the wonderful arias and recitatives in Handel's Messiah. 'The trumpet shall sound', for example. You will get the same message, with that great music. I pray that, however you do come to it, you will indeed have that 'sure and certain hope' of the resurrection to eternal life.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant