

20140406Lent5Sermon

I've really enjoyed reading passages from *The Pilgrim's Progress* as I've prepared these five Lenten sermons. In only 10-15 minutes of preaching it is hard to encapsulate not only the progress of Christian on his journey to the Celestial City but also link it to the Gospel reading. Those of you who know *The Pilgrim's Progress* might have seen how I stretched or concatenated some of passages to fit into the gospel themes. Those of you who have never read *The Pilgrim's Progress* I hope you have had your appetite tempted by the episodes I've described and that you will go and read it.

Now after a journey that was perilous and rewarding, that was filled with dangerous and delights, Christian and his companion Hopeful have arrived at the River. On the other side is the Celestial City. Bunyan writes: *Now upon the bank of the River on the other side, Christian and Hopeful ... saw ... two shining men waiting to welcome them. Therefore, having come up out of the River, these men saluted and greeted them saying, "We are ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who shall be heirs of salvation." Thus they proceeded towards the gate. Now you should note that the City stood upon mighty Hill, though the pilgrims ascended that Hill with ease because they had these two men to lead them up by holding their arms; also they had left their mortal garments behind them in the River, for though they went in with them, yet they came out without them. Therefore they continued to climb here with much agility and speed, even though the foundation upon which the City was built was higher than the clouds. So they went up through the regions of the air, sweetly talking as they went, being comforted because they had safely crossed the River and were being escorted by such glorious companions.* Bunyan always refers to 'the River' never the River of Death, that was understood.

Lazarus had crossed that river of death in our Gospel. He had been in the grave for four days before Jesus arrived. It is interesting to contrast these two episodes. Christian and Hopeful are excited by the prospect of crossing the River and reaching the other side, climbing up to the Celestial City. We are not told nor do we know how Lazarus felt about being brought back to life by Jesus.

As I was preparing this sermon I began to think about this. Lazarus, together with his sisters Mary and Martha, were friends and believers in Jesus as the Messiah so surely he had crossed the river and been met by the two shining spirits and was heading up the slope as eloquently described by Bunyan. Then he was rudely ripped out of that setting and brought back to sin-filled life in this world. Why? Merely to prove a point that Jesus had power over death? In order to comfort his weeping sisters? Is it just humankind's desire to avoid death? The famous philosopher /author Albert Camus said: "Neither in the hearts of men nor in the manners of society will there be a lasting peace until we outlaw death." And the comedian and movie actor/producer Woody Allan said: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying."

The raising of Lazarus isn't the only time Jesus brought the dead back to life. He had stopped the brier carrying the widow's son to the graveyard and had brought him back to life. He had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. In fact, other men of God such as Elijah and Elisha in the OT and Peter and Paul in the NT did the same. So what was the reason for Jesus' actions here?

Yes, through the raising of Lazarus, Jesus showed the disciples, and the world, that he did have power over death. But because of this demonstration of power we are told at the end of our Gospel: *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.* The central aspect of our faith as Christians is that we believe in the resurrection from the dead. Therefore Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and claiming that he was "The Resurrection and the Life" is one of his most powerful messages ever: "Those who believe in me," he says, "even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

This story also has other components, perhaps less powerful but also significant. This story reveals Jesus' compassion for people. Jesus was not purely a God here on earth that can bring people back to life - surely an easy

task for a God to do. No Jesus was human **and** divine and through a genuine display of emotion - he weeps with those who mourn he shows his humanity as well his divinity. He knew that Lazarus would live but he was still moved to weep with the ones he loved. Jesus cared about their sorrow. He was not timid to show emotion and we should not be ashamed to express our true feelings to God. Like Martha and Mary, we can be transparent with God because he cares for us.

The fact that Jesus waited before travelling to Bethany upset his disciples. They felt that he could have prevented Lazarus dying. Jesus knew that he would be dead before he got there and he would perform an amazing miracle when he did get there. Many times we wait for the Lord in the midst of a terrible situation and wonder why he doesn't respond more quickly. Often God allows our situation to go from bad to worse because God's planning to do something powerful and wonderful; God has a purpose that will bring even greater glory to God.

The other question which is frequently asked is what happened to Lazarus after his rising. I say it is a frequently asked question because when I googled "Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead?" most of the questions concerning this episode were, "Did Lazarus die again?" There are no further Scriptural references to Lazarus and numerous "traditions" have developed but one thing is certain. Lazarus did die again and was buried. He might have lost out on his first journey up the Hill to the Celestial City when Jesus raised him from the dead but I am sure that he has experienced it when he died.

He, like Christian and Hopeful would have experienced the following:

Now while they were drawing near to the gate, behold a company of the heavenly host came out to meet them. To this multitude the Shining Ones spoke, "These are the men that have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and have left all for his holy name, and he has sent us to fetch them, and thus far have we brought them on their desired journey, that they may now go in and look their Redeemer in the face with joy." Then the heavenly host gave a great shout saying, "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb." At this time there also came to meet them, several of the King's trumpeters, clothed in shining white apparel, who, with loud melodious noises, made even the heavens to echo with their sound. These trumpeters saluted Christian and his companion with ten thousand welcomes from the world; and this they did with shouting and the sound of trumpets.

My favourite composer Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote an opera on *The Pilgrim Progress* and the final scene has the most wonderful audio-effect of a double choir singing "Alleluia! Alleluia!" as Christian and Hopeful enter the celestial city. A tenor and alto soloist sing over the double choir the words of Psalm 84, Isaiah 62 and The Book of Revelation: *Blessed are they that dwell in thy house they will be always praising thee. Behold thy salvation cometh and his reward is with him. Blessing and glory and honour and power be unto him that sitteth on the throne, forever and ever.* That is the way I picture heaven to be. And the only way that you and I can get to heaven is to believe in Jesus Christ who said: *Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.* And he went onto to ask Martha as he asks you and me today: *Do you believe this?*

If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

As a prayer we sing hymn 131 vs 5&6 only