

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Hartford, Connecticut

NEW LIFE

The Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A) March 9, 2008

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Ezekiel 37:1-14 Romans 8:6-11 John 11:1-45

As we approach Easter, the day of resurrection, our Scripture readings are retelling other stories of bringing life out of death. In the Old Testament lesson Ezekiel is commanded by God to prophesy that dead dry bones will, by God's breath, be brought to life, just as the people of Israel will be brought out of their graves when God puts his spirit in them. Paul, in his letter to the Roman Church, says that if the Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead is in us, then our mortal bodies will be given new life as well. And the Gospel this morning is the famous story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Now, I don't want to take anything away from the majestic and powerful Easter story which we will celebrate two weeks from now. But I do want to look more closely at one aspect of this morning's lessons that sometimes gets lost in the excitement we feel about the coming resurrection of Jesus himself. What I want us to look at is the detailed and compelling depiction of the humanity of Jesus as he responds to the pleas of Mary and Martha that he do something about their brother Lazarus, who has died. This narrative of Jesus reacting to a deeply personal tragedy is, however, woven into a text that is more focused on making a larger theological point, a point that is less personal, less intimate than Jesus' direct dealings with Lazarus' family. This larger, more general, point is about the power of Jesus as the Messiah.

The result is that we get two stories in one: in the first story the emphasis is on the theological message that Jesus wants to reveal his messianic authority and to establish the principle of a general resurrection for all persons. In this story, Lazarus' death is treated almost as nothing more than a means, a teaching moment, to make this larger theological point. But inextricably tied into this story is a second one (in fact, I would argue it is really the first and primary story). This second story is profoundly personal and human: it is the story of Jesus' deep emotional investment in the lives of three particular people, an investment that is just as moving as any theological lesson we might draw from the narrative at a more abstract level.

We can assume from the text that Jesus is personally quite close to the family of Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, all of whom the text says he loved. And this is not, I think, some general kind of love that is sometimes meant when we are encouraged to "love everyone," or humankind in its totality. Too often Christian love is treated theologically in such general, inclusive, and abstract ways that the specificity and uniqueness of the individual persons who love and are loved is often erased or marginalized. And Jesus is often treated as a theological formula or creedal concept in which the metaphysical union of the divine and human is stressed in order to accommodate theological principles which have a kind of philosophically abstract flavor, often to the neglect of the full humanity of the man Jesus. But the love of Jesus for this family is a direct and special love. The closeness of Jesus to the family is reflected in the rather familiar way in which Mary and Martha approach him, almost reprimanding him (as friends have the privilege of doing) for not coming earlier while Lazarus was sick. They tell him that if he had come earlier Lazarus would not have died. Jesus responds somewhat defensively by saying

that for their sake he was glad that he was not there during Lazarus' illness, so that "you may believe." This first response seems rather cold and distant. Yet Jesus' second response to what might appear to be the callousness of his first answer, is to immediately add "but let us go to him." One can sense the urgency in this assertion which, in effect, overrides his earlier object-lesson response: his friend Lazarus is dead and regardless of the message that can be made out of his death, Jesus wants to be with him now, not later. Whatever point Jesus can make about his power as the Messiah is overridden by his deep personal desire to be with his friend even though he is dead. And when he reaches Mary he was, as the text says, "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." And when they take him to the tomb, the narrative says that "Jesus began to weep." This may be the only time in all of Scripture where Jesus is depicted as crying in genuine sorrow over the death of a loved one. And those observing the event understand his tears as a sign of how much he loved Lazarus.

Now, there are some scholars who would warn us against reading too much into Jesus' special love for the members of this family. They are afraid that if we personalize Jesus' love we lose the global, universal inclusivity of his love. But I'm not sure it is particularly virtuous to love everyone in general and no one in particular. I think it demeans the Christian message to regard it solely as an impersonal comprehensive love for "humankind" in general. When love is genuine it is always personal: that is, specific, particular, unique, individual, and personally engaging if it is anything at all. This is what Jesus' humanity is all about: he was emotionally and personally invested in and committed to particular persons in all their uniqueness, not to persons in general or merely as stand-ins for the whole human race. And Jesus was committed to them in their full humanity: as unique and individual bodies, souls, and spirits. Again, too often Christian theology has ignored the body and focused exclusively on the soul. But God created us as whole persons, and that means soul and body. The body is the literal embodiment of what it means to be "me" in all my peculiar particularities. (We must not be led astray here by Paul's letter to the Romans, which seems at first glance to be condemning the body. But Paul uses the word "flesh", not "body," and "flesh" does not mean the physical body as such, but rather the body when we make it the exclusive preoccupation of who we are to the neglect of the spirit. What Paul wants, and what I think is presupposed in the Gospel, is a healthy re-integration of the body and the spirit: in fact, he concludes his letter by saying that if the spirit is in us it will give life to our mortal bodies. He would hardly say this if the body did not matter.

So if we can extract the second story in this morning's gospel from the more abstract theological one, we get Jesus' recognition of the goodness of embodied individual, particular lives, and from that recognition we get a profound affirmation that love is always particular, unique, and specific to the individuals with whom we are in the deepest possible relationships. God does not love in the abstract: God loves us, not the idea of us, just as Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, in the uniqueness of the particular persons they really were. Of course, what distinguishes God's love from ours is that God can love all persons uniquely and specifically, whereas we, being finite, can love only a limited number of other persons fully and completely. And in loving Mary, Martha, and Lazarus perhaps more deeply (except for his mother) than any other persons in his circle of friends, Jesus is demonstrating the fullness of his humanity. And, we must not let that humanity be eclipsed or marginalized by focusing too much on Jesus' divinity. In fact, I would argue, it is only by loving intimately, unreservedly, mutually, and fully that Jesus reveals the fullness of God for all human lives.