

Lent 5
9/03/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 37:1 - 14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6 - 11

John 11:1-45

... in him was life...

The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the last of Jesus' signs in John's gospel. Its purpose is to finally make clear the meaning of words found in John chapter one: *in him was life, and that life was the light of all*. Wherever Jesus goes in John people are surprised by the transformative power at work in him, which enables him to overcome the restrictions and limitations in which they are caught and brings them new life. So it was when the wine ran out at the wedding at Cana, so it was when Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink, so it was when 5000 were fed with bread they did not have, so it was when the man born blind received his sight.

The name Lazarus means *God has helped*, and the strong message of this text is that through Jesus' prayer and his words, God has helped. That the power in Jesus is not subject to any aspect of death is a way of saying that it comes from the source of all life. It belongs to the realm of the Spirit, even though its impact is felt in the realm of the flesh.

Jesus' delay in going to Bethany makes the point that Lazarus was dead beyond hope. Once among Lazarus' family and associates Jesus then demonstrates what it means to say he is the resurrection and the life. Through him God's power transforms death into life where no possibility of any such thing can be imagined. In Jesus the last day of Jewish expectation, spoken of by Martha, is here. Its transforming energies are no longer confined to the sweet bye and bye. They are present in our world, regardless of it being bound by grief, scepticism, disbelief, and the rancid odour of decay. In the face of all these deterrents, Jesus spoke, and new life merged.

The graphic for today makes the point that Lazarus came forth bound in grave clothes. This is radically different from the testimony of Easter Morning where the grave clothes are carefully folded. Lazarus is still bound by death even though he lives. His raising is a partial conclusion. The end time has not yet come in its fullness. He and the friends he stood amongst will have to wait a little longer for that. But his life remains an undiminished sign that in Jesus Christ the transcendent power of life is at work in the world, for us.

There are many challenges presented by the story of Lazarus, not least of which is the question of how do we live in the light of what is given to us here. Paul sets this out in his words about the choice between living in two different ways: according to the Spirit or according to the Flesh.

For Paul living by the Flesh means choosing a mindset that is shaped by the standards of the world. An orientation that does not allow for any possibilities other than those

dictated by the market and the prevailing culture, focussed as it is on consumption and the quest for power, prestige and celebrity.

On the other hand, life lived according to the Spirit means choosing to dwell within the mindset that arises from Christ. What that means is shown most clearly in the Cross of Christ. In the cross we see one who, foolishly it seems to us, rejected all temptations to power and glory, and completely trusted himself to God's power. Many things can be said about the resurrection, but one thing it does mean is that God vindicated the choice Jesus made to live as a Servant of God. And the Resurrection narratives show how, even when the disciples were confused, without hope, or had gone back to their old ways, they continued to receive the gift of the knowledge that God was at work for them, opening up the way to life.

It is a struggle to choose between the Spirit and the Flesh. We have seen it in the conversations we have listened to in John's Gospel these past few weeks. And there are so many ways in which the times we live in continually cause us to think hard about which order of life we will choose.

Others were faced with these choices before us. The tragic irony is there was no great rejoicing at the end of the Lazarus story. When God's power of life was so clearly seen to be at work, the first item of business the chief priests got down to was a plot to kill Jesus, and also Lazarus. Out of the amazing manifestation of life in Bethany came a plan for death.

But there is another irony. The verses following in John show that from the death the chief priests plotted, there came life. The disciples were the first to discover that, while they were helpless, hopeless and unable to ask for this gift, God shattered the walls of their doubt and grief and called them forth to life. The pattern of the Easter story shows how, despite us having our minds set on other things, God has come in search of us to unbind us and set us free. The wonder is that in Christ we are able to join forces with the one who trusted fully in God's love for the world.

The raising of Lazarus was the last of Jesus' signs, which show that: *in him was life, and that life was the light of all.*

After that God gave us a sign in Jesus. John wrote down these stories for us so that: *believing [we] may have life in his name. (20:31).* May it be true for us, and for many this Easter.