**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 2 April 2017 Lent 5**

**Psalm 130** 1Out of the depths I cry to you, 2God, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. 3If you, kept a record of sins, God, who could stand? 4But with you there is forgiveness,  so that we can, with reverence, serve you. 5I wait, my whole being waits, and in the word of wisdom I put my hope. 6I wait for God more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. 7Israel, put your hope in God, where there is unfailing love and full redemption. 8 It is God who will redeem Israel

**John 11:1-45 The Death of Lazarus** 11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” ... 5Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”... 17On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18Now Bethany was less than two miles[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekel+37%3A+1-14%3B+Psalm+130%3B+Romans+8%3A+6-11%3B+John+11%3A+1-45&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26542b)] from Jerusalem, 19and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” 23Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

28After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” 29When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. 32When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34“Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. 35Jesus wept. 36Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39“Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” 40Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” 41So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” 45Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

‘He who has ears to hear let him hear’ by Malcolm Guite

How hard to hear the things I think I know/ to peel aside the thin familiar film/ that wraps and seals your secret just below:/ an undiscovered good, a hidden realm,/ a kingdom of reversal, where the poor

are rich in blessing and the tragic rich/ still struggle, trapped in trappings at the door/ they never opened, Life just out of reach…/ Open the door for me and take me there./ Love, take my hand and lead me like the blind,/ unbandage me, unwrap me from my fear,/ open my eyes, my heart, my soul, my mind./ I struggle with these grave clothes, this dark earth,/ but you are calling ‘Lazarus come forth!’

I know, because at least one of you has told me, that this Gospel story stretches your incredulity. Once again, we need to remember the different way stories were conceived and told in the Middle East during Jesus’ life time. Both often had a different purpose – not to record history but to convey meaning and significance. Events told in the story were either known to be true, might have been true or were known to definitely not be true and yet to contain great significance and meaning.

Last Sunday the study group learned a new concept – the matrix. A matrix is not only background – we know quite a lot about the Middle East of Jesus’ time, nor it is only the context – we know quite a lot about the state of the Jewish religion, the political situation and the developmental stage of civilization in the early first century. A matrix is more than that – it involves customs, traditions, understandings, idioms, loyalties and prejudices, world view, perspectives, all the myriad things which make a people and a place what it is. The matrix of NZ is what makes us different from Australians. That difference is the reason we bristle when people think we are Australia. The difference in matrix particularly its political aspects is why we find the present US political situation or the present Syrian situation difficult to grasp. Matrices are complex, always shifting and reshaping as events occur and people come and go within them.

Without knowing all about the matrix within which this story was conceived, then told and re-told, recorded and then translated many times, we do not know whether this story is true, might have been true or was definitely not true in the twenty first century sense – that is as a strictly factual historical event – the kind of account we might expect to be written down in a police officer’s description of a crime scene for example.

We ***do*** know this story made it through all the telling and re telling, that the community of the time found it profoundly significant and that it survived into the canon of Scripture. This tells us it is worth mining for what it can give us today, sitting as we are in our completely different matrix.

First let’s look at these two sisters. It is significant that here are two women named. They have already appeared in the scripture record more than once. They must have been significant women in the early Church for their memory to be so recorded.

I know, because at least one of you has told me, that the original story of Martha and Mary profoundly irritates some women. That the practical Martha appears to have been rebuked by Jesus just gets your goat and you sniff to yourself and wonder (quite rightly) how the Church would have got on over the years without practical women who busy themselves with serving.

In *this* story, the two grieving sisters show they have both developed. They are, correctly for women of their time, inside the house with the grieving women, their friends and neighbours, who have come to wail with them. This time however, it is Martha who seeks Jesus’ company, leaving her housekeeping and feminine duties of hospitality and grieving to go out to the company of men who have arrived. It is Martha who has a deeply theological conversation with Jesus about death and dying and resurrection and life, of belief and faith. It is Martha who in verse 27 becomes one of only two people in the Gospels who identify Jesus as Messiah. The other was Peter and - this is one of the scriptural things which irritate *me* profoundly - we hear all the time about Peter’s great confession of faith. Frequently, we hear hear nothing of Martha’s equally starting insight delivered here even at a time when she is grief-stricken and bemused.

Next, it is Martha, so jealous previously of Mary’s time with Jesus, who goes back into the house and tells her sister that Jesus is asking for her. The two sisters share the time with Jesus and equally leave the practical, hospitable tasks to prioritise the spiritually significant moment. It is a testament to both women that they have been thinking a lot since the last time we have them recorded together. *Each* now take the time to be with Jesus and *each* now will both do their duty as host yet also will leave those duties when it is important duty takes second place for a while. The sisters unite in a more integrated approach to life. Each has matured and grown.

What about Lazarus? Not being in the original matrix, we are left to take the calling forth of Lazarus symbolically. One clue that this story has archetypal meaning is the way Lazarus has entered our folklore. Even people who are relatively unchurched will refer to a Lazarus experience when something comes back to life, or a loved one emerges from a coma or is brought back from he brink of death.

Malcolm Guite’s sonnet takes us to the heart of the matter, to how difficult it is to go below the surface as these two sister did and find there “an undiscovered good, a hidden realm...”

He writes of that hidden realm as being “a kingdom of reversal, where the poor are rich in blessing and the tragic rich/ still struggle, trapped in trappings at the door/ they never opened, Life just out of reach..” When we are rich in things to do and be, when we are rich in things to own, we sometimes do not think we need to open the door which will admit us to another world, where all is different. If we do not open that door, we are like Lazarus, buried in his grave, trapped in tightly-wound wrappings which will become our own grave-clothes unless we work to release ourselves from them.

This story of a man in a tomb, called forth from it, can reveal for us the nature of the tombs in which we have buried ourselves. It can alert us to those trappings which hold us back from the freedom of swinging stride and the pleasure of breathing deeply fresh autumn air. For each of us those tombs and those trappings will be different. Each of us probably have more than an inkling of what they are. You might like to give that some thought for a minute or so... What buries you? What have you buried? What has entrapped you? *Silence*

The question lying in this story for us is: Will we answer the call to come forth and be unwrapped?

It is tempting to remain intellectually stuck on whether or not this is a resurrection in the full, if unscientific, sense of that word. Did this happen or not happen? We could continue to ask ourselves such questions – a good way to divert ourselves. A good way to divert ourselves from the bringing-to-life which is needed deep within ourselves. This story is calling us to pay attention to that call to life.

The point of this story is that it is not in the end about a dead man but a living one. The point of this moment for us is whether we will allow whatever is dead for us or in us to continue to moulder and us with it, in the grave, or whether we will join the land of the truly alive. The question of the story is, can we respond to the call of Love and allow ourselves to be unwrapped?

Malcolm Guite’s sonnet ends passionately:

Open the door for me and take me there./ Love, take my hand and lead me like the blind,/ unbandage me, unwrap me from my fear,/ open my eyes, my heart, my soul, my mind./ I struggle with these grave clothes, this dark earth,/ but you are calling ‘Lazarus come forth!’

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 04 909 9612 minister@standrews.org.nz