

Farewell Sermon as Martin and Trish leave Stow, Condicote and The Swells

October 31st 2021

John 11. 32-44

Preachers used to use texts – little soundbites from the Bible - in the hope that these texts would be memorable even if the rest of the sermon wasn't!

So someone has suggested that the last words of this Sunday's set Gospel reading would be a perfect text for today... *Unbind him and let him go!*

Now, whilst I certainly want to talk about the Gospel reading, which I hope you will take home with you, I want to invite you to *imagine a scene* rather than to dwell on a text.

The scene we are dropping in on is one that many of you have shared with me. We have come together in times of loss and bereavement, and today I am very aware of all the saints now on another shore who were with us ten years ago.

Jesus is even more present to them than he is to us and so they will in touch with what is happening here and longing to welcome us, in our turn, into that closer zone of love eternal, where a room is waiting for us too.

- All bereavements find their proper context when we see our lives as a journey back to our creator
- All bereavements find their proper context when, like Jesus, we see our lives as a journey back to our Heavenly Father.
- That is the key message of our reading this morning.

Jesus has always had his doubters. There is no shortage of them today. People are not generous in recognizing the way Christianity has shaped our culture for the better over the last 2000 years.

But look around! What alternatives are there? What happened to Marxism? Secularism? New Age, Progress? And how many governments really care about the environment enough to make the changes we all know we need? And who is stepping- up to provide a thought-out response to Artificial Intelligence? Now that people are losing faith in the algorithms of social media and the web, I hope that the idea of loving one's neighbour, rather than exploiting them, may come into favour again. And we all know where that idea comes from!

Back to our story. Jesus walks in on a scene of grief. Lazarus, one of his friends on the outskirts of Jerusalem, has died leaving his two grieving sisters Mary and Martha. Generously, Mary says 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Less generously, his critics are wondering why Jesus had not used his well-known special gifts to stop Lazarus dying in the first place.

It's not an easy situation for Jesus.

- Does he accept what has happened? After all death is part of life.
- Or is this a moment for his special connection with God to make a difference?
- Should he let his Father to work through him as he is being goaded to do?

Jesus we believe is the one person in whom the divine and the human co-exist in perfect harmony – neither getting in the way of the other but each coming through at the appropriate moments. Might this be one of them?

Whenever Jesus revealed his special connection with God, it was always for a purpose linked to his wider mission of saving the world. It was not there to be used as a family favour. So how could he justify helping out here?

Jesus saw a way forward. His own resurrection would ultimately validate his entire mission.

It occurred to him that what he could demonstrate here was a foretaste of God's victory over the grave. When the resurrection happened, people could look back on this moment with Lazarus and see how it fitted in with what he destined to do. So, before he did anything for Lazarus, Jesus made his rationale public. Lazarus' return to life was to demonstrate that he and his Father were one and to point to the heart of his mission to break the power of death and to link this world with the next.

So as the reading described, Jesus looked upwards and said, *'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'* and then he ordered the tomb to be opened.

What Jesus was wanting to illustrate through this miracle was not how amazing he was but that he was genuinely and intimately connected and to the creator of the universe. In other words, they were Father and Son.

So the big question today's reading raises is: How do we look on Jesus?

- Is he just an exceptional human being or is he someone in whom God is uniquely present?
- Do we find, through him, that God is with us and alongside us in our daily living?

- Or do we not really bother to engage with all this because most of the time we can get along without him?

Sooner or later we will all face the exceptional. There will be a moment when we all want Jesus to do something for us. Then this story about loss and resurrection can offer us the hope we will need.

Lazarus returning to life is a foretaste of what will happen to Jesus himself. The difference is that Lazarus will die again - but the risen Jesus is alive and with us forever. As we say in our usual Sunday service *The Lord is here, His Spirit is with us.*

- Those who gather here week by week do indeed believe that Jesus is alive and with us – that’s the thing we have in common.
- We believe that the first Easter Day forever changed the way we should look at our world.
- His resurrection confirms the unique relationship that Jesus has with God his Father.

It is a relationship he invites us all to share.

And we believe that, whenever we invite the risen Jesus to share in and enrich our lives, so we become, most fully, the people God created us to be.

Like Jesus we are called to be people of compassion

- people with a desire always to reach out, to heal, to renew and to make whole.
- people who can see beyond the chances and changes of this fleeting world and draw down the gift of resurrection and wholeness
- people who can assist things move positively towards what God intends - their place of rest, their place within God’s love.

When I came here I prayed that our churches would become known as places of support, hope and mystery.

- When you are in difficulty, I want you to find support here
- When the world seems a dark place, I want this to be a place where you can come to find hope. And
- Whenever you come here, I hope that you have a sense of mystery - that here you find connection with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - the God who has made you, heals you, and guides you.

All this is possible because of Jesus’ presence whenever we gather in his name. This is the heart of what is on offer in our churches. And it will always be an experience beyond mere words.

So this morning, as on many other occasions, I am reminding us all of the difference the risen Jesus can make. When we realise that Jesus is alive and with us He brings a whole new dimension to everything we do.

This is truly remarkable. Ten years ago, praying in church, I was inspired by a verse from St Paul 's letter to the Ephesians which Trish read for us: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.*

As I look back on all that has happened in the last ten years across our Benefice, it is abundantly far more than I could have asked for or imagined.

Trish and I have hugely enjoyed our time here and your care and generosity. You have been very kind in your appreciation of us.

But what we dare to hope that you have made the resurrection connection and link all that has been good to God's power at work within us.

Most of all we pray that you will look to the same power to continue to inspire the life of our churches and that you will continue to *accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.* **Amen**