



The Fifth Sunday of Lent
6 April 2014

The Resurrection and the Life

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11.1-45

What *is* Christianity, really? Do you ever ask yourself that question?

Maybe you encounter another religious tradition and see its adherents so committed and faithful and wonder what's so special about Jesus. Maybe you see the church do something really stupid and you lose heart. Maybe someone on whose faith yours is founded turns out to have feet of clay. Maybe you just get bored or bewildered by all the palaver of liturgy or administration, and church seems so irrelevant or small. Maybe in the light of history or science the Bible seems isolated or outdated or incoherent. Maybe someone you care about is really hostile to the Christian faith and one day you just can't find words to argue with them anymore.

What *is* Christianity, really? Wouldn't it be nice if we just had a short document that reminded us from time to time, when we lost sight of the big picture?

Well we have one. It's called John chapter 11. We just read it this morning together. John's gospel has 21 chapters. Chapter 11 is the central chapter. And Jesus' discussion with Martha is the centre of that central chapter. It's not a coincidence. I want to explain why this story of Mary, Martha, Lazarus and Jesus explains pretty much everything we need to know about Christianity. Christianity is a historical claim, a philosophical claim, and a personal, existential claim. Let's start by looking at the historical claim.

The historical claim is this. God called Israel. In Jesus God fulfilled that call to Israel and opened that call to the whole world. The way to grasp the historical claim is to read the story of John chapter 11 and see that Lazarus stands for Israel. Jesus gets a message to say, 'He whom you love is ill.' Israel is ill. Israel is occupied by the Romans and far from God's ways. Jesus responds, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' In other words, this isn't about the end of Israel but about its resurrection. When Jesus comes into Judaea, it's like him taking human form in the incarnation. When Jesus says Lazarus has fallen asleep, it's like the description of Israel in Ezekiel chapter 37. Israel is the valley of the dry bones, and Jesus has come into the valley to awaken them and give them life again. When Jesus in verse 14 says 'Lazarus is dead, but let us go to him,' he is summing up the context in which the New Testament takes place. Thomas immediately realises the cost of the incarnation when he says 'Let's also go, that we may die with him.' At the end of the story when Jesus cries, 'Lazarus, come out!' it sums up the whole message of the gospel: that Israel is in its tomb and Jesus is calling it to be unbound and free.

If you want to get a sense of what resurrection means from the valley of the dry bones, picture the scene on the TV show *Britain's Got Talent* in April 2009 when the unknown Scottish singer Susan Boyle, giving her first audition, after a stumbling introduction, opened her mouth and sang 'I dreamed a dream in time gone by.' From out of her heart came the voice of an angel, and by the time she'd got to the end of the first phrase the judges and theatre, who never expected anything to emerge from an unemployed middle-aged woman with Asperger's from a West Lothian council estate were galvanised and transfixed like a valley of bones coming to life. It's become one of the

great 20-million-hits youtube moments of our generation. Resurrection before our eyes in a matter of seconds.

So the story of the raising of Lazarus is clothed in the historical claim that Christianity grows from the soil of Israel, and is a renewal movement among the people God called to be a blessing to all the world. But embedded in this historical claim is a philosophical claim. And the philosophical claim is what Martha and Jesus square up to when Jesus arrives in Bethany in the middle of the story. Martha speaks words of faith and lament that sum up the longing of Israel and of everyone since who has ever called upon God and found their prayer: 'Lord,' she says, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Jesus says, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha proclaims a firm hope in God. 'I know he will rise again on the last day.' Jesus takes things a great deal further. He says, 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

It seems that resurrection and life are two different, albeit closely related, things. In fact they're the two things that Christianity is really about. Resurrection is where Christianity begins. Jesus is risen from the dead. Death no longer holds us in an eternal grip. Death is real, but it doesn't have the last word. Love is stronger than death. God's creative and life-giving purpose can't be thwarted permanently. Nothing can finally separate us from the love of God. That's the good news.

But it's not the whole of the good news. There's also life. Christianity isn't just faith about the past and hope for the future: it's also love in the present. Christianity is a way of living made possible by the removal of our panic about death. It's a way characterised by joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, and patience. Today we'd add words that we associate with the virtues of our era – words like generosity, hospitality, kindness, inclusivity, respect, compassion, trust, and dignity. Jesus says I *am* the life – not I bring the life or procure the life or promise the life but I *am* the life. This is a present-tense thing. If you can't live it now, what hope does it truly give for the future?

Notice how easy it is for Christians to get a hold of one of these dimensions and not the other. Half the church grabs hold of the resurrection and runs the danger of missing the life. It concentrates on personal salvation, getting into heaven, knowing you're forgiven, having a personal relationship with Jesus, and often a rather narrow range of issues in so-called personal morality that keep you in God's good books. The risk is that Christianity becomes a means to an end, a get-out-of-jail-free card, a device to avoid hell and head towards heaven forever. People tend to look at it from the outside and wonder whether it really and truly represents the life that Jesus is telling Martha about.

Yet half the church makes the opposite mistake. It concentrates on the life, and talks about justice, and tolerance, and rights, and affirmation, and the planet, and never quite gets round to focusing on the crisis of death, the need for personal repentance, the awesomeness of judgement, the fear of oblivion or everlasting torment or isolation in eternity. The trouble with this is that it's admirable but it's not always clear in what sense it's Christianity, because the commitments and perceptions are often shared with a whole range of secular and religious people looking for a better and more equal society; and often Jesus doesn't get much of a look-in.

So you could say the most important word Jesus says to Martha isn't 'resurrection,' and isn't 'life.' It's the little and easily-overlooked word, 'and.' Christianity's about life after death. It's also about life before death. It's about both. But the order's important. Resurrection and life. Because we've been given the glory of life beyond the constraint of death we can enter the wonder of life beyond the constraint of life.

The most inspiring people epitomise this little word 'and.' Nelson Mandela believed in black-majority rule *and* racial reconciliation. Barack Obama is a proud black man *and* a proud American. Mahatma Gandhi was an Indian nationalist *and* a pacifist. Jean Vanier is a prophetic visionary *and* a man who's spent his life with mentally disabled people. In each case the unique quality of the

person lies in their embodiment of that *and*. Being a Christian means seeking both resurrection *and* life, seeing Jesus as everything we yearn for in the future *and* everything we need in the present. I wonder what *and* means to you. I wonder if there's an *and* that epitomises your own struggle for integrity and maybe something that others have struggled to understand about you. It could be that living and expressing that *and* is the heart of it all for you.

And all of this matters when we look not just to the historical and philosophical claims of Christianity but get down to the existential and personal level. And that brings us back to the story of Lazarus. There's two very intimate and visceral things going on in this story. One of them is death. Martha says, 'Have you no idea of the smell in that tomb? He's been dead four days.' Here's the horror of death: that a brother you have loved and cherished and embraced and wept over is now a rotting corpse, a mass of worms and bacteria and decomposition. And, as if physical revulsion were not enough, this story has anger, in both sisters saying, in as many words, 'Lord why were you not here?' And it has questioning, in the mourners saying, 'Could he not have kept this man from dying?'

But there's something even more overwhelming than death. It's the impossibility of continuing to live. There's such a thing as a good funeral. A good funeral names the grief and at the same time recrafts the person's story in such a way as everyone can see its beauty and truth. But even at the best funeral, if you've loved the dead person deeply, you come away saying, 'Ok, I've faced death – but how do I now face life?' That's what Martha is saying to Jesus: 'I know that Lazarus will rise on the last day – but how do I live until then?' In other words, 'You can keep your resurrection – I want him back!'

And Jesus' answer is, 'I am resurrection. *But I'm also life.*' And this is what his answer means. Because Jesus has taken care of what comes after death, we can actually focus on life – not on survival or security, but on really living. And if we're truly living, if we've tasted that life, we'll hardly notice our life is in danger, because we'll be so fully alive that we'll be almost beyond the power of death to enslave and depress and constrain and intimidate us. Jesus comes to Judaea, not to die, but in spite of the fact that he'll probably die. And Thomas follows him. Because Thomas has discovered in Jesus a life that puts death in the shade.

And these three dimensions of Christianity, the historical, the philosophical, and the personal, all converge when Jesus summons Lazarus from the tomb. Jesus fulfils the hopes of Ezekiel by bringing Israel back to life. He overcomes the power of death by unbinding a living man from the bondage stench and fear and decay. And he gives each of us a reason to live by showing he is Lord not just of death but of life.

What *is* Christianity? It's finding, in Jesus, the resurrection and the life. The now, and the forever. Here's the good news for the world, for the church, and for you and me: we don't have to choose between the two.