

In the midst of life we are in death...

The Rev. Prof. Ron Nicolson

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In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour but of thee, O Lord.

Do you recognize the words? We say them at a funeral service, as the coffin is lowered into the grave or committed for cremation. In the midst of life we are in death.

It was quite a long gospel story, was it not? And quite a difficult one too. We're just two weeks away from the great drama of Good Friday and Easter, and the story of the raising of Lazarus is meant to prepare us. But is the story really a preview of Easter? What does it mean? Was Lazarus raised to eternal life like Jesus on Easter morning, or will he die again one day at the normal end of his mortal life? And if Jesus knows he will raise him, which is what it says earlier in John 11 verse 4, then why does he weep in verse 35? And if you're looking to me for answers I'm not sure I have them. I'm not sure any of us have answers about the mystery of life after death; it is a deep mystery beyond our present understanding and we just have to be patient and have faith.

If we have faith, does that lessen the pain, when someone we love dies? Perhaps that depends on the circumstances. A dreadful car accident a week or two ago took the life of a young boy and his father. I know about it because the boy is the older brother of the best friend of my 6 year old granddaughter Alexandra. Alexandra is not a very sociable child. She is an independent soul, but in Courtenay she found a soul mate. It is Courtenay's brother who was killed. Alexandra was not just heartbroken but deeply disturbed. Not that she knew the older brother well, but she has been brought face to face with the impermanence of life. In the midst of life we are in death. She remembers all her loved ones who have died – her great granny, one of her grandfathers, our dog Emma whom she loved, a baby bird that they rescued last Easter and which didn't survive. She knows now that anyone whom she loves may die at any

time. Her sense of security has been damaged. Any reference to her friend Courtenay, any reference to death, brings her again to tears. Courtenay's father died in the accident too. What if Alexandra's father died, or her mother? That is her unspoken fear.

And what would you say to her? How do we comfort children about death? "Never mind, darling, they're in heaven." If I am six, I don't want my mother and father in heaven, my friends in heaven. I need them here with me now. She and her mother were watching the film *Beauty and the Beast*. She burst into tears when the beast died. "But he didn't die", my daughter comforted her, "he came back to life as a handsome prince". "But Robert", the dead boy, cried Alexandra, "will he come back?"

And as I heard the story I remembered sitting with another daughter one black Good Friday as the kindly Rector came to make funeral arrangements for her dead baby. "It will soon be Easter," said the Rector, "and the celebration of resurrection." "Do you mean Benjamin will come back to life", asked my daughter.

So ... what is this story of Lazarus about? Why does Jesus weep? Do you think perhaps he weeps to see Mary's pain. Belief in the Resurrection, belief in life after death, is our great Christian message. "O death, where is thy victory? o death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor 15:55) In a fundamental way of course that is true, but in the immediacy of death, in the frightening awareness that there is no guarantee that those upon whom we depend will not be taken from us, the sting and pain are sometimes unbearable. Easter does not take away the pain of knowing that someone whom we love we will never see again in this life. In her 6 year old way Alexandra is quite right. Life here is uncertain, unpredictable, impermanent and we lose people whom we love. Jesus' tears are perhaps because he understands and feels the pain with us. We're not meant to be stoic about death. We're allowed to feel the pain, perhaps the anger, perhaps the fear of whether we will cope. Lazarus is restored to Mary and Martha for a time, but the season will come when they will lose him again, just as the season will come when we will lose all whom we love or they will lose us. We prefer not to think about it, but every now and then we are roughly reminded. In the midst of life we are in death.

“If only you had been here”, cried Mary, “he would not have died.” But Mary is wrong. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He cannot escape his own duty and destiny. Nor will his presence protect us from disaster, disease and death. There is no guarantee that we will never face the tragedies that can beset any of us in this mortal life. That’s not part of God’s bargain. Of course there are sometimes miracles. Of course there are sometimes stories of miraculous protection. But Jesus wept, and still weeps, because he knows that we all, in one way or another, at one time or another, will face loss and pain in this mortal life, just as he did. He wept, and we may weep too.

That’s a comfort. But is that all that he does, empathize and sympathize? Well, no, he raises Lazarus. He transforms situations. Lazarus, we are made to understand, was really dead. Not just in a coma, but dead, dead for four days. Lord, says Martha in the King James Version of the Bible when Jesus asks for the grave to be opened, “Lord, by this time he stinketh.” Bereavement and tragedy can make us feel dead. Not just bereavement. Failure. Betrayal. Disappointment. Divorce. Sin. And in that state of spiritual death we are not nice to be near. Like Lazarus, we’re very dead! We stink!

Maybe that’s what Paul means in Romans today. To be controlled by human nature, to set the mind on the flesh, is death, he says. When all we care about is money, or status, or being appreciated by others, when all we think about is worldly things, we have one foot in a spiritual grave. When we are in the power of alcohol, or obsessed by sex, we have two feet in that grave. When we are consumed by anger or resentment or a feeling of being unjustly treated we are in death.

Paul talks about our fleshly nature and our spiritual nature being at war with each other. Sometimes we lose all faith that we even have a spiritual nature. We despair at ourselves. As the alcoholic who has promised himself that today he will not drink raises the gin bottle to his lips, as the adulterer who has decided he will definitely end the relationship finds himself phoning the girl friend yet again, as the mother who knows that she is taking her frustrations out on her children lashes out to slap her daughter, we despair of ourselves. As the person suffering from depression faces yet another black day, when though the sun is shining and the people are kind he cannot find happiness within himself, he despairs. In the midst of life we are in death.

We've all been there. Times when we have no hope, no energy, no love left in us, no belief that we can change, no expectation of rescue. It's into this situation that this famous passage from Ezekiel today is spoken. You know how the old spiritual goes – Dem bones dem bones dem dry bones...The people of Judah and Israel have for some generations ignored and disobeyed God. In consequence they are divided. Foreign powers have defeated them. Now Jerusalem has been destroyed. David's temple is no more. The people are in exile in Babylon, far from home, and it has all been through their own pride and foolishness and disobedience. All is lost. They are like a valley of dead bones. They are in despair. In the midst of life they are in death. "Behold", says the Lord, "I will open your graves. I will put my spirit into you and you will live." The words from the funeral service are turned around. No longer in the midst of life we are in death. In the midst of death we are in life!

That's what happened in the story of Lazarus. Jesus enters his grave. And he says, Lazarus, come out. This story is not just a story of empathy. It's a story of restorative power. We think of ourselves like Lazarus. Dead. Buried in a spiritual grave. Without life. Bound by the graveclothes.

What are the graveclothes that keep you in the grave? Old habits? Recurring sins and failures? Unresolved issues? Resentments? Loss of confidence? A belief that you don't matter? or just laziness? Or, to go back to the beginning of this sermon, are we so trapped by sadness and bereavement, so lonely, so frightened by the impermanence.

In the midst of death we are, after all, in life. Jesus understands. He weeps with us.

And then Jesus calls, with a very loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" And the graveclothes fall away. And we come back to life.