

The Raising of Lazarus

Can you tell me the name of this bird? - the phoenix. It is the stuff of myth and legend. This spectacular bird is said to be born of fire and lives for more than 500 years. When its time is up, it builds its own funeral pyre, and then throws itself upon the flames. As it is burns to dust, a new phoenix arises from the ashes to live again.

The phoenix was an early Christian symbol of the resurrection - even though for the Christian, the resurrection is intensely real. There is nothing mythological about it. It is in fact, the cornerstone of our faith.

Today's Gospel reading is about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It's a powerful story. Not only does it encourage us in our belief that we too will have victory over death; it also encourages us in our day to day struggle to live for Jesus. Let's have a look at it.

This story is the last of seven miraculous signs that we find described in the Gospel of John. In this last and most dramatic sign, Jesus - the One who is Life- confronts death and overcomes it. It is a foretaste of both the battle and the glory to come.

This event thrusts Jesus into the final week of his ministry, propelling him relentlessly towards the cross.

The story begins with Jesus and his disciples receiving a message that Jesus' friend Lazarus was ill. Lazarus was the brother of Mary, who had poured perfume on his feet earlier, and her sister Martha, the busy hostess. The message that came to Jesus from Mary and Martha referred to their brother Lazarus as 'the one whom you love'. There was obviously a very close relationship between Jesus and this family.

Yet....Jesus didn't drop everything, and take the next camel to Bethany. Listen to his response:

"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."

Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

We know how the story ends, so we understand why Jesus responded the way he did - but his disciples didn't.

They would have assumed that Jesus wasn't all that worried about Lazarus, and they would have assumed that Jesus was being sensible by not going back to the place where they'd just tried to stone him. But then a couple of days later, Jesus said, "Ok boys - time to go back to Judea."

They objected strongly. "You can't go back there, Lord - they were trying to kill you!" Then, when Jesus described Lazarus's condition euphemistically, saying he had 'fallen asleep', they took him literally, and tried to talk him out of going to Bethany. "If he's asleep, he'll wake up. He'll be fine! - don't go there!"

Miles away, in Bethany, I imagine Mary and Martha also couldn't understand why it was taking Jesus so long to get there. It was only a day's journey. They'd have anxiously watched their brother as he slowly slipped away, pacing the floor saying, "Where IS he? What's happened? Why isn't Jesus here?" - and then Lazarus died. They'd have been shocked and hurt, and even angry that Jesus wasn't there for Lazarus when it counted the most.

This can be such a real picture of our relationship with God at times. Sometimes, when things don't go according to plan in our lives, when things fall apart - just like the disciples, we question Jesus. We wonder what he's up to. We worry. We want him to intervene in a particular way - and when he doesn't it can leave us feeling disillusioned, perhaps even abandoned. We may begin to wonder if God has stopped caring about us.

Of course none of that is true.

In this story, Jesus knew that this situation was to bring glory to God; it was to help his disciples, and others, to believe.

So often we see the disciples depicted in the Gospels as being confused and fearful. We see that to an extent here too, but in this event, we also see their loyalty and their courage. We read in v16, **Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."**

The disciples are a great example for us here. They show us that we can still follow Jesus, and remain faithful to him, even when we don't understand what's happening; even when we fear the worst.

As Jesus approached Bethany, we read that Martha rushed out to greet him. She fell at his feet with an agonised cry, **"Oh Lord, you're too late. If only you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died."** What pain she would have been feeling.

Here in front of her was someone who had healed the blind and the deaf and the lame; he'd had raised a little girl from the dead; he'd raised a young man to life who was about to be buried....and he could have done the same for Lazarus. But he was too late!! When Jesus got to the house, Mary fell at his feet with the same agonised cry, **"Oh Lord - if only you'd been here sooner, Lazarus would not have died."**

It was a tragic funeral. Jesus felt the family's grief. He was deeply disturbed by the pain and power of death - and he began to weep.

But the story didn't end there. With a prayer to his father, and an authoritative command for Lazarus to come forth, Jesus turned the bleakness, pain and hopelessness of death into glorious new life. We can just hear Jesus' triumphant command "Loose him and let him go!"

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was a triumphant testimony to Jesus' power and authority. It declared his divinity, and affirmed him as Messiah to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. It was both a challenge and battle cry to Satan, as Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and the cross.

This story also speaks to us on another level. It shows us that we serve a God who is all-knowing, all-loving and all-powerful. It speaks to us of a God who draws near to us in our struggles, who shares our pain, and who finally delivers us from our chains.

There may be times when we feel that God is not acting in our lives in the way we think he should. We're not alone there - the disciples felt that.

There may be times when we think God has let us down and all is lost. Martha and Mary felt that.

But that is never the case.

We live in a fallen world. It is warped and broken by sin. Sickness and death have been part of the landscape since the time of Adam. Because we live in this world, we inevitably get caught in the fall out and our lives may be affected in adverse ways.

Sickness may come to us from the world around us, or our genes, or our choices. Sometimes the things that happen to us come from the sinful choices of people who are long dead; or they may be a result of the sinful choices of people in our own time, of people we may or may not know, and sometimes, they are a result of our own poor choices.

We need to remember that God is not in heaven pulling strings and causing bad things to happen to us or those we love in order to make us stronger, or to teach us something. God does not engineer our suffering. It is just there.

He does however, promise to be with us, and help us through it. There may be times when he will intervene, as he did in the raising of Lazarus, and bring something beautiful from the ashes in our lives. At other times, he may simply hold us tight in his embrace, and help us move on in our lives, whispering healing into our souls.

Let me tell you a Phoenix story.

My first parish was in a small rural community. There were three little churches, many kilometres apart, and a small elderly congregation. They could only afford to have me there part time. We were absolutely thrilled when a retired couple moved into town. The wife had been very active in her church in Sydney and was keen to help out wherever she could. The church was delighted, and soon had her involved in everything. She became my right hand person and very good friend. We all rejoiced that God had sent her to us.

Then she was diagnosed with bowel cancer. It was very aggressive, and despite surgery, intensive chemo, and heaps of prayer - she died within 6 months of the diagnosis. The church was shattered. Why hadn't God healed her? Well, we still don't know the answer to that, but we do know that she is with Jesus.

However, there was something really amazing that came out of it. Her husband was a very vocal agnostic, and scoffed at Christianity. She'd prayed fervently for him for 30 years and was deeply concerned about him.

In the few weeks before she died, I spent a fair bit of time with them. I vividly remember one day feeling nudged by God to challenge the husband gently with the Gospel. I asked him outright if he'd like to become a Christian - and you know something? He said yes! I had the privilege of leading him to Christ that day.

My friend died a week later, but she was glowing with happiness, because her husband had come to know the Lord. He went on to be confirmed, and became a very active member of the church.

Through this awful situation, God was at work, and two souls were set free; one into his presence, and the other into his Kingdom on earth.

Next time things are going pear shaped, let's remember the raising of Lazarus. Let's remember that God knows the whole picture, and that he has the power to overcome even death itself.

And let's remember the symbol of the Phoenix. - which reminds us that God can take a situation as bleak as death itself, and raise up something new and wonderful from the ashes.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray.