

"LAZARUS COME OUT!" (St John 11:1-45)

Canon Andrew Neaum 29 March 2020

Of all the Gospels' miracles, the most mind blowing is the raising of four-days-dead-beginning-to-putrefy Lazarus.

As a story it is magnificent, full of drama, love, truth, hope and joy. "*Lazarus come out!*"

As history it is dire, beyond belief, for most of us just won't do. It depicts Jesus as a more than human superhuman, and as such not truly one of us.

If we believe in the Incarnation, that is, if we believe, as I most certainly do, that in Jesus of Nazareth, God, somehow, utterly inexplicably, shares our humanity, is alongside us in our vale of tears and joys, is truly one of us, then he could no more bring back to life a four day old corpse than we can.

The story stinks

In the Authorised Bible's version of this story, when Jesus says "take ye away the stone..." Martha protests "Lord by this time he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days....." I too protest. As history, the story stinketh.

In the ancient world, though, such tales of impossible happenings were commonplace, two a penny, common currency. Scientific means of proving or disproving them were largely unavailable. In credulous, word-of-mouth-only times, that such stories gathered around so fascinating and radical a healer and story teller as Jesus of Nazareth, is not surprising. That the Gospel writers recorded some of them as especially significant, is to be expected.

Yet of the four Gospel writers, St John is by far the most discriminating. He selects only seven such stories for his Gospel. Three of which are healings and so rather less than mind-blowing. Nor does he tell those he selects primarily to impress, prove, persuade, or astound. For he calls them signs, not miracles. This suggests that they've been selected to signpost meanings and truths within them, rather than as an invitation merely to goggle at what happened. He is signposting truths implicit or immanent in reality.

With the advantage of hindsight he looks at and interprets Jesus' life to retell in ways that heighten significance and emphasise meaning. He selects and possibly embellishes details not just because they happened, but also and primarily for their significance and meaning.

Interpreting history imaginatively

The raising of Lazarus from the dead occurs only in St John. Why? How could so mind-blowing an event be omitted by the other Gospel writers?

In a sense they don't omit them. They too tell of Jesus raising the dead, but in less spectacular, and more ambivalent ways. The Widow of Nain's son, and Jairus' daughter, for example, unlike Lazarus,

aren't raised from the grave four days after death, but in ways readily interpreted more naturally as healings. Healings of those given up as dead.

St John is more imaginative. Lazarus' raising is told as a sign, as an intriguing pre-echo of what is to come. Namely the world-upending, topsy-turveying resurrection of the three day's dead Jesus.

Interpreted by love

So in Lazarus' story, lo and behold, there's a tomb with a stone to be rolled away from its entrance. There's a wrapped and embalmed body and a separately napkin-wrapped head. There's a weeping, grieving woman called Mary and puzzling, questioning loved ones.

Moreover, just as the crucifixion of Jesus can only be made sense of by love, so too this Lazarus event resonates love. Mary and Martha's love and tears for their brother. Jesus' love of and tears for his friend. His love of Mary and Martha. The event is told in a way to resonate, prefigure, echo and prepare us for Jesus's death and resurrection.

The great shout

But best of all there is that great shout: "*Lazarus, come out!*" It is a megaphonic call to us all. A call to come to life now, in the present, to leave the tomb of unredeemed, purposeless materialism now, because "I am the resurrection and the life I AM!

So "*Andrew Come out!*" open yourself to the risen Lord now. Who gives life abundant; life filled with the tang and savour of salt; the gleam of a lustrous pearl of great price; the joy of treasure found in a field. "*Come out!*" with wedding feast joy to be the light of a lamp shining in a dark room to be a beacon on a hill; the bubble in life's bread, a purveyor of good news, the best news, heart-stopping news. Not dumb, glum duty; not thin-lipped, sour-pussed dim, grim duty; but joy, joy, **joy**. "Come out of the tomb now and live." Because I am the resurrection and the life..... I AM!

Entombed in space and time

More even than that, we're dared to believe the unutterably impossible, That "*Lazarus come out.....*" calls us not only to life abundant in this life, but to life. abundant beyond life.

For Lazarus was called back to live life abundantly only to have to die yet again. Whereas Jesus rose to live and to be, beyond time space, in an unimaginable eternity.

He calls us there too "**Lazarus come out**", "**Andrew come out**". Out of the tomb that is time space to an unimaginable eternity of love. For "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."