

Lent 5 2017 – Mary Mags

Ezekiel 37:12-14, Romans 8:8-11, John 11:1-45.

Karshish, an invention of Robert Browning, is an Arab physician. He has been travelling around Syria and Judea – it is the first century – and he runs into someone strange

... the man's own firm conviction rests
That he was dead and then restored to life
By a Nazarene physician of his tribe
Sayeth the same bade "rise" and he did rise.

This man, it is one Lazarus, a Jew
This grown man eyes the world now like a child.

And oft the man's soul springs into his face
As if he saw again and heard again
His sage that bade him rise and he did rise.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus we see the Fourth Gospel's love for dramatic scenes which are drawn out to their fullest possible extent.

This is the seventh miraculous sign which the evangelist presents Jesus performing, and it is the climax of what some scholars call the book of Signs, the first part of John's gospel, because it is this event, this sign, which the evangelist presents as the decisive point at which the Jewish council decided that Jesus must die, "from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death." At the opening, when Jesus is told his dear friend is ill, he responds not by rushing to his aid, but by remaining where he is for a further two days, which should warn us that something strange is happening here.

The parallels with the story of Jesus own resurrection are scarcely subtle. A woman called Mary goes to the resting place of a dead man she has loved, seemingly to weep there. She meets Jesus. And the man she loves rises from a rock-hewn cave of a tomb, from which the stone has been rolled away. But the story of Lazarus should not be seen as an imprint of Jesus' resurrection, but might perhaps more properly be called a resuscitation: we are given a gruesomely literal scene reminiscent of early Hollywood – a mummy-like figure emerges from the tomb and is unbound, freed, from his grave clothes. The resurrection of Jesus receives none of this Houdini treatment.

We are always too ready to view the resurrection as something like a wonderful illusion. Christian preaching on the subject has become far more interested in a sort of forensic or legal accumulation of evidence than the gospels ever were. The resurrection is something strange. Mary Magdalene does not recognize Jesus - she thinks he is the gardener. The two disciples on the Emmaus road do not recognize him either. The women who come and find the empty tomb in Mark's gospel are told to go and tell his disciples that he is risen, but instead they turn and flee, for they are afraid.

A cliché among theologians rightly asserts that the resurrection of Jesus is not about death but life. I am the resurrection and the life. As St Augustine comments, Jesus is the resurrection *because* he is the life. Not simply the mechanics whereby a human being is restored to life despite experiencing death, but rather the reason why there is life at all, the source of everything which we describe as living.

The raising of Lazarus is the climax of all the signs and wonders which the fourth gospel records Jesus performing, because it is the fullest expression of what that gospel wants to say, that in Jesus we find life. In saying this, John is remaining faithful to one of the essential teachings of the Old Testament, that it is Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel, who

has the power of life and death over all things. Our reading from Ezekiel talks of the Lord raising his people from their graves. Ezekiel's context, the coming liberation of the people of Judah from their exile in Babylon, is one example of the many occasions in the history of Israel that the Lord has restored them to life. Paul picks up this theme and emphasises, like Ezekiel, that life in the Lord is the life of the Spirit, the life which has no breath of its own, but relies entirely on the breath, the pneuma, of God which keeps all of us alive even as we take it for granted.

John's view is that the Word of God is the source of all life. All that is made has life in him, the prologue tells us. The believer in Jesus receives life in its fullness, receives, in other words, a share in the life which Jesus gives to Lazarus and to all people – a share in the divine life, a share, hence, in the divine love. The life of God is nothing other than love, the eternal, perfect and ceaseless giving and receiving of love which is the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To live the Christian faith, to experience it, is to be drawn into that love and to be able, however feebly, to imitate it ourselves by rising above the selfishness and weakness which we are often too ready to give into. To be a Christian is to love, or at least to know that one must try to love, despite one's tendency to fail.

Karshish summarizes the Christian claim he has encountered in Lazarus thus:

So through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying "O heart I made, a heart beats here
Face my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
Thou hast no power nor may conceive of mine
But love I gave thee, with myself to love
And thou must love me, who hast died for thee
The madman saith he said so: It is strange.

Strange indeed is the life and the love of God. It is that strangeness we are called to witness and live anew this Passontide, as again we put love to death so that again we may celebrate its life.