A SERPENT’S TOOTH

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8: 6-11

John 11: 1-45

Little Bobby: Mom, why was nothing said about the other persons that Jesus raised from the dead together with Lazarus?
Mom: Oh dear, now were did you learn that there were other persons? It was only Lazarus.
Little Bobby: But mom, every time I read that verse I cannot help but assume that there were at least four persons.
Mom: Now why would you assume something like that?
Little Bobby: 'Cause Lazarus came fourth (forth)!

The little boy’s puzzlement in this case is funny, but the fact is that Jesus did raise more than one person from the dead. Back towards the beginning of His ministry, you’ll remember, Jesus is walking through the countryside with his disciples and the crowd following them, when they see a funeral procession coming out of a little town called Nain. It turns out to be the funeral for a young man, the child of an already widowed woman. Jesus is deeply moved by the situation, and he brings the young man back to life.

And then, of course, there was the time when a local politician comes to Him and asks him to cure his daughter, who is in danger of death. So Jesus takes Peter and James and John with him and goes home with the politician. But by the time they get there, the little girl is already dead, and the professional mourners are already filling the house. Once again, Jesus brings the little girl back from the dead.

So the story of Lazarus – which is told in much greater detail than these other two stories, and which plays a much larger part in the overall narrative of the gospels – doesn’t demonstrate any new power of Jesus. The text itself tells us, of course, that many who witnessed it were concerted on the spot into believers, but they were people who hadn’t been with Jesus during His ministry, and so hadn’t seen him do something similar before.

But since we readers, like Jesus’ companions, have been with Him for some time now, we’re free to look for other and perhaps deeper meaning in this event.

And there’s something else that encourages us to look a little deeper into what happened here, because this is one of those episodes in His ministry where Jesus seems to be engaged in what we might cal stage managing. Like the Transfiguration and the feeding of the five thousand, just to name two others, Jesus has an active hand in the structure and timing of the events involved.

And as if that wasn’t enough, what Jesus actually does here in setting the stage is surely one of the most perplexing things in all of Scripture. When the word if first sent to Him that his beloved friend Lazarus is deathly ill, instead of going immediately to his aid, Jesus very deliberately tells His disciples they must wait for two days, and it is during those two days that Lazarus died.

But it gets even more perplexing, perplexing and even painful. When Jesus finally arrives back at Bethany, where Lazarus is entombed, his two sisters, Mary and Martha, come to Jesus in turn, and each gives voice to the same bewildered heartache: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

And the explanation Jesus gives for why he delayed doesn’t seem very satisfying, even though it’s true. “Your brother will rise again.” Yes, but what about the heartache, the sense of loss and distress, the mourning, the pain and sorrow the women have gone through. Why was that all necessary?

In order to address that question seriously, I think we first have to start to accommodate ourselves to the thought that Jesus was not the sweet, gentle, lovable guy that so much of modern Christian preaching and understanding has reduced Him to. We have to recognize that he didn’t just rebuke demons, he rebuked His closest friends; his attacks on his adversaries could be brutal and pitiless; His language could be coarse and even vulgar, a fact often buried by our English translations; he cast demons out of a maniac into a herd of pigs who then killed themselves, costing a whole village to lose its income and essentially run him out of town; using a whip, he attacked a bunch of money changers, and he sure wasn’t whipping their tables; his own family at one point thought he was crazy, and near the end of His ministry, most of His disciples left Him and went home because His teaching offended them so deeply. He was a man on a mission, and he would not let anything stand in the way of accomplishing that mission, certainly not ordinary human affection and courtesy.

Once we begin to accept that possibility, once we accept that Christ’s mission was more like Sherman’s marching through the south than it was like Dorothy strolling through Oz on a yellow brick road, I think many things we read in the gospel account appear in a different light, and begin to make more sense, and even to become much more serious for us. And I would include there the episode or raising Lazarus from the dead.

What was Christ’s mission? His mission was not to die on the Cross. The cross was a means to the accomplishment of His mission.

What was His mission? His mission was not to rise from the dead. The resurrection was a *passage* on the way to the accomplishment of His mission.

What was His mission? It was not to ascend into heaven and be seated at the right hand of His Father. That was the *stage* for the accomplishment of His mission.

Then what was it? If not any of that, then what was Christ’s mission?

Christ’s mission was the act we commemorate at Pentecost. His mission, what everything else had led up to, and without which everything else would be completely meaningless…Christ’s mission was to send His own glorified Spirit to dwell in the hearts of those who believe in Him, so that every single one of them might be united with Christ, and in Christ, be incorporated into the divine family of God, and begin the process of becoming like Christ. That’s the gospel, that’s the good news of Christ.

What we’ve noted before and what I’d like to emphasize again is the stress that Jesus lays upon the resurrection from the dead that still lies in his future. Until that happens, he says, the whole plan of salvation cannot proceed. The resurrection is the key, the vital element, the turning point.

But why was all that necessary? Why the cross, why the death, why the resurrection. Couldn’t God simply have sent His own spirit into the hearts of His children, that same spirit that Scripture tells us has been at work with God from the very beginning of beginnings: Genesis 1, verse two. *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

Couldn’t God simply have sent that Spirit?

The answer is no. And if you ask, Why not? the short answer is because that Spirit does not know what it is to be human. It does not know, and therefore God Himself does not know, what it is to experience life as a human, to rejoice as a human, to suffer pain and sorrow and loss and rejection as a human, to die as a human.

Before it could indwell us to any purpose – before it could serve as our Comforter, as our guide or as the spirit who strengthens us, the spirit of God had to be united to the spirit of a human being, and that divine/human spirit had to lead the life of a human and emerge utterly victorious, remaining in perfect submission, perfect obedience, and perfect faith to the will of God the Father.

What is the hardest thing to do as a decent human being? What runs most contrary to our instinctual love? What causes a good woman the most pain?

I would say it is to dismay and disappoint those who have come to love you, to trust you to depend on you.

“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is,” King Lear discovered, “to have a thankless child.” There is nothing worse than the hatred of those one loves. Yet those who receive the spirit of the risen and glorified Christ can know that His is a human spirit, just like their own, a human spirit who has endured that same pain and incorporated it into the divine. Only such a transformed Spirit could be of any use to any of us.

Both Mary and Martha come despairingly to Jesus and tell Him the same thing: Lord, you could have saved our brother. Why didn’t you. And He can’t even give them a good reason why not. He had to bear the pain of their confusion and disappointment with Him.

That’s why Jesus wept.

And how many people throughout the generations have turned away from God, because they can’t get a good answer to their cries of dismay. Lord, why was I born with this awful disease? Why can’t I stop taking drugs? Lord, why did my child have to die? They can’t get a good answer, so they figure God doesn’t hear them, or doesn’t care, or doesn’t exist.

God experiences their dismay and disappointment, but God experiences it as God. From Mary and Martha, and Lazarus himself, Jesus experienced it as a human. And it is the divine Christ’s divinely human spirit, that was poured out on Pentacost, and continues to dwell within every Christian, as Comforter, as guide, and as the spirit who strengthens.

And so, Gracious God, let our prayer this morning be a prayer of thanksgiving as well as a prayer of petition. We thank you for the unfathomable sacrifice you made for us, by sending Your son away from You to live the life of a mere human being, so that eventually – after suffering every pain the human spirit can experience – His divinely human spirit might be glorified above all else in Your creation, and as such offered freely to us. And Father, we pray that all of us who have come to a belief in Christ, will be enlightened to allow our own spirits to feast more and more bounteously on His, for it is in His name we pray.