

## **Sermon 1 November 2015. John 11:32-44 and Revelation 21:1-6a**

A colleague returned from a business trip to Brussels this week with a curious collection of items promoting a project he is involved in. The project promotes environmental and nature conservation and is funded by the EU. The funding stream is known as a LIFE project and one of the very low key goodies he shared with us were a number of bookmarks showing beautiful flowers, with this question on the back – what is LIFE? It made us smile, someone offered the answer ‘42’ and it made me think about this mornings’ passages. What is life? What did Lazarus do with the gift of extended life? What would any of us do?

Do you know the story of Alfred Nobel? The philanthropist who founded the Peace Prize and other achievement awards? Do you know that he made his fortune from his invention of dynamite? Which is either a very useful or a very deadly invention, depending on the use to which it is put. Do you know that an unfavourable obituary published while he was still alive is reputed to have changed the way he viewed life? He wanted to be remembered as a better person.

I don’t think it matters where we are in our life’s journey. Whether we are starting out, motoring along in the middle or nearing the end, we can still ask ourselves every day, how will I live the rest of my life? Because each morning can be considered to be a new lifetime.

Jesus showed that he has the power to give new life. He can, and will, give that to us afresh each day, if we choose to believe and follow him. We don’t need the extraordinary display of his power that he revealed to those watching when he called Lazarus back from death. What we need is faith.

That though can be easier said than done. Often we are stuck. We feel trapped, confused, lonely and helpless. Whilst we know that God wants to move us from despair to hope; from darkness to light; from loneliness to community and captivity to freedom, so often His voice is hard to hear.

Did you see though that Jesus uses other people to help in his task? In much the same way as the feeding of the five thousand would not have happened without the boy with his loaves and fishes, so here too Jesus engages others. He asks the crowd to remove the stone from the mouth of the cave. And they do so.

In much the same way today I believe that Jesus relies on others to help. In our everyday encounters with ordinary people we encounter Jesus. Through them, we so often experience and receive the redemptive power of love. Through them, whilst we might not hear God’s voice, we recognise it in their encouraging words and actions. They can help us find hope, light, community and freedom.

Paula Gooder in her book ‘Everyday God’ says that actually there isn’t really any such thing as an ordinary person. She uses the term ‘unsung hero’ instead. She says that part of the essence of the kingdom of God is to be unsung. The best servants are those who you don’t really notice as they go about their business. She suggests that we and they know that they are succeeding when others notice, not them, but God.

It is so easy to fail to give people dignity and respect, simply because they seem different from us. How many of us listen to conversations around us, on the bus, in the queue in a

supermarket or reading twitter feeds, and judge people or misjudge them, based on our view of life? If instead we see those whom we meet or pass by, as being children of God for whom Christ died, will we have a different view of them?

I sat behind two women on the bus the other day. They were strangers to each other. One was in tears, fearful about the future. The other simply listened, and gently offered comforting words whilst bringing a measure of reality to the others' fears, showing her that she was not unique and that things need not be as bleak as they seemed. I was glad that the tearful woman had not chosen to sit next to me. It did give me a chance to reflect on how I might have responded had she done so, and to observe how an ordinary woman simply gave respect and dignity to one whose distress was causing her to act in a very un-British way.

Like the distressed woman on the bus, many of us mourn something or someone: a broken dream, the loss of a loved one, the loss of energy or health. We weep as Mary and Martha wept, indeed as Jesus wept. The passage from Revelation, which Joy also quoted from last week, encourages us not be stuck. The one who is seated upon the throne says: see I am making all things new; see the home of God is among mortals. We can move on from our place of mourning. We can trust God to wipe away our tears. We can answer the same call that Jesus used to summon Lazarus. He calls us to come out.

I came across a book this week entitled – Where on earth is heaven? You can give the emphasis in many places. I like to place it on 'on earth'. It was too heavy a tome to bring home from the library so I skim read it. The author suggested that the answer is contained within the question – he quoted from Elisabeth Browning's poem Aurora Leigh: Earth is crammed with heaven and every common bush is aflame with God.

Our human spirit feeds on love. Our unsung heroes, or should I call them saints?, do more than just give us practical love and support. They point towards Jesus, where we experience spiritual love and the hope of that new Jerusalem. Jesus came to give us abundant life. It's not an EU funded project. It's so much more than that. LIFE in all its fullness, touched by sorrow, fed with love, knowing hope, light, community and freedom can be the hallmarks of our lives, if we surrender to God. Let us be alive.

Amen

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