

Saint Margaret of Antioch Leigh-on-Sea March 29th 2020
Sermon for 5th Sunday in Lent - Passion Sunday

“Do something” - the raising of Lazarus.

Ezekiel 37:12-14, Romans 8:8-11, John 11.1-45



Well I've been here two years now and the church is empty – I know, it's not all my fault!

We truly are in a terrible crisis. As I alluded to last week on Mothering Sunday – it is largely of our – humankind's – making. The mistreating of Mother Earth and as St. Paul puts it, our obsession with unspiritual things, must surely lead us to hope that when this crisis ends (and end it will) that our minds, lives and hearts may be changed to things that truly matter.

Those truths are spirit and life. We must pray that human beings may walk a little more humbly on a beautiful earth which is not of our making, does not belong to us, and is not purely for our whim, pleasure and misuse. When Ezekiel tells us to open our graves it should at least speak to us of the pits we have dug for ourselves that we may come out and live again. But let us remember that nothing is irredeemable to the God who creates in love, shares our profoundest griefs and highest joys in His Son and when open to His Spirit frees us to live – really live, even when life is dark.

In our extraordinary, and long, gospel of the day – the raising of Lazarus – Jesus says when we walk in the day we do not stumble, but when at night we stumble and fall. (How true, I still have the scars to show from many a stumbling night on duty with Royal Marines). Jesus is the light that turns even night into day.

For Martha and Mary, it is a terrible crisis we do not know what has caused Lazarus's sickness, but we know that for Jesus, deeply human, this is a very special family for him. They live at Bethany – “the house of the poor” and yet they are a source of so many riches in the gospel and close to Jesus's heart. In a crisis we want those close to us and those in authority to

do something; to act and sort it out. And yet on the surface when Jesus hears of the crisis he seems to do nothing. Nothing for 2 days.

Of course it wasn't nothing. Sometimes we say others are in our thoughts and prayers. For Jesus, this is no glib saying it is cuts to the very heart of who he is and his relationship with the Father. It is always out of that prayerful relationship that action – light and life come - even at the cost of his own life on the cross.

On a seemingly lighter note: “Don't just do something stand there” – says the white rabbit in Alice in wonderland.

Some may feel confused like Alice. Isolating at home may feel like a frustrated enforced nothing while others are frantically working to save life and help return us to “normality” whatever that might be. Jesus' two days are not days of nothing they are days of prayer. He will later say “Father thank you for hearing my prayer as you always do”

Some of you will have conflicted feelings, but doing nothing in an enforced isolation need not be nothing but a time of prayer – real prayer that changes you, us – as all prayer does. Some of our elderly and housebound, are not just house bound and vulnerable victims to be “done to and looked after” but powerhouses of prayer and wisdom and maybe we will see and use them and value them in a different light as we share that place of **being**.

In the Gospel, after the prayer come two very human reactions and then a supernatural event we cannot explain, the miracle, of Lazarus being raised from the dead. For the gospel writer they are never miracles but signs pointing to something more important beyond.

The two human reactions are ones we share. Firstly, Martha's “if only” as Jesus arrives. *If only you had been here....it would not have come to this.* How we share that so often. *If only...* as we replay life's turns and seemed missed chances. Many thousands will be asking that today. The other human reaction, will be shared too - it is the gut wrenching grief of Jesus himself – he is deeply distressed and moved to tears. It is a reaction we remind ourselves of at the beginning of every funeral service. Jesus tears,

are prompted by Mary's phrase "come and see". Of course he already **sees**, he sees much more than they know. His grief is not just a distant sympathy it is total knowing empathy – "*see how much he loved him*".

He weeps for Lazarus, for Mary and Martha, he will weep too over Jerusalem, our world, and for us all from the cross.

Yes Lazarus is raised from the dead – but this is not a *clever me* "come and see what I can do", this is a sign "come and see who I am and who God is" it is a call for us all to be **unbound** and set free to live, really live, in the light – a new and eternal light.

Lazarus will die as we all will, and for many of us our mortality is sharper before us at this time. Yet we are called to live and believe that we may never die when we live in God. This is the last of Jesus's signs – miracles if you like, before his own trial, agony and death on the cross. An agony where few weep, friends desert him and the world walks on by and yet he doesn't stop praying for them or for us.

In this land, we are told the worst of this crisis is to come. If true it will come as we Christians enter Holy week and Easter. We enter the Holy Land. Past present and future become squashed as we enter into the last week of Christ's earthly life and the teeth of his earthly crisis - a crisis that defined who he was, and is. We are called to **re-member** his darkest time and yet also the time of his glory as we do in this and every Eucharist - His life giving sacrifice. It is a glory that is revealed, as St. John puts it, on the cross. In this gospel we are reminded it is when it is darkest that the true light shines brightest.

Yes, do something when and where you can, but pray always, that the light of Christ may be with you wherever you find yourself and set you free.

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Amen.