

Sermon - All Soul's Day – 31st October 2021. Written by Rev'd Rutton Vicajee

I think the shortest, and most shocking sermon I ever heard was delivered by the actor Jack Hawkins, playing a distressed, drunk, fundamentalist hellfire preacher. It was delivered from the back of a retreating horse drawn carriage, in the 1960's film Zulu! He said this: "You're all going to die! All of you! Don't you understand?" And in response, the rifles held by the South Wales Borderers behind their pitiful sandbags start to droop, as the psychology of despair starts to spread amongst them, long before a single Zulu appears over the distant horizon.

It's a shocking sermon in terms of pastoral care. But here's the problem: it's also true. We all are going to die at some point.

Enter John, our Gospel writer, and the beloved disciple of Jesus, with an impossible task. Given the inevitability of death, how is he going to explain the unexplainable? That Jesus comes to save, and that salvation has a present quality, as well as a future reality, in our lives. A present reality so powerful and so strong that it is almost as if death does not matter any more, it has no hold over us, it has no power to utterly destroy if – and only if – we believe in Christ.

So how does John build up to this seminal, life and death message of Gospel and salvation in Christ? So impossibly complex, and yet so simple? What eternal life markers can he lay down in the first 10 chapters, which might then prelude this shocking, this visceral account of the raising of Lazarus?

Let me pick out just two key verses to his build-up:

Chapter 1 verse 4: in Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

A theological health warning: this is divine mystery indeed, and we should not expect to understand everything. But we can understand some, if we avoid a literal approach.

Now, hands up anyone here who is a bit of a literal thinker? Who calls a spade a spade? Who says if you can't touch it, bite it kick it, scratch it or feel it, it ain't real?

Can I just be honest and say, this may not be the sermon for you! This is not a Gospel for literal, or black and white thinkers.

It's a little more complex than that, because life, is a little more complex than that.

Let's look again:

Chapter 1 verse 4: in Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

But in everyone is life – if they are alive! So, what can it mean to say in Jesus was life?

This is figurative language. The Greek work for life is zoe, and it also appears at a crucial moment in the raising of Lazarus, when Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life. It's that life, that fundamental, creating lifeforce power that holds all created things together, that's the life that John is referring to. A life that transcends time, and place, and even death.

This life force was both in Jesus, and was Jesus, and is Jesus. That's what he's trying to say in Ch 1. That's zoe life.

Fast forward to ch. 3 where he tries to summarise the whole gospel in one verse: the most famous verse: God so loved the world, that He gave His only son that whomsoever... what's the next word?

That whoever believes in him in the future?

No

That whoever believes – present tense. Although I fact, the Greek there is nuanced – it really means to hold something in your hand, to have it, to possess it. It's yours.

Martin Luther says believe the promise of God. Believe it, and you have it. Now. Not in 10 years time sitting on a cloud and playing a harp. That's just silly, isn't it? You have it now. Eternal life.

A quality of salvation and life that is both for this world, and for the world to come. We may not bypass death physically, but it is as if we do so spiritually. It has no more hold over Christ, and through Him, it has no more hold over us.

We have eternal life now, because we have salvation now.

For many, if not all of us, there will be death in this life. And Jesus acknowledges that. But in the last analysis, it will be some form of gateway to new, transformed, transcended, resurrection life in the world to come.

After the return of Christ there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And we will have, in some way, a renewed spiritual body, to live in it.

Why does Christ offer us this now? Because He loves us.

John 11 is an easy passage to get wrong. It's not just about resurrection and eternal life. It is about the power of love that underlies it.

Jesus loves Lazarus, and Mary, and Martha, and they love Him. This is stated throughout the passage. And all the agonising, all the anger, and denial, all the bargaining with Jesus in passage – it's all at surface level. Underneath all of that is his great love for them – and His great love for us.

Yet the love of Christ seems so absent! He could have saved Lazarus, he could have healed him, if only He had been here! If only he had not deliberately stayed away! It's a shocking story in some ways. Jesus, don't you care about us? Is church ministry so important to you that you forget the friends of your household, who love you, who support you, who pray for you?

And so, in best Kubler-Ross stages of bereavement style, they pour out their denial, their anger, and their what-if bargaining at the feet of Jesus, because they are so overcome with grief. Their raw emotions simply take over.

But actually, at the feet of Jesus is a really good place to lay our raw emotions.

Back to the now and future gospel, back to the present and the future hope of eternal life.

I am the resurrection

Even though he dies, he will live

He who lives in me will never die

And you might say, well, that's contradictory!

But no it's not! It's only contradictory if you are a linear thinker – birth, middle years, old age, death, sleep, trumpet, resurrection, all that's true, but it's all a bit linear, isn't it?

Whereas the eternal life on offer here is not linear. Its quality is outside of recorded time. It is for now, as well as forever.

And let's be honest, this won't be for everyone. Some will say, I cannot believe this, I will not believe this. In the face of a painful death, or an unexpected death; in the face of the cruel loss of a loved one.

Or to change the analogy: I will not look at this dead and dirty pile of wood and coal in the fireplace of my heart and believe it can come to life.

Not so for Martha. She has the spark of faith. She says, Jesus, you were four agonising deliberate days too late. And now he's dead. But. But even now, I believe the Father will grant whatever you ask.

And so, a tiny spark of faith lights the great fire of resurrection reality.

And so, through faith, Jesus illustrates this greatest of 'I am' statements with this most shocking and dramatic of visual aids that he is to give. Lazarus, come forth, bandages and all.

And so, he does.

Of course, it is only a visual aid. Lazarus will die again. All this is given to us as a wonderful, living sign of John 3:16. That powerful, resurrection, eternal life in Christ, for all who believe, is for now, as well as forever.

Martin Luther says believe in the promise of God. The promise in today's passage is that Jesus says that we will never truly die if we believe in Him.

Believe it, and you have it.

Such is the great great love of Jesus; for Lazarus, for Mary, for Martha, and for each one of us.

Believe it, and you have it.

Amen