



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Ezekiel 37: 1-3, 11-14
Epistle Romans 6: 16-23
Gospel John 11: 18-44

This is the “mother of all miracles,” the sign beyond all others in which Jesus raids the world of the dead. Before the tomb of Lazarus Jesus groans, as he will groan again in the Garden. He knows what is coming. But he also knows what this means: he plays down his own anguish and goes to the aid of his friends with all his strength. By so doing he pledges his life for them.

But the story also contains a detail that might be disturbing to some: it suggests that Jesus may be *afraid*. That is certainly not the most obvious thing about the story, and it certainly doesn't fit the traditional take on our Lord that we are given by sermons and Sunday School material. But it suggests itself to me at two points in the story.

The first is that famous little sentence so beloved by those hooked on Bible trivia: “Jesus wept.” Even in the story there is disagreement about what this means. It would first appear that Jesus' tears are in response to both the death of his friend Lazarus, and also to the anguish of the two mourning sisters whose faith has been sorely tempted by Jesus failure to appear in time to save their brother. Some of those who were there saw this only as a sign of Jesus' affection for Lazarus,

prompting their own cynical question as to why there was no miraculous healing in this case.

But Jesus is facing the greatest challenge of his life: a confrontation with humanity's oldest and most formidable enemy: death. Jesus knows this enemy, and he recognizes in him the one thing that will make or break his authority to speak for God in the world. If death defeats him, first in Lazarus and later in his own passion and death, then what hope can he offer others that the New Life he offers means anything at all? If death ends our existence, then why bother following Jesus' plan after all?

Later in John's Gospel we will hear about another episode in Christ's life as he finds himself alone and facing his own death in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, also, we find elusive words to describe our Lord's feelings: deep sighs, sweat like blood- the author is at a loss to describe the Son of God in agony and at the edge of despair.

Is it wrong to think of Jesus as being afraid? Does it put into question his being the Lord? Should we doubt his power and his authority even over death itself? Of course not. This is the sign of his humanity- the proof that God really did join the human race as it truly is. And his fear is not that of a coward who refuses the challenge, but of one who knows the cost and the danger, but chooses to go forward.

We are allowed to be afraid of death, just as we are allowed to mourn for those who have died. Anything that Jesus felt or experienced is common to all humanity, but that human life was offered for all humanity to give us something new and better out of it. That offer is a life in which our fears can be faced because they are not stronger than God; in which the persons we are do not dissolve into nothingness as though we had never been; in which our ultimate enemy is no longer death, but only the failure to accept the simplest and most profound of gifts: an existence that doesn't end with death, but continues in God through Christ.

Lazarus came forth. And for us, it will be well to take a cue from the Evangelist John himself and see this miracle above all as the proof of the spiritual power that Christ can use on our behalf. We, too, hear a voice of authority commanding us to "Come forth!" Some respond by making the first steps in a new life, a new way of seeing ourselves and those around us. Others of us, hear that same command, make some half-hearted resolve to do something about it, someday, and then drop off back to sleep, finding sad, fearful, compromising ways of making do with life in the tomb of darkness and corruption: and when all the while Christ is offering them new life!

The story of Lazarus, life so much of the Gospel account that has been entrusted to us, is not meant for us to listen to, but to live. We are invited today to accept our natural fears, but to see beyond them to the opportunities God is offering us in Christ: to come out of our tombs and begin to *really* live.