

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT 2nd April 2017**Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11: 1-45**

Well, two almost overpoweringly dramatic stories about the God who raises the dead. “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” “Lazarus, come forth!”

This is the stuff of legends. When I was a boy one of my favourite films was “Jason and the Argonauts” and it has a fabulous scene of the wicked king who scatters the teeth of the Hydra on the ground in front of Jason and his companions and raises up a terrifying skeleton army to do battle with the hero. But the household of Israel raised up by the breath of the Living God is raised up not as an army of the undead, but as living beings with flesh on those bones, and the breath of God himself within them, the sign of a love that nothing can destroy – not death, not exile, not even their unfaithfulness. God is never finished with his people, never washes his hands of us and walks away, not now, not ever.

Then enter Jesus, God made flesh, love taken to its ultimate extreme. “I will go myself”, says God. And I just love all the detail of this story.

At the beginning we get an action replay. Last week on “Jesus of Nazareth” if you like, for anyone that missed the last episode, or if you left the room to make a cup of tea when Mary of Bethany shocked everyone by washing Jesus’s feet and drying them with her hair. Yes, it’s that same sister. The other sister in another episode was the bossy one: “Lord, tell this lazy, dreamy sister of mine to lend a hand with the dishes!” So it’s clear that these sisters and their brother are very special to Jesus. God in Jesus, the God made man, needs friends. Bethany, their home, was a place where Jesus renewed himself with their kindness, friendship, hospitality and love.

I can think of homes and friends who offer that kind of Bethany welcome to me and you probably can too. These are places where new life gets breathed into your tired bones and your weary heart, these are people who raise you up and renew hope and help you believe in yourself again. We all need them and so, it seems, did Jesus.

So when the message comes about Lazarus, we are in no doubt about Jesus’s love for them. We may be perplexed about the delay, as the sisters were, but Jesus is in no doubt about the outcome and the incredibly powerful witness that this story is going to be. Nobody at the scene knows that the words spoken by Jesus outside the tomb of his friend will be spoken at every Christian funeral for the rest of time: I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me shall never die. But they will be, and these are words to cling to.

Those are words I’ve spoken, proclaimed hundreds of times as grief stricken families and friends have gathered to say their farewells. I trust that someone will proclaim

those words for me when my time comes. Lazarus would die again, we know. But the real resurrection is the resurrection of my brother and yours, Jesus Christ, to which the raising of Lazarus points. And it's that resurrection that gives us hope.

God in Jesus will face every danger to get this message to us. Thomas thinks he's mad to even think of making this journey back into Judea, into the lion's den of so many enemies, but this powerful, beautiful encounter is a vital stage on the way – because in it Jesus shows us the face of God and the heart of God.

This is not the passionless God of the Greeks, not the unnameable God of the Jews even, this is the God who is moved – See how he loved him. This is the God who weeps. This is the God who meets our anguished questions not with an answer or a solution, but meets them with love. Twice the sisters rebuke him as sometimes we challenge and almost rebuke God: Lord, if only you had been here my brother would not have died... Lord, if only.... Lord, why?... And Jesus will ask that very question himself on the Cross when his time comes: My God, my God, why?...

So for now, they and we get not a final answer, but a sign. Just like the breath of God raising the household of Israel, the love of Jesus for his friend has power to call Lazarus back into life, and the stone is rolled away. Another stone will be rolled away in a future episode, and another loving voice will call the dead Jesus back to life, not for a time or a season like Lazarus, but for eternity.

This is the God who raises the dead. This is the God who breathes new life into us, not just in death, but daily and after all the little deaths that we do. The deaths we suffer when we fail, the death we feel palpably when we're grieving and alone, the deaths of disappointment and things that don't work out as we'd hoped. We don't wait for death to hear that voice. It's the voice that tells you to leave the tomb of darkness, sorrow, guilt and embrace a new day.

We're raised to new life every morning in life – a sign of the final, joyful awakening of which Jesus is our pioneer, the one who goes first, goes before us, shows us the way and asks us to trust him. "In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also". This is the love that will not let me go.

O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee: I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.

This is the rainbow promise we trace through the rain, to which these stories point us when we come to the Lord with our questions, our sadnesses, our inability to make sense of what's happening. There are ocean depths of love in God which are beyond our imagining. The purpose of these stories is to give us a glimpse of those depths and a taste of the promise that is for us. See how much he loved him; See how much he loves us.