

COME FORTH!
Sung Eucharist
St. Michael, Cornhill
Lent V
Passion Sunday
Sunday April 2nd 2017
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Just over four years ago now, I was bound for Rome to preach at the inaugural service of the new Director of the Anglican Centre there. The aeroplane arrived perfectly, with no delays, and I had plenty of time to get to the city centre as I collected my goods and chattels from the overhead locker. Moments later, however, the captain asked us all to return to our seats. The Air Traffic Control people had sent us to the wrong stand, and the air bridge would not connect with the plane. It took nearly two hours to sort it out. eventually I arrived, breathless, at the church, just in time to preach the sermon. The gospel was as today with that amazing punchline: ‘Lazarus come forth!’ I could not avoid the sense of irony having been locked in the aeroplane with no means of exit. Ultimately it felt like: ‘Stephen, come forth!’

Attempts to engage with this remarkable story of Lazarus have been legion. Perhaps one of the most powerful representations is as you enter the Narthex of New College, Oxford. As you go through the main door you are greeted by a massive sculpture of Lazarus. He is bound from head to feet, almost appearing to be in *mummified* form. His head is bent back over his shoulder, almost seeming to gaze behind himself soulfully. The allusions and resonances are manifold. The image of the grave clothes of Jesus’ burial and resurrection are certainly there. The sense of a mummified body too comes across. Lazarus is bound in death – and why the extraordinary turning of the head? Is he looking back with regret, or with pain, or longing?

Probably all of these responses are part of Epstein’s creative intentions, but so too is the sense of a world transferring miracle. In hope, love and astonishment, Lazarus bends his head to hear Jesus cry out to him: ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ Here is one of those occasions when a more archaic translation captures the intention most effectively. Sometimes contemporary literal renderings have Jesus saying simply, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ But this offers a rather wooden picture of the dead man popping out of a box. ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ as in the King James’ Version gives a far more dynamic feel to the entire passage. The Spirit of God is rekindled and transforms death into life.

St. John’s Gospel, which has offered us our focus for these past three weeks is a contrast to the first three gospels. Mark, Matthew and Luke are often styled the *synoptic gospels*. That name issues from the fact that you can stand them in parallel in a synopsis. Both content and structure share a good deal in common. John is very different. The common material is much less. The structure is different. John’s gospel appears to be a reflective response to Jesus, almost certainly written up later in the first century.

These last three weeks have included Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well; the man born blind and today, Lazarus. Sometimes John’s work is titled by scholars simply as a *book of signs* or a *gospel of signs*. For scattered through its pages are signs or miracles which lead into dialogue with those around Jesus, then followed by a monologue from Jesus. Often included in that monologue will be one of the great *I am* sayings, often preceded by the familiar ‘*Verily, verily*’ or ‘*Truly, truly, I say to you.*’

Those *I am* sayings bring with them great depth. For, in the Old Testament, as in Moses’ encounter on the mountain, so God’s name is *I am* – that is what the title Yahweh means. So, when Jesus begins *I am*, the resonance is that here is God, speaking and living out our humanity. Today it was *I am the resurrection and the life*. Elsewhere we hear *I am the bread of life; before Abraham was, I am; I am the good shepherd; I am the way, the truth and the life*.

Over these past three weeks we have been taken ever more deeply into the nature of what God effects for humanity in Jesus. Jesus offers living water, as in *the woman at the well*, and as at our baptism. Jesus removes the scales from our eyes: we see the world anew through the eyes of faith, as with *the man born blind*. Then today the most radical transformation of all is revealed in the new life given to *Lazarus*.

This day, the fifth Sunday in Lent, has always been known as Passion Sunday. But the readings we have heard (the gospel has been used on this day for 1,600 years!) start with the passion prefigured in Lazarus' death but leave us in hope and triumph. Captured in Epstein's great sculpture, the new life in the Spirit, re-animating dry bones is there in that cri-de-coeur from Jesus: '*Lazarus, come forth!*' That is the very message of hope which transforms our universe.

Amen

Readings

Ezekiel 37. 1-14

Romans 8. 6-11

John 11. 1-45