

Sermon: Fifth Sunday in Lent: 2 April 2017

*Jesus said to [Martha], “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who trusts in me will never die. Do you trust this?” (John 11.25-26).*

So essentially, Christians are invincible. Really. Trusting in Christ makes us immune to every threat, including the ultimate threat of death. Nothing can harm us, because even death will not take away from us the true and eternal life that we have in Christ. And this is why Christians, from the beginning, have themselves been seen as threats to worldly authority. Wherever we see abuse of power, we are free to confront it. Wherever we see corruption, we are free to uncover it. Wherever we see people in need, we are free to break social convention and to give without limit. Because, trusting in Christ, we cannot lose. Of course, we can make mistakes, but our fate doesn't depend on that because it depends solely on Christ our God. We do not set ourselves free, but, as Christ has said earlier in this same Gospel, “if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (8.36).

So, it's a pretty amazing thing that Jesus is said to have done in today's Gospel reading – perhaps the miracle of all miracles. It is the seventh of seven “signs” in John's Gospel. Of course, healings are pretty remarkable, as is multiplying bread and fish. Walking on water is impressive, as is turning water into wine. But bringing a person back from the dead after four days of lying in a tomb, with a body already decomposing? This is in a class of its own. If there are degrees of impossible, the raising of Lazarus is more impossible than all the rest.

But this miracle, like all the others in John's Gospel, is not simply a display of divine power. Its purpose is not simply to impress people into believing in Jesus. In John's Gospel specifically, the miracles of Jesus are described as signs. The point of these signs is to reveal Christ as God's Son and to reveal the salvation that God was bringing about in him. These signs reveal Christ's character as well as God's divine purpose in him.

Specifically, the raising of Lazarus is a sign of what we heard Christ tell Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who trusts in me will never die" (11.25-26). Now, this is a statement we read most often in the context of funerals, and so we hear it in that light, as Martha no doubt heard it, as a statement of comfort and consolation. But the Judeans in today's Gospel story don't hear this statement; they instead see it manifested in the sign of Lazarus coming from the tomb, alive. Suddenly, the statement has an edge. Suddenly, "I am the resurrection and the life" goes beyond comfort and consolation; suddenly, it becomes challenge.

If trusting Christ gives hope even in death, then it also gives immense power and freedom to the one who trusts. And there is no controlling who has access to this trust, this power and freedom. The challenge is in its inclusivity. This might be hard for us to grasp, after a long history of Christian exclusivism, which has tried to keep people out of salvation by questioning the quality or genuineness of their faith or by adding extra conditions. But in its context, this saying of Christ's in fact opens up access to resurrection and life to anyone at all: "*everyone* who believes in me will never die". But what about criminals? Sex workers? "Gays?" Muslims? People who stop coming to church? People who are "too lazy" to work but take advantage of social safety nets to get by? Migrants who enter countries illegally? Yes! Everyone.

But this is difficult for the respectable to hear – and the successful, the law-abiding, the straight, the faithful churchgoer, the hard-working taxpayer. All who form part of the status quo will have a chance to feel threatened by the inclusive promise of Christ the resurrection and the life. And so the Judeans of today's story have occasion to feel threatened. They may not have as much power as the Roman authorities, but by following their rules and supporting their authority, they have a chance at peace and stability, even if it may be on the backs of some others. To break with that authority that's built upon the oppression, poverty and death of others seems impossible. To break with that authority risks placing oneself at the bottom of that massive structure, risks becoming one of the oppressed, poor and dying.

So what made the difference for those Judeans who did believe in Christ? Was it that they had been let down by the structures that maintained the status quo life? Was it that they had seen the death at the foundation of the authority that presumed to keep control and order? Whatever it was, they saw a chance at freedom from the oppressive power in which they were participating.

As goes a famous line of Leonard Cohen's, "There's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." When we are confronted with the faults in the system that seems to sustain us, when we realize that the system thrives on violence and oppression, when we're let down by a system that had promised to protect us, we also have a chance to follow the light through the crack to a place outside the system.

A brief example: why do we in Canada feel threatened right now by the global refugee crisis? Why do we think that forty thousand out of the millions in need is already too much for us to handle? Is it because the system that keeps us feeling secure depends on the insecurity and homelessness of others? Or what?

Now, Christ was and is the light coming through the crack. He knew that this last sign of his would also be the last straw for those in authority. He knew that those in authority would not tolerate a person who offered invincible hope to those their authority oppressed. And so he pressed on, with bold and invincible hope, to the cross that would be his glory. May we too go forward eagerly to meet him there, knowing that the powers of death cannot hold us either. And may we thus be invincibly free to challenge the status quo.

Amen

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