

## St Peter's, Brighton Beach

### Sermon - Sunday 26 March – Fr Chester Lord

*May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Some notable biblical academics describe the raising of Lazarus as the seventh and final “*sign*” or miracle in the Gospel of John, and many might argue, Jesus has saved the best for last.

As we heard in our reading this morning, even though Lazarus had been dead for several days, Jesus manages to pull him back from the brink of death and restores him to life. All it takes is Jesus’ command. The voice that spoke creation into existence now calls him out of the darkness of death and into the light of life again.

However, in our pervasively sceptical, postmodern age, this may seem like a story that’s been embellished by John to help sell his listeners and audience on the idea of following Jesus. But this miraculous story is *real*. Like the other signs in the Gospel of John, it is meant to prophetically point to a deeper truth about Jesus and his ministry.

In the story of Lazarus, the reality of death seemed more poignant than the fragrance of life.

In some ways, it still is today. It is there amongst our broken relationships, in our wounds and betrayals, in our fears, in our anger and resentment, in our addictions, in our sorrow and despair. Perhaps it pervades our excessive busyness and preoccupation with success, in things done and left undone. Death wraps around us like strips of burial garments and grave clothes, and it has the potential to taint, pollute and tarnish all.

It seems that death permeates our lives and world in many ways. It hangs like a cloud over Ukraine at present. It blows through the lives of those encountering famine, hunger, natural disaster, disease and countless other places filled with war and violence. It threatens to indiscriminately and insidiously waft into our lives, taking those we love and cherish.

We desperately want to avoid it. *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,”* Martha and Mary say.

But Jesus wasn't there, at least not in the way they wanted. He wasn't there for a purpose; so that they and we might ultimately believe by what he does next.

Jesus stunningly and profoundly proves that the fragrance and gift of life is greater than the despair of death. That is the choice before us every time we meet death whether it is in us, in others, or in the world. Do we trust the smell of death more than the fragrance of life?

It seems those gathered at the tomb were overcome and preoccupied by decay, more than the fragrance. *“Take away the stone,”* Jesus says. His words echo Ezekiel's prophecy that God will open our graves, bring us up from those graves, put his spirit within us, and we shall live. All of this happens in Jesus, the one who is resurrection and life.

Martha protests. Decay has already filled her nostrils. *“Lord already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”*

We too might have uttered equally despairing things. Things such as:

*“He’s beyond help. It’s her own fault. Leave him alone. She’s always been like that. He’ll never change. It’s all hopeless. It will always be like this. No matter what I do, how hard I try, nothing good ever happens.”*

Our words might be different but the meaning is the same. Those are words of death, words that say we trust the stench of futility and fatalism more than the fragrance of life.

Jesus does not deny that death is awful. It is and it always has been. Instead Jesus asks us to release the life, the fragrance of life, that is wrapped in death. *“Unbind him, and let him go,”* Jesus commands. To unbind another or let ourselves be unbound means we must trust the perfume of life more than the decay. They did that for Lazarus. With each strip of cloth they incrementally removed, death trembled, knowing that its days were numbered. The unbinding of Lazarus was a death sentence for death itself because that sentence was ultimately carried out in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ himself.

Likewise, a very similar theme is evident in our Old Testament reading of Ezekiel today. It was a dark chapter for God’s own people. They had largely been exiled. The temple had been destroyed and its treasures removed. Then God gave Ezekiel a revelatory vision.

In this vision, God’s Spirit brought him to a valley full of dry bones, a place without life. God told Ezekiel that these bones would be re-formed. Then God breathed on these bones, and they *“came to life”* and became *“an exceedingly great army”*.

God explained, *“These bones are the whole house of Israel.”* He would cause His people to *“come up out of their graves”* and *“come to life,”* and He would place them *“on their own land”*.

For centuries, these prophecies largely remained a mystery. Many asked whether God would bring His people into the land of Israel again. This seemed to be impossible. Yet in 1948, this is exactly what took place. The world watched with amazement as Jews came from across the globe and united in the land of Israel.

Just as these dry bones came back to life in Ezekiel, we can be assured that all the Bible’s prophecies will be fulfilled. He will ultimately accomplish His purposes, and He will bless those who in turn bless His people.

Every day we encounter the threat and fear of death and every day we have the opportunity, by the grace of God, to change and be changed, to unbind and be unbound, to let go and be let go.

Lazarus’ resurrection and Ezekiel’s dry bones coming to life, points us to the hope of resurrection and new life that we ultimately have in Christ. What Jesus did for Lazarus is also a promise for all who believe: in Jesus there is no enemy of God—not even death itself—that can defeat us. If we are in Christ, we will have eternal life and victory over death, no matter what we face today.

When we have times in which we are struggling, anxious, or afraid, we can look to Jesus and remember his promises of life forever with him. As we contemplate today’s two readings and approach the joys of Easter, let us remember that nothing is too big, and no problem is too difficult for Jesus to overcome.

Amen.

