

Sunday 22 March 2026
The Fifth Sunday of Lent
Passion Sunday

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ezekiel 37:1-14

NT: Romans 8:6-11

Gp: John 11:1-45

It's tempting for some of us to read St John's account of Christ's response to Mary and Martha's message, as cover for all matter of failures of compassion and pastoral care. St John isn't writing a novel, but these characters, adult siblings living together, unmarried, we assume, can appear like people from a nineteenth century novel – by Jane Austen, George Eliot, or the spinsters in Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford – prim and proper, in bonnets, fussing about their preacher friend from Nazareth. But if you've read those novels, and I confess, in my case, it's been a while, you realise that at their best, they're full of insight and compassion, and wisdom that doesn't necessarily translate onto a small screen Sunday night period drama, no matter how lavish the production values. So, we shouldn't dismiss these characters, they're at the centre of John's gospel precisely because the glory of God is revealed in the ordinariness of their domesticity. And despite the temptation for negligent clergy to reach for a free pass, Christ's response to the news that Lazarus is ill, is not dismissive, or unkind, but mysterious in ways that overflow with divine glory, not human callousness.

The name of the village of Bethany, where this little family live, has a contested translation into English. As you probably know, Hebrew names carried a meaning, a symbolism. The name Jesus, the Greek version of the Hebrew 'Joshua' translates into English as 'God Saves', for example. But scholars disagree on how to translate the name Bethany. Some contend that it means 'The House of Figs' – which suggests richness, a place where fruit are found in abundance, which seems apt to the geography of the place. It puts a happy gloss on the events that unfold in today's gospel – as Lazarus comes out from the grave, alive again. But the other meaning some scholars draw from the unclear Hebrew is 'The House of the Poor' or 'The House of Affliction'. And that would resonate with the character of Lazarus, who in this story dies, and the other character Jesus describes in one of his parables, also called Lazarus, the poor man who starves to death at the rich man's gate, his sores licked by dogs, and ultimately carried into the heaven, after his affliction.

Figs are a strange fruit. In the wild many varieties are fertilized by wasps flying into their flowers. So far so normal. Many plant species rely on insect life to pollinate them, it's an evolved means of mixing genetic material between plants, and keeping the species healthy. But figs are unusual because they have evolved a symbiotic relationship with various particular species of wasp, known as 'fig wasps', which have over time come to specialize and adapt their life cycle one to another, plant to insect, in ways that mean some vegans won't eat delicious figs, because when the female wasps pollinate the fig flowers, the wasps are trapped inside the flower, and as the flower turns into a fruit, are engulfed and consumed, completely dissolved by the plant's enzymes, so that when the ripe fruit is gathered, it has been not only pollinated but fed, by the wasp.

Now, you haven't come to church for a lesson in natural history, I'm aware. But as we reflect on the significance of the story of Lazarus' burial, and the sting of death that he and his family experience, the story of his burial; decay, because St John tells us that his body smells now; and then transformation, when Christ summons him back to life, all of that seems to me the kind of thing those ordinary people in Bethany would have understood, in a place where figs were cultivated, and prized. And so, just as

Bethlehem means 'House of Bread' and the Bread of Life, Christ, was born there, hundreds of years after it received that name; so Bethany means 'House of Figs' and the weird botany of that plant is revealed as a sign, a symbol of the healing force of God's love, for Lazarus, and for all of us, if we listen to his words, the natural cycle of death and decay that was at work in Lazarus, dramatically, definitively interrupted and reserved by God in Jesus Christ.

Our passages of scripture today speak about bodies, decay, and the hope of life beyond death, in ways that sound discordant to modern ears. Most people who speak of a hope in a life beyond death, now, will talk about the spirit of the dead person moving to some kind of reality that sounds dreamlike, and perhaps slightly anaesthetized – beyond pain, but also perhaps beyond side splitting laughter, or the taste of delicious fruit on the tongue – ethereal and ghostly. But while today's readings do contrast the bodily and spiritual, it's not to suggest that after this life we should look forward to being ghosts, or shadows of our former selves, doped up to our eyeballs by God.

We have entered Passiontide today – the final two weeks of Lent, when the physical reality of Christ's last days and hours is thrown into sharp relief, and those physical details aren't things he looks to escape or throw off, but they are charged with glory. He cries real tears. He rides a donkey. He breaks bread. He shares a cup of wine. His body is stripped, whipped, pierced with nails, broken. Wrapped in grave clothes, sealed behind a great lump of rock, and on the other side of the Easter mystery, the risen Lord is dazzling, at first hard to recognize, for his grief stricken friends, but most definitely a man with a body, who speaks, who touches, who eats and prepares food for his friends, who breathes peace that resonates, because he speaks as a real man, from real lips and with human lungs that breath the air we breathe.

The ordinary stuff of human life, physical, but charged with incredible spiritual depth, is the point of the great drama of our faith. The evolution of the wasp and the fig, the oh so human grief, anger, heartbreak of Mary and Martha, and their friendship with the preacher from Galilee, these details matter, the little people are Titans, in the Christian Gospel. We shouldn't take this truth for granted. The spirit St Paul describes as the flesh, or the world, sees things differently – calculatedly, prizing the rich, the powerful, the ruthless, the famous, over little people in out of the way places.

As we walk with Christ to Calvary, I encourage you to hear him speaking to you, as he did to Lazarus. 'Unbind him!' Let him look at you at your most real, and vulnerable, as we look at Christ himself, on the cross, and ask him to unwrap the bandages, and inhale the sweet fresh richness of God's love for the world, revealed in Christ, and the lives of his friends.

Fr Philip Anderson