

Lazarus life

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 26 March 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 5A

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; a Dramatized Reading from John 11: 1-45

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Jesus wept.

In English, that phrase is the shortest verse in the Bible, although - as ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς - it is not the shortest in the original languages. Nonetheless, what expressive power it has. It is certainly appropriate to recent events. What with the AUKUS deal, with its expensive, and nuclear, submarines; Nazis on the streets of Melbourne; continuing anti-trans violence; right wing Christian attacks on our own community and others; and the latest IPCC report! As if earlier ones were not enough! Jesus wept indeed.

This passage has also been on my heart for some time. Not least it came to mind when I saw a recent transport ad. 'End Extreme Poverty' it said and it brought me up with a shock. For wasn't that the cry of other past campaigns in which some of us have shared, such as the Jubilee campaigns to end the debt of poorer countries, and the Make Poverty History campaigns of the 'noughties' (2000s) with their vaunted Millennium Goals? At that time, some of us may remember, there was an ecumenical campaign, led by a former colleague of mine, called the Micah Challenge.

Meanwhile, working with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, I recall being involved in our own Make Indigenous Poverty History campaign, with our own Millennium Goals, several of which have been part of the *Closing the Gap* initiatives since. As part of that, with an Aboriginal Christian leader, I co-wrote a little reflection on the Gospel story we heard this morning. Yet are we that further forward on many First Nations issues too? Well may we say Jesus wept.

Where though is the pathway to life?

As it seems we have to re-learn past lessons, this morning I want to revisit three key features of what my former Aboriginal colleague called the *Lazarus Demand*. However, before doing so, it is worth reflecting on the nature of today's Gospel passage and the figure of Lazarus in particular.

Much ink has been used up trying to figure out the formation of this passage, its sources and historicity. No one can say for sure which traditions John's Gospel has drawn upon here - or its particular connections with other Gospels. Key specifics of time, place, and other features are contested among scholars.

It is certainly likely, as with other great Johannine passages, that the composer has used factual elements creatively. Unlike the stories of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain, and of Jairus' daughter, what we have here is, for example, undoubtedly something more than revival of a body. For the four days in which Lazarus is said to have been in tomb is quite another thing. Being longer even than the period between Jesus' death and resurrection, its claim to factual historicity is quite unlikely. Yet the narrative has lasting power and attraction. For it wrestles with deep and evocative experiences of literal and symbolic death, trauma, loss, and paths of challenge, renewal and reconciliation.

Lazarus for David Bowie and Nick Cave

Not for nothing has Lazarus fascinated many down the ages, including in recent times. Indeed, the great English singer-songwriter and actor David Bowie wrote a famous song, entitled 'Lazarus', on his final album. In the very same week he ended his final cancer treatments, he shot a video for the song. 'Look up here', he sang, in words which threw some Christians into, probably unnecessary, excitement, 'I'm in heaven. I've got scars that can't be healed.' Similarly, the great Australian singer- Nick Cave - has drawn on the figure of Lazarus, but in a more troubled manner, working with the darker themes. For, as Nick Cave wrote about his album *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!* :

Ever since I can remember hearing the Lazarus story, when I was a kid, you know, back in church, I was disturbed and worried by it. Traumatised, actually. We are all, of course, in awe of the greatest of Christ's miracles—raising a man from the dead—but I couldn't help but wonder how Lazarus felt about it. As a child it gave me the creeps, to be honest. ⁱ

Cave gave Lazarus a contemporary frame, setting him in New York City, and deliberately also associating Lazarus with Harry Houdini, whom he termed, 'after Lazarus, the second greatest escapologist'. For in Cave's reflections on Lazarus, we have a vital combination of scepticism about pious interpretations with an expression of that longing for liberation and transcendence which is part of the human condition, and which Nick Cave's music, at its best, conveys so powerfully. Thus Cave, in being inspired by Lazarus and Harry Houdini, was aware that Houdini spent a good deal of his life debunking the spiritualists who sought to cash in on the grief and struggles of the bereaved. Yet, as Nick Cave also observed:

I wanted to create a kind of vehicle, a medium, for Houdini to speak to us if he so desires, you know, from beyond the grave. Sometimes, late at night, if you listen to the song hard enough, you can hear his voice and the sad clanking of his chains. ⁱⁱ

Or, as the lyric in 'Dig, Lazarus, Dig!' has it:

*Well, I don't know what it is
But there's definitely something going on upstairs.*

Perhaps Nick Cave's sardonic yet profound sense of humour is indeed a fine, and very Australian, way of approaching the Lazarus story. After all, others of us must also have found the story somewhat creepy at times. A deep note of tragedy runs through it, particularly surrounding Lazarus himself. Much Christian tradition has for example held that, after his raising from the dead, Lazarus never smiled, such was the effect of what he had seen during his four days in the realms of death. Hence Nick Cave's lyrical injunctions to Lazarus to dig himself 'back into the hole'. For, in Cave's words, 'he never asked to be raised up from the tomb'. That is important for us, I believe, as we hear the three commands of Jesus which make up what my Aboriginal colleague named the *Lazarus Demand*.

For this is not a straightforward story, even when read symbolically and metaphorically. Rather it is a story which encourages us to wrestle with our own deep experiences of death-bearing and trauma: something which is not at all easy. There is indeed resurrection, extraordinary new life, in this. Yet it comes not only with challenge, but also with a human wrenching, which only the grace of God can really bear and enable us to live through.

In that spirit, let me therefore touch briefly on each of Jesus' three commands which lead us into Lazarus life.

Take away the stone

The first command is, in many ways, the most challenging: when Jesus says '*take away the stone.*' There is powerful truth here. Unless, and until, we face up to the forces of death we deny, we will never be free, either personally or as a society and world. Unless, and until, we truly uncover, for example, the impact of colonialism on the First Nations of these lands, then we, with First Nations people will never be free, and some will remain in tombs of death and despair.

Similarly, unless and until, we truly uncover the depths of transphobia and homophobia in our faith groups and wider society, all of us, with LGBTIQ+ people, will never be really free, and some of us will remain in tombs of death and despair. So, if there is anything good to have come out of the recent wave of highly publicised anti-trans attacks, perhaps it is this message. Whilst others avoid the pain, the despair, and the sheer death-dealing experienced by marginalised and abused people of all kinds, we can never be free. We must therefore take away the stones of denial in many areas of our social and personal lives. Yet how do we do this responsibly?

Anyone who has been in ministry, or experienced in any form of pastoral or psychological care, or political life, knows that dealing with death-dealing and trauma is not quite so easy as simply uncovering truth. How we do this matters. One of my former clergy colleagues was, for example, a powerful advocate of what is known as a behaviourist approach to caring for his own and others' trauma. We have to be pragmatic as well as prophetic, for we are not all Jesus! Or, at least, there are several ways to address death-dealing and trauma, alongside letting go of denial and speaking the truth. That is part of what some of us will be exploring this week in our Trauma workshop with members of Presbytery and others. How do we explore trauma-informed ways of giving life to the Lazarus among us and within each of us? How do we enable both safety as well as truth and healing? How do we help Lazarus live and smile again?

Come Out

Jesus' second command is addressed to Lazarus, and to those living today in death-dealing, trauma-filled, tombs, and those parts of each of us living with death-dealing and trauma. Jesus again speaks boldly: '*come out.*' What a vital invitation that is! I surely do not have to spell out to this congregation its obvious resonances for LGBTIQ+ people. Yet it is addressed to everyone. Again, best pastoral, psychological, and political practice might want to add something. No one should be encouraged to 'come out' to whatever they are called to be, without their own consideration of the possible ramifications. Nonetheless, it is so true that unless, and until, each of us comes out to receive the invitation to new life, we can never experience it. Too often, we & others, or at least parts of us, continue to remain unnecessarily in the shadows, or dwell too long on death-dealing and trauma: not stepping out, with the gracious light of God, into the greater light which can help transform us all.

Untie Lazarus and let them go

So how do we help others to 'come out' and to smile again? The third command of Jesus is crucial: 'untie Lazarus' he says 'and let them go'. Isn't that what First Nations people are asking of the rest of us? Don't just dwell on our pain and the death-dealing of the tombs. Yes, take away the stone. Face up to the truth, and the stink that comes with it. But, above all, untie us and let us go. That is what the Statement from the Heart, including the impetus behind the Voice, is all about. Too often, even when they have come out, marginalised people are still tied up in all kinds of strings: assumptions, stereotypes, ignorance, and a lack of resources and empowerment.

That, to be quite frank, is transgender people's greatest challenge too. Yes, it is good to have people finally realise something of the death-dealing and trauma they/we face daily. Yes, it is lovely to celebrate transgender visibility, trans coming out, not least on days like the Trans Day of Visibility on Friday. Above all, however, together with truth and recognition, trans people, like First Nations, and other marginalised people, need to be untied and let go to flourish – as indeed, we all do.

Who is Lazarus for you/us?

This great story has so many other amazing facets. Let me conclude however with a few more words about Lazarus himself. We will have to leave other aspects for another time, not least the extraordinary characterisation of the women in this story, and Jesus himself, including his tears.

What do you make of Lazarus however? Scholars have various ideas, including that Lazarus was a narrative creation, or perhaps 'the beloved disciple' – which would certainly help explain the depth of Jesus' weeping. Ancient traditions also have him going on to be a great evangelist: becoming either a missionary bishop in Cyprus, if you follow the Eastern Orthodox; or the first bishop of Marseilles, if you follow the Western Church. As we have briefly explored, others, including David Bowie and Nick Cave, have also had their say.

But what do you say? Who is Lazarus for you, for us, today?

Who do you/we need to release from the tomb?

Who do you/we need to see come out?

Who do you/we need to untie and let go? Perhaps it is someone we have struggled with for many years, or simply tried to ignore.

Or perhaps it is a part of our very selves we have also ignored: parts of ourselves which also need to experience the life-giving spirit of God's grace and active forgiveness.

Whoever, or whatever, it is, let us, each of us and together, take up the Lazarus Demand.

In the inexhaustible love, mystery, and freedom of God. Amen.

ⁱ See further <https://www.nme.com/news/music/nick-cave-and-the-bad-seeds-43-1351551>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*