

Foreshadowing Easter

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 6 April 2025

A Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Lent 5C

John 11: selected verses; John 12:1-8

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

After so much anticipation we are all disappointed that Vladimir could not be with us today. Nevertheless, his presence is felt in the unusual choice of two readings from the gospel of John. He must have had a particular plan in mind linking these two powerful stories as stages in the Lenten journey towards Easter. Indeed, the raising of Lazarus and the anointing of Jesus' feet foreshadow what is to come with Jesus death and burial.

I can't offer a fully developed reflection but a few personal thoughts which I hope will stimulate your own thinking and I'll finish with a meditation. There are two words which I can't help returning to frequently – "*profound*" and "*intimacy*". These two stories are very human stories filled with powerful feelings. They have a connecting setting, they both happen within the same, very unusual family in the Jewish culture, a family of unmarried adult siblings! It's clear that Jesus has a close, I could say, intimate relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Our reading today of the death and raising of Lazarus is based on selected verses. It's a very long and detailed episode in the gospel indicating its importance. There's an ambiguity at the heart of it that is not so clear in our version. Jesus lingers 2 days after hearing that Lazarus is ill. Why does he linger when the need is so great? He says: "*so the glory of God can be revealed*".

When the news arrives that he is dead, at first Jesus says, "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him*". The disciples said to him, "*Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.*" They knew that it was dangerous to go into Judea and thought this was an out. Then Jesus says plainly that Lazarus is dead and he must go immediately.

For Greeks hearing this they would immediately recognise the sequence of the "*temple sleep*" which was part of the initiation process in the Greek mystery temples. The neophyte, after years of training would go into a kind of death, suspended animation on a physical level but awake in the spiritual world. It usually lasted for three days. Then the hierophant would call them back to the body. (This is how the Egyptian initiates were able to bring back the knowledge to build the pyramids in alignment with the starry constellations.) After the stone was removed from the entrance to the cave where Lazarus lay, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "*Lazarus come out.*" When he did come out in restrictive grave cloths, Jesus calls, "*Unbind him, and set him free.*"

Perhaps the gospel writer is making the ultimate point that the old initiation processes are no longer relevant. Now, post-Golgotha and the tomb, with the resurrected Christ, the spirit is available to everyone. Christ is present with us always.

Of course, this is a profound story, symbolic on many levels. It speaks of our endings and beginnings in life, our little deaths and resurrections. That Christ calls us back to life in many situations. I think of American poet Sylvia Plath and her identification with this story in her poem *"Lady Lazarus"* written after she had survived her second suicide attempt. She wrote. *"Dying, is an art, like everything else. I do it exceptionally well."* What is very apparent is Jesus' empathy with the sisters; he is there, fully with them in their grief not a distant priestly figure.

This is a significant moment on the Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. After the raising of Lazarus some people believed in him and others went to the Jewish authorities and provoked a calling of the council to decide how to deal with this disruptive phenomenon.

For this penultimate Sunday in Lent Jesus comes to Bethany about 2 miles from Jerusalem. We are told it's 6 days before Passover. It will be an intense, turbulent few days. Here he finds a place of rest and recreation. The family, Mary, Martha and Lazarus hold a banquet and it seems that once again Martha does the work of serving; while Lazarus sits at table and Mary does an extraordinary thing, the profoundly intimate anointing of Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair as an expression of her deep love and devotion.

We're told the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. This is such a beautiful, sensual moment! Jesus accepts the generous gesture with grace and dismisses the critical voice of pragmatism. This affirms there can be moments of rest and relaxation along the journey and it foreshadows the women bringing ointments and balms to anoint the body of Jesus in the tomb.

Now we move into a time of meditation, an inner space of letting go of all that troubles or disturbs us, a place of inner calm where we find our peace. Where we find the spirit, the Christ within. In preparation I will read Jan Richardson's poem *"Beloved Is Where We Begin"*.

And so we prepare for Palm Sunday and the coming of our new supply minister.