

'Unbind him and let him go' (Passion Sunday March 28th 2020, The Raising of Lazarus)

Those of you who don't know St Mary's Maldon will not know my very dear friend, Cyrus Pugh. The exciting thing for me about my relationship with Cyrus, is that he is about 45 years younger than me. Unlike me, his upbringing has been almost totally secular. But a year ago I challenged him to start coming to church, which he has done faithfully. Cyrus is intelligent and questioning. Maybe he sees us not as we see ourselves. A leader of the Corrymeela Community, David Stevens, once said to a new member of staff, 'Keep telling me what you see while everything is still new'. Last summer we encouraged Cyrus to spend a week in the community of Taizé in France, which he loved. I think he would allow me to say that he is impressed by the Church and the gospel. He can see that Christianity helps people to become good and to lead meaningful lives. But I think he might also say that the gospel is truthful but not necessarily true, if that distinction makes sense to you. This week he asked me, quite by chance, because he didn't know that it was going to be today's reading, what I made of the story of the raising of Lazarus. And I had to give a very unimpressive answer, which was: 'when it's read as the gospel from the middle of the church, with all the people surrounding it's proclamation, it's true. It's authoritative. Jesus speaks and Jesus acts. But if you were to ask me the question in the middle of Maldon High Street on a Wednesday morning, I would be much less certain. I would say it is symbolic. St Paul tells us in his letters that we are raised with Christ; St John, the only gospel writer who gives us this account, is using a graphic story to give the same message as Paul. The believer is raised with Christ, how we are raised with Christ.'

'OK', said Cyrus, 'the whole of the Bible may be merely symbolic.'

Indeed, it may be. But that does not prevent quite a lot of it being factually true. Including the story that is most like the raising of Lazarus, that is the Resurrection of Jesus.

Cyrus was not convinced. I couldn't just put a fence round the Resurrection of Jesus to prevent the whole Christian story come crashing down. Now this is where Cyrus and I parted company. There isn't time here for enough detail to satisfy some of you. But it is a matter, among other things, of historical evidence. Even if it were true, the historical evidence for the raising of Lazarus is extremely weak. This is the only place where it is reported and it is referred to nowhere else. The historical evidence for the literal raising of Jesus, is very strong. Were I to preach a 25-minute sermon and not a 12 minute one, I would tell you why I believe that to be the case. But the problem is, historical evidence doesn't actually interest people whose minds are made up. If historical evidence doesn't catch people's imagination, it doesn't help. How often have I started my explanation before noticing that my conversation partner isn't listening? The 17th century English philosopher, Francis Bacon, famously said:

"'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer."

To be fair to the secular world, why should you stay for an answer? 2000 years ago the gospel set the world on fire. 150 years ago, socialism tried to do the same thing and with some permanent good results, though like Western Christianity, it became exhausted. Communism and Nazism tried to overthrow the world and got close to destroying it. Today

Christianity, especially in the West, is seriously weakened. We ask the dominant secular world to give us a little niche on the edge of society, where we can go on being kind to people without giving offence. If we were a movement and not an institution; if we were plotting to take on the world; if we were plotting the overthrow of Satan; if we were inexplicable outside of the livingness of God, more people might consider the death and resurrection of Jesus worthy of their interest.

If Jesus is risen; if we are risen, if communities of faith are transforming the world, which, without doubt, some are, then story of the resurrection of Lazarus itself is a story that matters. When I watch King Lear or Hamlet brilliantly acted, I am drawn into to the terror and the mystery and the wonder. It is my life that is at stake. The story is truthful. But for me, the gospel goes one stage further. It is not merely truthful. It is true.

What are the truths in the story of Lazarus, and indeed, in the story of the Valley of Dry Bones, for today?

Imagine a brave but frightened hospital worker sharing a live streamed mass before going to work this morning, and listening carefully to Jesus saying of Lazarus, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory.' And that worker suddenly feeling empowered. At the end of their energy, at the end of their breath, receiving the breath which is the Spirit of God. Have you ever, at the end of your tether, felt something else taking over?

The scientist/theologian Teilhard de Chardin, was a stretcher bearer on the Western Front in the First War. One day, trying to bring the wounded to safety, he suddenly had what he was absolutely convinced was certain knowledge, that he was not going to be hurt. What are we to make of such a claim to knowledge? Teilhard was a Darwinian palaeontologist. He was not naïve. But he also knew what Pascal knew, that 'the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of.'

At the end of the story of the raising of Lazarus, the story which I really do not believe at 11 o' clock on a Wednesday morning as I walk down Maldon High, Jesus says the words,

'Unbind him and let him go.'

Those words are not newspaper reportage. They go deep down inside. Jesus commands the church to go out into the world and unbind people and let them free. How are we doing that? I can think of loads of stories in which our faith has set people free. I am sure you can too. Amen.