

Today we have the finale of what's called, 'The seven signs in John's gospel.' These are seven great acts that Jesus did during his life that point to who he is. Through these we see more about God. Jesus has changed water into wine, he's healed a royal official's son, he's healed a paralytic, fed 5000 people, walked on water and healed a man who was born blind, and then finally, in this story he raises a man called Lazarus from the dead.

In all these 'signs' Jesus is shown as the one whom even nature obeys. He is seen as the one who can be turned to when all else fails and there is no Plan B. He is the one who provides food for the hungry, but not in a minimalist fashion – he provides excess and he provides wine for a party! He is the one who makes and breaks the laws of nature in order to right wrongs and bring blessing to his people.

So today we have the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Death is always a tragedy, and this one as well as being a tragedy for Lazarus and his close family, was also a personal tragedy for Jesus because Lazarus was his friend. We have a touching picture of Jesus, the man who was God living among us, crying with grief at the grave of his friend. What an amazing thought; that death even grieves God!

We may well ask the question that if death upsets God so much, why doesn't he stop it. And in fact we'd be in good company – this is exactly the question asked in verse 37: 'But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"' I don't have time to go into that question today, but just to say this: If this was a knock-down question pointing to the non-existence of God and the falsehood of Jesus, then there's no way the writer of the Gospel would have included it! In fact, it made the editing cut, probably for two reasons – one, it actually happened and people actually questioned exactly that issue – it's not a new question. And two, somehow the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead goes some way to helping us with our picture of the issue.

Jesus takes control of the situation and orders the tomb opened, despite everyone knowing that this was a bad idea. There follows a statement about seeing God's glory, before Jesus loudly orders Lazarus to come out. We then have a fairly comedy situation of a man leaving his tomb all bound up in grave shrouds, unable to see clearly because his face is still wrapped up; but very much alive! Jesus commands that he be unbound and let go.

There are two things about this strange and amazing situation that struck me. One is the statement about the glory of God. I need to be really clear - this isn't a complete answer to the question of the suffering and death we see in the world around us, particularly with the current Covid-19 pandemic, but there is something that can be said. In this instance, Lazarus's death brought the crowd into a greater knowledge of the glory of God as he was raised from the dead again. This is very different from saying that God killed Lazarus as a party trick. But it is to say that sometimes out of tragedy God's glory can be demonstrated. It doesn't make it 'right' or 'worth it' necessarily, but we can be brought into a greater understanding of God through the bad things as well as the good things in life.

The second thing that struck me is the phrase 'Unbind him and let him go.' Lazarus was unbound from the garments that signified his death and then he was released into new life. In this, we have the Christian faith in miniature. It is the promise that although we may die in this world, Jesus has the power to unbind the grip that death has upon us and release us into a new and everlasting life.

For Lazarus's family and friends, there was celebration, awe and wonder at what had happened. Lazarus remained mortal and eventually did die again; his was only a partial new life. His resurrection was a sign which pointed to Jesus, as the one who wields power over death itself, and who then went on to die for us and for the whole world, and then rose again to a new and everlasting life; this is the sign of our hope.

For those of us who follow Jesus there is the expectation of new life and there is the glory of resurrection awaiting all of us, despite the tragedy of death. Death remains a tragic and fearful thing, and Jesus wept for his friend. However, death is certainly not the end. Ultimately, it does not bind us just like Lazarus was released from his deathly garments. We look forward to a day where we and all who believe in Jesus are raised to the greatest party of the glory of God every imagined. A party which will make the wonder and awe of Lazarus's family and friends seem completely insignificant. Thank God for this future. Amen.