

Expectant Uncertainty

Pitt Street Uniting Church 2 April 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Elizabeth Watson

Lent 5A

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11: 1-45;

Contemporary Reading: "Angels" by Mary Oliver in *Blue Horses*

A few weeks ago, I received an email from Avaaz, the international Internet campaign network and activist organisation. The email highlighted the plight of a community that lives on the hilltops of the village of Bethany in modern Israel, an indigenous community threatened with the bulldozing of their entire village and their removal from their land.

My interest was especially piqued by the fact that Avaaz had framed that call for action and support by reminding readers that 2000 years ago, it was in this exact spot that '*Jesus Christ was said to have brought Lazarus back to life*'. Now, 2000 years later, says Avaaz, '*these brave families are not going quietly but taking a huge risk, rising up against the bulldozers by non-violently "sitting-in" their homes and refusing to move*'. The email goes on...

'They're betting on a miracle: (i.e.,) that their act of courage will inspire people around the world to help stop the bulldozers before they crush them.'

It is certainly a dramatic backdrop to a very concerning case of powerful interests attempting to over-ride the rights of those who stand in their way.

The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead by Jesus is well known. It is one of those stories that might be said to have been incorporated into everyday language and metaphor. We could name several other miracles - turning water into wine, feeding the 5000, walking on water - that have acquired a similar status. Stories of this kind have a particular attraction for us, it would seem. They are memorable, startling, perplexing. Thus the very name of Lazarus (and remember there were two 'Lazaruses') is immediately associated in the minds of many with a miracle, a miracle which is nothing if not extraordinarily dramatic.

It is one of those stories we might call emblematic. It has become more than simply a story - it has become an emblem of resurrection - resurrection from the dead. Remember the title of the book by John Howard on his return to the leadership of his party and the prime ministership, *Lazarus Rising*. It is but one telling example. We know what it means - what it's about.

The miracle of the raising of Lazarus occurs only in John's gospel. It is the last of the miracles that Jesus performs before the Passion and his own resurrection.

It is a long story. I remind you of some of its significant features:

- You will have realised that Jesus and his disciples had fled from Judea to escape those who threatened their very lives.
- The receiving of news of the serious illness of Jesus' close friend, Lazarus.
- The delay of two days before setting out for Bethany, Lazarus' home.
- The news upon arrival outside the village that Lazarus has been dead for 4 days.
- The moving but blunt, almost accusative, greeting on the part of Lazarus' two sisters, one after the other: *'If you had been here (our) brother would not have died'*.
- That rather odd interruption of the story to include a brief, but potent, theological discussion between Martha and Jesus in which Jesus makes the decisive claim – *'I am the resurrection and the life...'*
- Martha's equally emphatic response in which she names Jesus as both Messiah and Son of God – the first time these two critical claims are brought together. John, in telling his story, has a woman be the first to make this crucial statement of faith in Jesus.
- The account of Jesus being deeply moved by the sisters' grief and he, himself, weeping.
- Finally, is the actual raising of Lazarus. Jesus asks for the stone to be moved from the opening into the tomb and calls out, *'Lazarus, come out'*! Lazarus emerges still wrapped in his grave clothes – strips of linen binding him from head to toe. Jesus asks that the grave clothes be removed and Lazarus set free.

A dramatic story by any reckoning.

The raising of Lazarus is the climax of (what have been called) John's 7 signs – the 7 miracles recounted in his gospel. It is a pivotal miracle. It starts the chain of events that leads to the crucifixion – a resurrection of one man that, in John's account, and in his language, leads to the death of the Son of God.

The raising of Lazarus is a miracle to end all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus is not a miracle in that same sense that the raising of Lazarus is. It is beyond and above and of another dimension altogether. But it is John's eighth sign. And Lazarus' resuscitation/resurrection presages that crucial event in the Christian story.

So, now in the second decade of the twenty-first century, what are we to do with this startling story and how are we to make sense of miracles more generally? If you go looking, you will find that many have attempted to take the Lazarus story entirely at face value and interpret it literally. Some of those literal interpretations see it as a wonderful event that actually happened. Others have seen it as fraudulent. As one commentator phrased it, *'this miracle has been assailed by all schools of hostile critics (and) ingenuity has been exhausted in inventing objections to it'*.

This is not particularly helpful in my view. In fact, I would want to argue that such attempts are futile and in a sense completely irrelevant; they are beside the point. All miracle stories are of another dimension. They are stories – they are myths in the most exacting and important sense of that word; they are rich metaphor and symbol; they are many-layered, truth-speaking, truth-affirming parable. They are there in the Biblical account to reveal important aspects of the character and life of the man Jesus and so also to tell us about the character of God; they represent the efforts of various human narrators struggling to understand those big questions and to answer them for themselves and for others.

Nevertheless, for many people this is not easy territory. There is a sceptic in most of us. We have been ‘tutored’ to be thus in our culture. It is not a culture at ease with miracle stories and myth. This is not a necessarily a bad thing and indeed a healthy scepticism is something we might well prize, in ourselves and in others.

So, for me, the question becomes, where or how does scepticism and the analytical, the probing, inquiring, rational part of each of us fit, find a place, in this world of miracle and metaphor and myth. And is ‘fit’ quite the right image here?

Albert Einstein offers a warning of sorts – another metaphoric statement, one I have always rather liked:

‘We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality.’

So, given the nature of the story as miracle, and myth and metaphor, we might need to add to our questions...how are we to learn afresh to immerse ourselves in mystery and be comfortable there, and nourished?

These questions may test us all the more in a time when we are becoming accustomed to the notion of a ‘sham world’ of ‘alternative facts’, ‘post-truth’, ‘fake media’. This is a world that provides little or no room for careful questioning, subtle argument, probing inquiry and you could add a whole lot of other things as well.

But there is also little room in such a world for a consideration of myth, properly understood, or of mystery and metaphor.

So, what are we to make of this powerful and dramatic account of Lazarus being raised from the dead, this wonderful, rich miracle story? What is the good news here - for us, 2000 years later?

The good news is not that miracles happen; they do, of course. But, as I have already suggested, it seems irrelevant in this instance. The good news is that in this story we are invited to immerse ourselves in this multi-layered, rich, disturbing yet life-affirming story, this unsettling and vivid metaphor. And most particularly, the good news relates to what it is we might garner when we do. After all, this Biblical story about the raising of Lazarus is a metaphor for life itself. There is so much to revel in here.

However, and given the time constraints, I’m going to talk about the shortest passage in the Bible: *‘Jesus wept’*. I want to look more closely at Jesus’ response to Martha and Mary’s profound grief, their overwhelming sorrow. Jesus is said to have been *‘deeply moved’*. A number of commentaries point out that the Greek word here means something much closer to righteous anger. That was a new insight for me. But it raises more questions. If Jesus was angry, with whom was he angry and why?

Some commentators have argued that Jesus was angry because everyone was crying and that meant that they had no faith in him. Barbara Brown Taylor, in one of her reflections on this passage, suggests that it is hard to believe that this is the whole story. She wonders whether, and she names it as her own *'wild and subjective guess, his tears were for the whole world, tears so full of anger and sadness that it was hard to tell where one left off and the other began'*, to use Taylor's own words. She goes on, *'He wept tears for his friends, Martha and Mary in their grief; tears over the loss of his friend Lazarus; tears about the frailty of life and the randomness with which it was snuffed out; tears that no one seemed to understand what he was about, much less believe it; tears over the enormity of what he had been given to do and how alone he was.'*

I have said that I think of this story as a metaphor for life. So in some ways it is not unexpected that there should be encapsulated here, in this story, a sharp juxtaposition of, on the one hand, a story that speaks of new life, and, on the other, a hard, gritty reminder of the inevitability of death.

Clearly this miracle story is in many respects very this-world, this-life focussed, as are the gospel stories more generally. So one powerful message here is about new, resurrected life, new beginnings, being possible for us all; indeed, promised to us all, even in the face of our doubts and fears and confusion. This is wonderfully positive and hope-filled and we must take hold of it and seek to live out of that understanding of life, of abundant life.

But here, at the same time, there is a heightening, in this story, of issues to do with the inevitability of death and our fear of it. If it prompts questions about how we are to live our lives, it also raises the perennial question of how are we to face our own deaths. And how are we to live with the certain knowledge of that inevitability. Lazarus may have been raised from the dead but it is clear that he, as with the rest of us, will now have to go on through the whole business of dying again. And that will be a final exit.

The human response to the reality that we all die has most often been one of fear, of feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.

And when death is seen to have come suddenly to those who are young or relatively so, or to people like us just going about their ordinary lives, as in the London terrorist attack a week ago, or when we, or someone close to us, are confronted with the diagnosis of a degenerative condition or terminal illness or something of that order - something that seems entirely random, our response is so very often: *why me? Why them? Why this? Why now? How unfair!*

And then, perhaps: *they've always looked after themselves and been so prudent and careful. They don't deserve this!* The Psalms ring with these same cries, these outbursts and entreaties and accusations directed at Yahweh. 'It is the ancient, ancient cry of the human heart'. Life in all its randomness and uncertainty slaps us in the face. And when we're not given a reason, when we can't make sense of what happens, this is when, as Barbara Brown Taylor reflects, we feel most abandoned, forsaken. Strong words, strong, strong questions to pose *'to the ruler of the universe'*, in Taylor's words.

Yet we are in good company. The patriarchs (and no doubt a goodly number of matriarchs of whom we know nothing) and the prophets and even Jesus himself have joined us in these strong words and powerful feelings. *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

The Christian life is based on the idea of stepping out in faith, living each day trusting that God is dependable, regardless of whether or not we can make sense of the universe, of whether we understand what it is all about. As Taylor says, we are asked simply to *'give up the illusion that we are in control of our lives and step out'*. More than that, we are asked to step out without a net. Which is why, perhaps, it is called a leap of faith, she speculates. And why I, using Richard Holloway's words, have entitled this reflection, *'expectant uncertainty'*.

The biologist, Charles Birch (some of you will have known him), wrote that...

'To take risks is the safest thing for a Christian to do. The sturdiest faith comes out of a struggle with doubt.'

One thing I know for sure: in the business of living, one must not live by certainties but by visions, risks and passions.

Visions: to see the future in hope and expect the best from people and situations.

Risks: to venture forth in faith and not to count the cost.

Passion: to feel with all one's heart, to show emotion, to share one's deepest experiences.

This is to be saved by hope.'

Birch's message is about the call to live well, now, to embrace the abundant life, to take hold of the promise of the Kingdom. So we return to the other theme in this miracle story, this metaphor for life, new life, resurrected life. It is a call to live fully, not to waste our time in ways that are not fully life-affirming, loving, grace-filled, hopeful. They may be pretty demanding yardsticks (they are) but it would be difficult to see them as other than fundamental markers of the Christian life.

We only have the one life.

As Mary Oliver asks...

'Tell me what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life.'

Chris Budden reminded us recently in Elenie Poulos' farewell from UnitingJustice:

'Our faith is about the way we inhabit the world'. He went on... 'justice, mercy, faithful walking with God and loving our neighbours as we wish to be loved ourselves, that's the character, the life, the being, of those of us that claim the name Christian'.

In the town of Bethany, two thousand years after the miracle of Jesus' raising of Lazarus, a second miracle is desperately needed. Those villagers living in modern Bethany are holding out for, hoping for, no doubt praying for, a miracle. It is a miracle that only other people, good, justice-seeking people around the world, can deliver.

This miracle is about justice for our neighbours who are in sore need of it. And about so much more...

And so, with God's help, and sustained by one another, we need to get on with loving our neighbour and loving the world that God so loves.

We have miracles to perform.

Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God,
give us probing and piercing minds
eager to ask questions,
to ask why and why not,
minds content with the certainty of doubt;
but also minds that delight
in myth, miracle and metaphor,
that are willing to sit quietly with word and
image,
to embrace and be nourished by mystery.

Give us big-hearted and expansive minds;
open us up to ways to be kinder,

to be readier to step into the shoes of our
neighbour,
and the shoes of those we do not warm to
or like at all.

And help us to hear afresh,
to absorb into every particle of our being,
the good news
that we, and all God's people,
indeed, all of creation,
are loved beyond reckoning,
and that we are held in safe hands.
Always.

AMEN

References

Birch, Charles (1993), *Regaining Compassion for Humanity and Nature*, Chalice Press, St. Louis, P.39.

Taylor, Barbara Brown, 'Without a Net', in *Mixed Blessings*, Cowley Publications, Lanham, USA, 1986,1998, pp.109-115.