



*Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

Isaiah 43: 18-19

We are all living in a way that we have never lived before. Perhaps in a way that we have only dreamt of, after having read Stephen King's novel *The Stand*. When fiction comes close to being a living reality, it stops being entertainment. It becomes rather like a weather forecast of a storm warning – a prediction of what maybe to come. (I pray that the predictions of this novel do not come to be realised!)

How are you finding life at the moment?

To Jane and me it seems to change hour by hour, as news of shop closures or some new restriction comes into force, or we hear some new event on the news. It can be hard to stay positive sometimes, and it is almost impossible to plan ahead. Yet, there is a

joy in discovering what our lives have been missing. The simple pleasure to be found in a cup of tea or coffee. Standing in the sunshine, of recent days, enjoying God's creation and having time to enjoy the Spring taking place. Hearing the beautiful sound of the 'dawn chorus' or just being able to quite simply help someone in need. Perhaps someone you never knew or really took notice of!

The 15th century Byzantine Ikon of 'The Raising of Lazarus' (at the top of this paper) depicts graphically our gospel this Sunday. In the Orthodox East. 'Lazarus Saturday' marks the end of Lent and the beginning of Passiontide. (You will not need me to tell you that this Sunday, Lent 4, is Passion Sunday). In chapter 10 of John's gospel it would appear that no one was convinced to come forward and become a follower of Jesus after His talk on sheep and shepherds. Instead it makes present the intent to murder Jesus that has been simmering away since chapter 5. The bitter irony of John's gospel is that true believers are found outside the place where tradition understood God to live in great glory! As in the original exodus, many found faith in the desert apart from the institutions of government and cult. Could this be the message for the church today? For we are unable to worship in our usual buildings. Instead we worship God in the ecclesial desert of our homes, but perhaps this liturgical wilderness will turn out to be 'The Promised Land', and the Salvation of the church? We must journey on to discover this land...

Jesus' mission has not been going well. In the last chapter Jesus went to the other side to escape arrest for the Jews did not recognise Him. In v8 of our gospel we learn from the disciples "*the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again*". Jesus is to risk His life by returning to the land of the faithless. We can gather that the disciples are obviously not going to return with Jesus to Judea, and there is an irony that the Jews in v 19 had come to see Lazarus in the tomb, those who had previously wanted to put Jesus there! (We are not going to hear from the disciples again until v 54 where they are said to be near the wilderness in a town called Ephraim.) So we return to our Ikon...

The irony that the 'God of life' is at the tomb would not be lost on the Early Church believers. Our gospel can be seen as a forerunner of what will take place in Holy Week during our Lord's Passion. From the tomb of death will spring forth 'Life!' As Jesus said to Martha:

²⁵... *'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,* ²⁶*and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*

It is helpful to know that Lazarus's name comes from the Hebrew *eleazer* "God helps"¹ because this is just what is to happen. You will notice that Jesus, in our Ikon is clothed completely in blue. This colour would have been painted using an expensive mineral pigment powdered *lapis lazuli*.² It depicts Jesus in His divine role as Creator, calling Lazarus back to life: 'Lazarus, Come out!' v 43. The shepherd is calling His sheep by name. Will Lazarus? Will you, come out? The unbinding of Lazarus allows us to see that Lazarus has been set free from all that bound him in his old life. He returns to a new life! The binding of Lazarus' hands and feet alert us to his inability to help himself. His burial clothes are the work of human tradition and culture, which in this case see death as something to be shrouded from sight and not looked upon again. Our Ikon illustrates how Jesus can act in our lives when life appears hopeless, and there is apparently no light – when life is as dark as a tomb. Jesus calls you and I by name - if only we make time to hear His voice. To be effective we must cooperate with Jesus' calling to us. We must do His will and not be bound by tradition and culture.

As we meet, separately this Sunday, in Spirit, as the 'body of Christ'. God is calling us to a new life a new beginning. We must accept the call to be different. We must take risks, in Jesus' name, as the old ways of being are left behind. However, we can take comfort that God is with us. He understands our sufferings. Just as He recognised the grief in Martha and Mary and acted. This is not a 'last stand', but a new beginning. Amen.

¹ R. Brown 1966, 422

² Jesus is usually depicted in garments of two colours illustrating His being both God and man.