Sunday 29th March 2020
John 11.17-44

*‘Suddenly there are miracles everywhere…’*
The Gospel reading set for today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, takes us to the village of Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem which seems to have been a second home to Jesus because of the hospitality and friendship of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It was usually a place of respite and laughter. Yet death is the great ‘interrupter’ and today Bethany is frozen in grief.

That’s because Lazarus died before his ‘time’.

Throughout our world this Lent the Pandemic is bringing a lot of fear and, for some, an immense sense of loss.

In a message to the people of New York after 9/11 the Queen said: *Grief is the price you pay for love*. I think it’s probably the most profound thing she’s said during her long reign. And in today’s passage it becomes clear that Lazarus was much beloved – he was loved by his sisters, his village and by his friend Jesus.

In today’s Gospel Jesus stands outside Lazarus’ tomb and does two things which brings me great encouragement during the tough times in which we find ourselves.

First of all, he says: *I am the resurrection and the life.*

I think everything about God breaths with life. We describe him as the One who ‘in the beginning’ breathed life into our world. Life and wholeness – these are the characteristics that define the nature of God and God’s activity among us. We discover the best in ourselves in striving to love others.

The second thing Jesus does is cry. ‘Jesus wept’. Isn’t it significant that the first editors of the New Testament thought that was enough of a statement to make it into a complete verse?

This was a whole village event; they were all near tears. Jesus seems to be aware of that. The atmosphere is full of sadness and so, Jesus weeps alongside them.

Jesus shows us the ‘Christlike God’. The God who carries our burdens and shares our tears. Not a detached and stoical God, but a loving God who feels our sorrows and enfolds us at our lowest moments in his compassion.

Jesus does something very wonderful here – he calls to Lazarus by name. ‘Lazarus come out…’ Isn’t that a moment to cherish.

I like to think that, as Paul says, whether we live or die, God calls us by name and offers us his life – just as Jesus summoned Lazarus from the tomb by calling his name that day in Bethany.

He offers us his life too. He calls us, Ian, Mary, David, Carol…he calls you and me to share his risen life. I am the resurrection and the life, said Jesus. Right now, in the here and now, he calls us to live that life of love and service.

And then, in the words of a much loved funeral prayer, as the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, he calls us again as he welcomes us into his nearer presence.

I have found myself beginning to view life differently since the Pandemic. I think I’ve started to place a higher appreciation on ordinary things. Sensing how fragile life is perhaps helps us all to appreciate it more.

Victor Frankl, the Austrian holocaust survivor, said much the same thing. In an episode during his later life he was pronounced clinically dead before recovering. He writes: *Suddenly everything gets precious, gets piercingly important. You get stabbed by things – by flowers and babies and beautiful things, just the very act of living…suddenly there are miracles everywhere.*

I wonder how Lazarus felt the day after, the week after, the year after this life-giving moment in Bethany? Did he too, see miracles everywhere.

What we know is that just a few chapters further along in John’s gospel we meet Lazarus once more, this time serving at table. He was now using his life to bless others and by serving them he was serving God.

May that sense of gratitude become a balance to our fears during these challenging days.

Days in which, praise God, we are also seeing the best in people everywhere, even as we seek, together and with God’s help, to do Church and Community differently, yet always with love and service at the centre.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 26th March 2020*