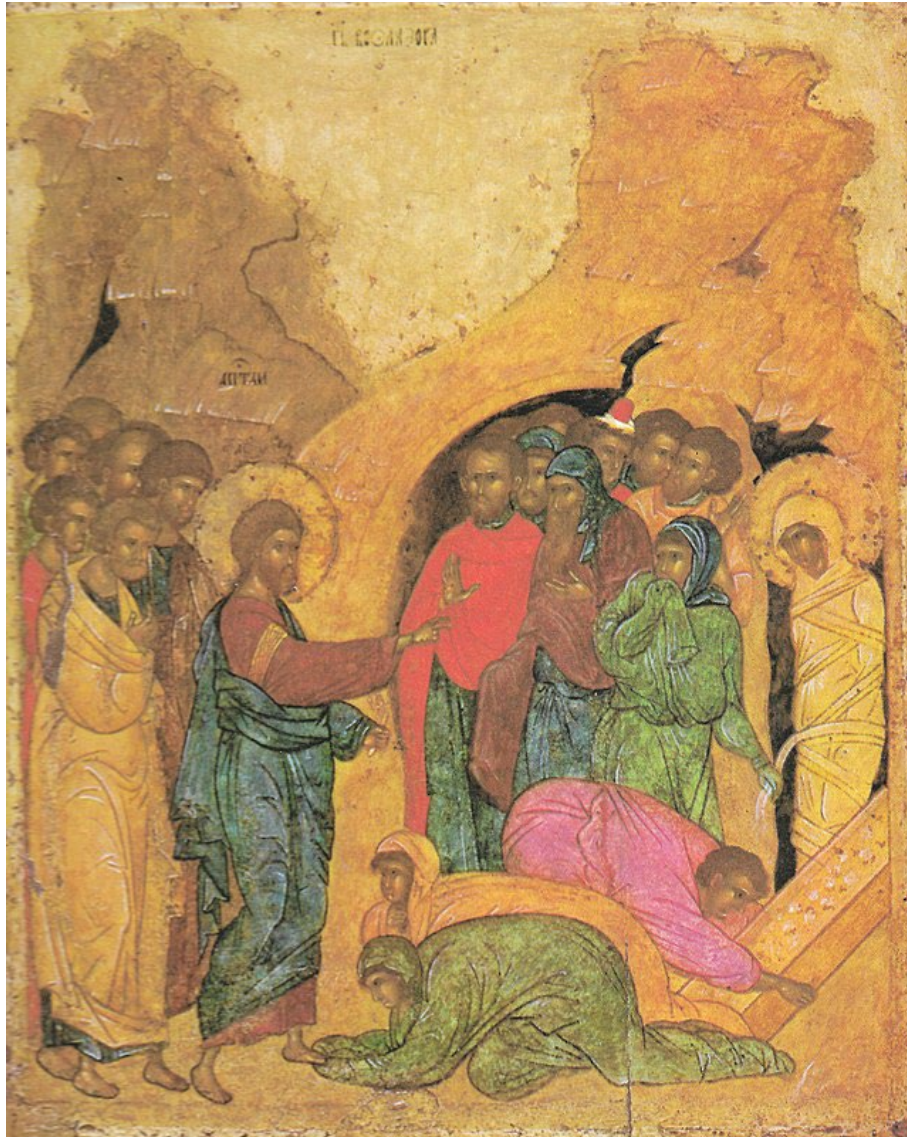


Discipleship, Illumination and New Life – a short Scripture series focusing on the Key Gospels of Lent Year A



'Lazarus, come out!'
John 11:43

This Lent our Liturgy follows the Gospel of Matthew. In particular, we hear the accounts of Jesus and the woman of Samaria, the Healing of the Blind Bartimaeus and the raising of Lazarus.

John Huntriss, Scripture Scholar reflects on each of these Gospel accounts and offers us some questions to ponder. Listen to the video and then take some time to quietly reflect. You may wish to do this with other people in your parish or simply as a time of personal prayer. We suggest that you:

1. Read the Gospel
2. Watch the Video
3. Ponder the questions offered. Below follows John's text.

VIDEO THREE

TO PONDER John 11:1-16

What do you make of St. Thomas? He deserves a few minutes' thought. He is one of several people who are merely named by Matthew, Mark, and Luke; but John gives them a moment or two in the spotlight, and perhaps a few words to say. Thomas has three such moments.

First, this, in 11: 16. He comes over as a doggedly loyal pessimist, rather the Eeyore of the Twelve. Then, 14:5 where he is puzzled and asks, "Lord, we do not know where you are going: how can we know the way?" Finally, the end of 20. He was missing when Jesus came on Easter Sunday evening, and he needed more than the testimony of the other apostles if he was to believe. A week later, Jesus comes again, and helps him to believe. His response: "My Lord and my God!" It looks as if the book originally ended at this point (21 being added soon after); and if that is so, it was a very powerful ending indeed. Nobody else in any of the Gospel accounts so directly calls Jesus "God".

Thomas needed to be sure before he believed (nothing wrong with that), but once he was convinced his confession of faith went further than any other. This is the man who, tradition says, travelled all the way to India and planted the Gospel in Kerala. (Acts shows the Gospel spreading north and west: Thomas was one of many who went in other directions.)

What is meant by the glory of God in 11 :4 (& 40)?

God tells Moses in Exodus 33:20 that "Man shall not see me and live". He is invisible to our sight, but there are visible signs of his presence. There is the cloud which surrounded the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:7-10) and led the people through the desert; filled the sanctuary (Exodus 40:34-38) and Solomon's Temple (I Kings 8: 10-13) at their consecration and received Jesus from the apostles' sight at his ascension (Acts 1 :9).

Clouds of incense may remind us of this cloud veiling the God who is there but may not be seen. The "glory" of God in Ezekiel is more than an abstract idea. It is something visible, in 43: 1-5 returning to the Temple at its restoration after the time of exile in Babylon. At the end of the vision in 1, Ezekiel sees a light which looks like the "glory" of God.

John 1: 14 tells us that when the Word was made flesh, "we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father". His glory is the glory of the Father (8: 54). We cannot see the Father, but if we see his Son, then we have seen him (1: 18 & 14:9). When Jesus performed his first miracle, at the wedding in Cana, he "revealed his glory" (2: 11).

Today's story is the climax and culmination of a series of miracles in the first half of the book. Twice (11 :4 & 40) we are told that the glory of God will be revealed in what is about to happen.

The second half of the book will tell of the ultimate revelation of God's glory, in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. 12:23 the long awaited "hour" (remember 4:21 & 23) has come, when the Son of Man will be glorified. 17 is Jesus' prayer on the eve of his Passion. It opens with the themes of the "hour" and of glory; and glory is mentioned again in 17:22 & 24.

TO PONDER JOHN 11:17-37

Martha's words in 27 are one of the great confessions of faith which punctuate this book.

Others include:

Andrew (1:41)

Nathanael (1:49)

Peter (6:68)

John (20:8) - so very understated that you'd easily miss it, but all the more moving for that. "This was the instant when I knew."

Thomas (20:28) not forgetting the people of the Samaritan town (4:42) and the man born blind (9: 38).

What do we mean by faith?

The Greek word can be translated as "faith", "belief ", "trust". In the Greek original, it is the word at the head of the Creed we say at Sunday Mass: we might sometimes remember as we say it that this means "I trust ..." as well as "I believe ...". It is of the heart as well as of the head. To "believe in..." is not the same as to "believe that ..."

Look at Peter in 6:68. He is nowhere near to full understanding yet: only after Easter and Pentecost will the whole picture become clear. But we see that already he has grasped the essential thing: he knows he just has to be with Jesus and to listen to him. Without using the word, he is close to calling Jesus the Messiah.

In Matthew 16:13 he confesses straight out that Jesus is the Messiah. We see very soon after that he has a great deal still to learn of what that is going to mean, but that is hardly surprising at this stage. Peter shows us how faith can come before understanding. You can believe something before you can prove it - if you ever do get to prove it. So, faith is in no way opposed to the intellect: it is absolutely not like Alice's White Queen in "Through the Looking-Glass" who says "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Our Lady showed faith like Peter's at the wedding at Cana. "Do whatever he tells you", she said to the servants (John 2:5). She did not know what Jesus would do, but she trusted him.

"Keep thou my feet," wrote St. John Henry Newman: "I do not ask to see the distant scene: one step enough for me."

TO PONDER JOHN 11:38-45

The raising of Lazarus (and of the widow of Nain's son, and of Jairus's daughter) are a reprieve, a further lease of this life. This is not at all the same as the Resurrection of Jesus. But those miracles do point ahead to that greatest of wonders: they show that God has power even over death.

We might just think again about the importance in the Gospel of real hard evidence, It is easy to read or hear the Gospel as a beautiful, indeed an inspiring story. But it is more. It is not a fairy tale. It is not wishful thinking. The writers are telling us that these things happened. They want us to think, "How do I respond?"

Four days: Lazarus should have been starting to rot. As Martha said, your nose (and your eyes) would have told you so. He had been dead, very dead; and now he is not. As you walk round Bethany, you might well meet this man who was dead, very dead, and now is not remotely dead. A man who had never seen now can see. You might meet him in the street too, but now he'd see you coming. If someone has left an unexpected pile of rubbish in the street, he'll no longer trip over it. He'll see it.

Jack Sullivan was crippled with back pain. He could hardly move. He faced giving up all hope of completing his studies and being ordained deacon. Then, by the prayers of John Henry Newman (as the Church has accepted) he was suddenly healed; and here he is in the procession into Westminster Cathedral for the Mass, and here he is again at the Beatification Mass, walking like the rest of us, and ministering as a deacon. Peter and John at the beginning of the Acts are healing people. How? they are asked. By the power of the risen Jesus, they reply. The authorities are furious with frustration. They'd gone to all the trouble of having Jesus killed to put an end to his movement, and still it won't go away: indeed, it seems to be rapidly growing ...

Some of those who believed you might try to dismiss as credulous simpletons, but not all of them. People varied then, as now. There were intelligent and sceptical people who were persuaded, as there are now.

A final question: quite impossible to answer, but nevertheless worth considering –

What might it have been like to come face-to-face with the Incarnate Word of God, True God since before eternity, and now become True Man?

We vary greatly from one another: still, he looked like one of us because he had become one of us. He is True God and True Man. Hold on equally to both of those, and you won't go off the rails in considering this question. He is not partly God and partly Man, not sometimes God and sometimes Man. He is simply True God and True Man.

Most of us will occasionally have met people who have a special sort of presence, in a way not easily put into words. Do we see in the Gospel records that people found something special about the presence of Jesus? How (if at all) might it be described? what was this something special? What was it about him that enabled him to part a hostile crowd and walk away unmolested in Luke 4:28-30? How do you read his confrontation with Pilate in John 19:9-12? his eloquent silence? Who is the more flustered? and who the more calm? Who seems to be in control? What was it like for the woman at the well to look Jesus in the eye? or for the man who had been blind?