

First Sunday after Trinity
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St. Matthew's Church
18 June 2006

1928 Book of Common Prayer Propers
Epistle: 1 John 4:7-21
Gospel: Luke 16:19-31

The mentioning of the name Lazarus to anyone vaguely familiar with the New Testament conjures up images of the dead being raised to life or thoughts of life after death as related by Jesus in his parables. It is thus appropriate, or God's incredible sense of timing and humor, that this should be the appointed Gospel text for my first homily since experiencing being dead myself for some ten minutes or so just a few short months ago.

In the New Testament, there are two accounts of a man identified as Lazarus. Saint John's Gospel (Jn. 11:1-46) tells us of a person named Lazarus of Bethany who died as a result of some unidentified illness. This Lazarus was a real person. He was the brother of Mary and Martha. After being dead four days, Jesus arrived in Bethany. Jesus then called Lazarus to come forth from his grave and he was immediately resurrected from the dead in response to the words of Jesus. We do not know much more about this Lazarus and his life after death experience other than the chief priests consulted as to whether to put him to death also because of his testimony that Jesus had raised him from the dead (Jn. 12:9-10).

In this morning's Gospel from Saint Luke (Lk. 16:19-31), Jesus introduces us to another Lazarus. This time, it is in the course of a parable – a story told to make a point. The Lazarus of Jesus' parable suffered from poverty, was full of sores, and was ill fed. We are told that he was a beggar who spent his earthly existence lying at the rich man's gate each day looking for a handout of some leftover crumbs. This Lazarus died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom and received consolation in the world to come.

The name of a person in Biblical times was deemed to be greatly significant. The name 'Lazarus' in Greek means 'helpless'. In Hebrew, 'Lazarus' is a derivation of the name 'Eliazar' which means 'God, help'.

As I can now personally testify, being dead certainly puts one into a true state of helplessness. It is a quite remarkable event to contemplate, let alone to experience. In two or three short breaths, you quite unexpectedly transition from being alive to being dead. The control that we mistakenly presume to have over our life and future is in reality, a mesmerizing illusion with which we have become most comfortable. Becoming Lazarus, one in a state of helplessness, is the oft-unrecognized reality of the human condition.

The Scriptures tell us surprising little about the afterlife. Saint Paul briefly tells us (2 Cor. 12:2-4) of his autobiographical out-of-body experience. He describes being caught up into what he identifies as the third heaven or paradise. There, he hears unspeakable words

not lawful for a man to utter. In addition, we have numerous modern accounts of people who have died. They tell of seeing themselves hovering above their dead and lifeless bodies. Others tell of following a path of blinding light leading towards the presence of God before returning and re-uniting with their physical bodies.

In his book Lazarus, Morris West writes that near-death experiences may be a special grace extended by God to remove any fear of death. In a sense, it is a dry run for a selected few of that, which awaits us all.

None of these speculations are anything to which I can either affirm or deny with any degree of certainty. I remember an incredible sense of quietude and peace. Perhaps if I were more Pentecostal than Anglican, my recollection may have been somewhat different. However, I remember the words of Saint Paul and am reminded that (1 Cor. 15:10), "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

The Psalmist portrays death as a line of demarcation. It brings to an end what can be done in this life. No longer can we impact the world as we currently perceive it.

Jewish and Christian traditions rooted in the Old and New Testament consistently remind us that ultimately, on a day of His own choosing, God will require accountability of each person and judge His Creation. In the Nicene Creed that we recited earlier in our Liturgy this morning, we corporately confessed our personal belief that Jesus will come again in glory to judge both the quick, those who are alive, and those who are dead.

Our Epistle and Gospel readings this morning reveal different aspects of the reality and certainty of God's judgment as seen from both sides of the great divide. Each in their own way confirm the exhortation of Saint James (Ja. 1:22) that, quote, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

The rich man in our Gospel parable had heard the words of Moses and the prophets repeatedly over the course of a lifetime. So had his five brethren. The life of faith is not meant to be lived in an intellectually sterile environment - one that exhibits a convenient blindness and emotional detachment to the physically observable needs of our brothers and sisters. The rich man consciously made a decision each day to close his eyes and harden his heart to the needs of Lazarus whom he had to walk over or around on a daily basis.

In our Epistle, Saint John reminds us that we are to share with others that which we have received. Think of it as trickle down theology. God loved us and sent His son to pay the penalty for the sins of humanity on the Cross. We respond to this love graciously extended to us by confessing faith in Him and we receive the Holy Spirit that comes to dwell within us. Having received this love from God, we thus assume the active obligation to give it to others. It is similar to the instructions by Jesus to his disciples in Saint Matthew's Gospel, (Mt. 10:8) "Freely you have received, freely give." Then will we be doers of the word and not hearers only.

Saint John continues by telling us that by doing the will of God, we will also (1 Jn. 4:17) “have boldness in the day of judgment.” This promised future is a decidedly different outcome from the rich man and his five brethren who tacitly refused to repent or be persuaded though one rose from the dead and told them the truth.

I never would have imagined myself in the position of one who had come back from the dead to testify to the truth of God’s Word. I can only add my testimony of God and His faithfulness to the witness of Moses, the prophets, and our Lord Jesus Christ. He who is Himself the Resurrection and the Life told this parable to help us appreciate the time he has given us on this earth and to use it wisely by putting our faith into practice that will bless others.

Accordingly, let us remember the words of Saint Paul to the Galatians, (Gal. 6:10) quote, “While we have time, let us do good unto all men; and especially unto them that are of the household of faith.”