

## **Canon Christopher Andrews Passion Sunday 2017 St Edmundsbury Cathedral**

### **John 11 1- 45**

What a long gospel reading! But we need to hear the whole story of the raising of Lazarus, and the voices of the people: the voices of Mary and Martha in their puzzlement and grief. Above all the voice of Jesus who by his voice, by his words alone creates and controls this whole extraordinary episode, which is for John the climax of Jesus' ministry, his last sign and work before he goes to his death. Remember that this raising of Lazarus is, John tells us, the last straw for the Jews who as a result of it decide to arrest and crucify Jesus.

But it is the voices we remember. Think how powerful and lasting human voices are for us. In the Edmund Lecture on Friday evening the author Salley Vickers was reminding us how people who may no longer be alive can be powerfully present to us in different ways. I can go back in my memory to my primary school and recall not only the name of each of my four class teachers but also their voice, clearly. Each voice so distinctive, so particular.

For John the gospel writer Jesus was, is The Voice. Jesus, he tells us, is "the Word". "In the beginning was the Word". In so doing John deliberately takes us straight back to the all-powerful voice of God at the beginning of Genesis: "And God said, "Let there be light". By his word alone, by his voice God created light and life and all that is.

In the same way John means us to hear the authority, the power of God in Jesus' voice as the tomb of Lazarus is opened. "He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" Only God could call the dead back to life, such is the power of this voice. And in the Greek original, the words John gives to Jesus in this call are far more powerful than the English translation. There is no verb "come". Just "Lazarus! Here! Out!". Peremptory is not the word. This is the voice of ultimate authority, Jesus calling, commanding the dead man back to life.

And Lazarus in obedience, still bound in cloths, shuffled out into the light. And the voice came again: "Unbind him. Let him go." Again, the Greek word is of a person freed from prison, or freed from their sins, the word and action appropriate only to the most powerful - or to God himself.

Yet at the same time this voice of Jesus is a human voice. Remember John told us that Jesus the Word was made flesh. He is one of us. And we hear this, in a moment of powerful human emotion for Jesus. At the death of Lazarus, John tells us, "Jesus wept".

This is not silent weeping. We can hear this weeping. In his grief Jesus used no words but he certainly used his voice and his whole self. This weeping was loud, body-shaking sobbing. The Greek word John uses is also that of a horse snorting, in a way that makes you jump when you hear it. We hear in Jesus the voice of God's grief beyond words over the loss of one human life dear to him.

Over these next two weeks, as we move through the drama of the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, listen to what the voices are saying to you.

Next Sunday, Palm Sunday is one of the great occasions of our year. We have the dramatized gospel reading of the whole Passion, lots of voices, including ours, taking part in this drama, bringing it all to life. Don't let the readings just wash over you. Let them rouse you, wake you up to the meaning of the suffering and the death of Jesus not just as an historical event but as an inescapable dimension of our life now, our world now in 2017. And listen to the voices we take on, calling out: "Let him be crucified". Twice we say it. So few words with such a terrible outcome.

This drama, these voices are so contemporary. Why else do we feel the absolute rightness of carrying the cross through the streets of our town on Good Friday in largely silent witness? This same act of witness in countless places across the globe on Good Friday is powerful and speaks to our world more eloquently than any number of words. On Good Friday silence itself is a powerful voice.

And as he moves towards the death, notice how silent Jesus becomes, fewer and fewer words, as despite all the provocation he holds his peace. At the last in each of the gospel versions just three or four words: "Father, forgive them,"(Luke). "It is finished,"(John). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark and Matthew). "And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last." The voice - but no words.

Then on Easter morning the risen Jesus spoke – first to Mary, whose grief was pouring out of her in a flood of words. And all Jesus needed was one word, her name: "Mary", and by that word he brought into being a whole new resurrection life for her and for all of us.

In Passiontide, through Good Friday and on Easter Day we listen to the voices and hear in Jesus above all the voice of a saving and loving God who calls us all through death to life with him for ever. Amen