

Sermon for the Ordination of Deacons – D. Lazenby

24th June 2017, Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

Jesus of Nazareth is raised from the dead.

What does this mean?

Perhaps you are now even wondering ‘what does she mean?’ by ‘what does this mean?’ How is this opening relevant to being here today to witness and support a friend, neighbour, family member, co-worker, enter a holy office of the church, start a job with the Church of England?

The thing is, friends, that we gather here today *at all* is because a man called Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead. That fact, that event, is the beginning, the middle, and the end of our purpose in gathering today. *Jesus Christ* is why we are here. He is the reason for the season.

We have seen a man grow up into a family trade, living among small villages and towns, on the edge of an empire. He was a carpenter, taught by his dad, brilliant with wood. He grew up quietly in his town, though there was always the looming threat and frequent reminders of the mighty power of Rome, insisting on its eternal power on earth, ruthlessly maintaining its idea of order, and pitching its tax collectors across this little boy’s part of the Mediterranean world.

And then this boy grew up. And he became altogether strange, striking - and utterly magnetic. He gathered a group of friends and followers, because he loves people, and does everything in friendship, and had a mission that he wanted his friends to learn how to take part in by watching him. And so they began travelling from place to place, from village to village around a great lake, and wherever they went, when this man Jesus willed it, people were healed, physically, emotionally, spiritually: ‘be healed’, he would say, and they were, and ‘Peace be with you’, he would say, and they would walk away *on air*. And wherever they went, he would invite them to sit down, and then he’d teach them, and, by God, those words: they hit your heart like they’d flown from the depths of Truth itself and landed with an authority that shone from his eyes and made every word glisten like he was speaking from another place: from an eternal, never-shaking, utterly reliable, immovable, solid, place. And *as* for those words: never an ounce of cruelty. Always telling you how loved you are; always pouring out blessing; telling you how forgiven you are...

Forgiven? Yes, forgiven. All those small and big ways we’ve hurt ourselves, hurt other people, blithely and blindly gone about in this world partaking in systems based on hurting people. The systems of modern-day slavery and human trafficking. The affair we have had. The hatred we secretly bear for our in-law, and nurse after every family visit. The homeless person whose presence nags us every morning as we pass the supermarket. This man, Jesus, says to us: these things need sorting. These are not my ways for this world. Nothing that hurts and breaks us and others, and eats away at our destiny of mutual love with deceits and failures, big and small, none of these are my ways for this world. This needs sorting. And I, and we, will sort it...

But: for your part in it all: you are forgiven. And as a friend of mine says, if we think this forgiveness is irrelevant to us, that there is not pain in this world, or that it has nothing to do with us, we are merely failing to pay attention. This man Jesus brings a reality-check. But also a release. He says: Feel the burden rise. Go in peace. I have come that you may have life; and life to the full.

But this kind of talking gets you killed.

Want to strike a match in a hay barn?

Stand in the midst of Jesus' culture and start saying that you are forgiving people their sins. Because only God can do that. To the religious authorities, that claim is blasphemy. And it carries the death penalty. To the political authorities, the skirmishes and riots erupting in the religious quarter are a complete pain and a threat to the enforced peace. If getting rid of you will keep the peace – so *be* it.

The night before he died, *no-doubt* with a heart bursting for knowing what was coming, Jesus had supper with his friends. And during the meal, he wrapped his clothes around him like a slave, and offered to his friends the lowest form of service known to his culture: he began to wash their feet. The King of creation knelt and washed his friends' stinking feet. Because he loves them. His crown, an apron: his crown, a way you give yourself to others.

And then they killed him. The religious and political authorities killed him. Just as we, daily, try to kill him, in every little personal persistence, in every collusion with our culture, that declares that there is no God only so that some other thing can be God-forced-upon-us and enslave us to its worship: consumerism, advertising, celebrity-worship, obsessive work-loads that leave us knackered and wrung-out and deeply dissatisfied and desperately lonely, actually, somewhere in the haunted depths of our being. Our *hearts* are restless until they find their rest in the one true God. Why? Because they were made by him, and for him, and spend their anxious wandering lives searching, searching, searching for him like a constantly swinging radar looking for 'home', for 'security', for true and lasting love. So we search for everlasting love himself.

They killed him.

Another friend of mine said to me recently, 'have you every noticed? The only way that you and I could be without God would be if we could somehow, after all, get him into our hands and kill him. And so God, in his genius, allows this to happen. He allows this one way for the world to be without him to happen: *so that he could overcome it.* So that he could overcome it.

His disciples saw it; the crowds that came for healing and teaching saw it; the blind and heart-broken and paralysed and depressed and imprisoned and exhausted and lonely and outcast saw it; the soldier who stood by and watched him asphyxiate to death without a word of malice on his lips but only blessings-to-his-killers-even-to-the-very-end saw it; his mother Mary saw it; the prophets saw it; at his baptism when the Holy Spirit of God descended on Him and our Father in heaven declared this fleshly man to be his only Son, the gathered people saw it; when his closest friends watched him transformed into blazing light in glory as a revealing of his true life in God and a foretaste of his ascended life, they saw it; when he walked on water and calmed storms as king of nature, they saw it. *They saw it: this man, Jesus, was God. This man, Jesus, is God.*

And He was God-with-us. Showing you and I, his creatures, his creation, that *God is with us*. God is for us. God is intimately available to you and I every day.

How can we be sure of this?

We know from Jesus' earthly life what God looks like, and that he loves us.

And we know from Jesus' death *and from what came next* that we can be sure of this love forever.

Because, for one day, after he was killed, Jesus was dead. Very dead. And *death spent its day in the Son of God*. You see, there is no place in human life where God has not been, where he has not dwelt: there is no abandonment, no depression, no despair, no agony, no sense of meaninglessness or purposelessness, no restlessness, where God has not been. Hanging nailed to a cross he cried out his abandonment: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' God within God's own life, God as the very definition of relationship and love, bleeding in execution, wrenching in separation, swallowing up *that* level of heart and body pain – maximised unto the depths of God.

But do you see what God was doing? God was pouring himself into death so death is not the end. God was pouring himself into death so that even death could become a place of encounter with God. Do not be afraid.

Death spent its day in the Son of God: but death could not hold him. On the third day, the Father by the power of the Spirit raised the Son. Declaring to the world that love wins: that finally, irrevocably, at the end of all things, love wins:

Jesus the Son is raised from death to life, to pronounce God's 'No' to death and his 'Yes' to life.

Jesus the Son is raised from death to life, to show that everything Jesus said and did in his earthly life was true, and did not simply die with him, but will last. Jesus Christ *is* our destiny.

Jesus the Son is raised from death to life, to show that *you and I can be raised from death to life*. Because this human, this incarnate, Son of God, *being human*, has thereby taken our human destiny into the very life of God. *We can place our faith and hope in Jesus the Christ as the one who carries us into the life of God*. Jesus Christ lives with death behind him: and we are offered nothing less than *that* life.

Friends, the peace and eternal life and love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you – all.

The Church of God exists to worship this living Lord, in whose presence we come fully alive; and to share the fruits of his death and life with the world. This risen Jesus Christ is why we are here today, our hearts filled with joy for the promised present and future that his Church, his body, is empowered to proclaim.

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Ordinands for the Diaconate – as our scriptures today testify, you continue a ministry rooted in the earliest days of the Church's life. You are set-apart in the life of God's Church as a sign of what God's ministry to his world looks like. You are to be empowered and anointed by the Holy Spirit to show God's priority as he has shown it himself in his Son. To show what God's love looks like: that it looks like utter service, preferring the other before our self, seeking out the lost and forgotten, attending to the lowliest and most needed of tasks. You are to show, and remind, and equip, the Church of God to wash the feet of the world: because this is how God himself has come to us. In doing this, you will be a crucial sign to the churches you serve of their own calling and task, because you are ordained to lead the whole church into this diaconal ministry.

Once a Deacon, always a Deacon. And so, as you assist at the sacraments – those places where God has promised to meet us and give us his own life – and in your preaching and proclamation, may you evermore be issuing *God's own invitation* to the world he loves so much that he gave his only Son for it:

'Come, come the whole round world, and receive the free gift of eternal life.'

Amen.