

Third Sunday of Easter 2016 Evensong

John 11: 27 – 44

A few weeks ago somebody came up to me after a service at the Priory and told me that they'd been watching a programme on television all about Neanderthal Man; and it had troubled them because they couldn't work out how Adam and Eve fitted in to the evolutionary scheme of things. I was somewhat taken aback because it was clear that this perfectly reasonable and intelligent person actually believed that Adam and Eve are historical figures in the same category as Queen Victoria or William Conqueror.

It put me in what may well be described as a dilemmic situation for which I struggled to find any expeditious resolution. On the one hand I was clear that it was unambiguously my pastoral duty to disabuse this person and not to allow them to leave church thinking that Adam and Eve existed in history; and to do that in about the 30 seconds I had before someone else shook

my hand – ducking the issue was simply out of the question. But on the other hand dealing with the matter so expeditiously was entirely inappropriate because there was a real danger of shattering this person's sincere and profound faith.

So I had to state quite simply that Adam and Eve did not exist; but then flail about frantically trying to reassure them that I believe in the Book of Genesis; that I believe it is God's truth; but that God's truth is not in the same category as historical truth and is not to be judged by the criterion of historical accuracy. Well, I don't know how well I did, but at least they're still coming to Priory.

This evening's New Testament lesson raises the same question: is it necessary to believe in the historical accuracy of the raising of Lazarus? There are some clues in the story to suggest that it is based on historical event recollections of which have been handed down through the oral tradition. Remember,

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although the fourth Gospel – what we call St. John’s Gospel – is a complete enigma - and nobody can say with certainty who wrote it or when they did so - what everybody does agree on is that it was written jolly late: probably three or so generations after the events occurred. It’s a bit like one of us writing down the stories of the Second World War which our parents and grandparents have told us.

In 1936 an amateur anthropologist called Tom Harrison started the Mass-Observation project. He got people to record diaries of what they were thinking about events so that there would be a democratic, if entirely unscientific, record of what public opinion was. In 1975 the historian Philip Ziegler worked with Harrison and revisited people who had kept diaries for him of living through the Blitz. Ziegler writes,

“Any relationship between the incidents they had described in their diary and the story they told in 1975 was almost entirely coincidental. They got *everything* wrong: dates, places, the sequence of

events. In every case they moved themselves closer to the centre of the action: the bomb that had fallen in the next street now fell in *their* street; the blast that had caused freakish damage to a nearby house now affected *their* house. The experiment convinced me that, although oral testimony might be of value in recapturing atmosphere, it was worthless or worse than worthless if hard facts were wanted.”

What Ziegler doesn’t add, but I think is worth adding, is that I don’t suppose anybody was lying.

Well, thank Goodness, we’re not interested in hard facts: we’re interested in God’s truth. There may well have been a resuscitation during Jesus’ earthly ministry. The writer of the fourth Gospel might well have been drawing on it as the basis for the observation he’s making in this passage. But to insist upon its historical accuracy is to miss the point. And to make your faith in Jesus dependent on its historical accuracy would be to trivialise the one, in whom you’re

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putting your faith, into a conjurer who does tricks with bags of skin and bone.

The point is that this story is a vehicle for the evangelist of the fourth Gospel to make observations about the sort of new life Jesus gives. Yes, there are economic descriptions of events; yes, there are exchanges of dialogue which give the story an arresting immediacy; but all this is interspersed with oracular speech – and let me explain what I mean by that. An oracle is an inspired answer to a request for advice, or a prophecy. It is a statement of God’s truth.

The oracle that is proclaimed in this story is that those who believe will see the glory of God. Jesus prays to the Father (in similar terms to the way he prays to the Father in other Gospels, but in different contexts!) giving thanks that this situation reveals that it is the Father who sent him. Indeed Martha had only just asserted “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.” And the life

that Jesus gives is not simply a physical being alive, but is the life that he has from the Father. It is a life full of the glory of God.

The raising of Lazarus is not a story of a happy ending – a felicitous resolution – to the grief of a heart-broken family. Thank Goodness! Because, if it were, it would have nothing to say to us today. It doesn’t equip Christine and me to short-circuit the grief of the dozens upon dozens of families we meet in our ministries. Their loved ones are dead; and are going to be made no less dead by however sensitive and pastoral our ministry may be.

But what we can offer is something much more important and much more exciting than a post-mortal continuation of mortal life. It is new life; life of the aeon to come available now in the power of God’s spirit. And that offer comes with the guarantee of God’s truth.

Amen.