

Perhaps one of the most moving Romanesque sculptured panels in Europe is to be found in the south choir aisle of our own cathedral in Chichester. It (together with a sister carving) was found during building work in the cathedral in the early 19th century, and there is speculation that it originally formed part of a choir screen that was then dismantled and replaced as fashions changed. Originally coloured and gilded, probably with jewelled eyes, it is now plain stone, but reveals the emotion charged moments surrounding the resurrection of Lazarus. Each figure is represented in size according to their importance. Jesus is the largest figure, followed by the sisters Mary and Martha, then Lazarus and several of the apostles. The smallest are two little gravediggers holding spades.

The reason I find the panel so moving is because of the faces - particularly of the two sisters and Jesus himself. They have faces etched with grief. The sisters hold their hands up to their faces; Jesus reaches out his hand in blessing towards the rising figure of Lazarus – the movement of the story is captured, not in a single moment, but across the telling of the account – hence that grief-riven face of Jesus.

Indeed, it is hard not to be moved by John's account of the raising of Lazarus. We have the glimpses of the everyday family life of the sisters and brother, and the feeling that Jesus is very close to them, enjoying their company when he visits them.

For John the Gospel writer, the raising of Lazarus is a bridge in the ministry of the Lord. It is the last of the signs (John never calls them miracles – they are there to lead us to explore our relationship with Jesus) and in many ways it is 'the last straw' because as far as the authorities are concerned, it sets in motion the events leading to Passion, Death and Resurrection for Jesus. John wants us to be led in an emotive, vivid way, drawn into the account as bystanders. He desires to lead each of us on a journey, as much for us as for the sisters and those who were present. This playing on emotions deals with the very question of human life and death. However, the raising of Lazarus is not primarily about an illustration of the divine power of Jesus, at least not in anything other than the immediate sense. Nevertheless, this immediacy is captured when the sisters are scandalised as Jesus orders the tomb to be opened. 'He has been dead for four days,' says Martha. The stench of corruption will fill the air. This takes us to the reality of our humanity, but there is a deeper understanding.

Martha provides the focus of the theology behind the whole account. Jesus will be for the grieving Martha and for Mary, and indeed for all who mourn, a call to true life – a life eternal found through his own self-giving love. Martha's acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah just a few verses before our Gospel reading started, is, like the Apostles, only a partial understanding of the fullness of life to be found in Jesus. Jesus calls himself the Resurrection and the Life, and yet even these stupendous words can only be understood when we know the **whole** story of Christ's self-giving Love. However, in great love Jesus leads Martha and Mary on a journey of faith. It is one which is at great cost to himself – evident in the great emotion he feels and the personal nature of his communion with the Father.

When Lazarus is called forth, he is a totally passive figure, clothed in the wrappings of death, needing help to be unbound. I think John wants us to remember words that the Lord has spoken in Chapter 5: 24 *'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is here now, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live.'* For us, the importance is that the Resurrection of Lazarus is a sign that points to true resurrection and life in Jesus – something not just confined to death and resurrection for the Christian soul, but also that of living the Resurrection and Life in the here-and-now. Again, Chapter 5: 24 *Amen, amen, I say to you, those who hears my word and believes the One who sent me, has eternal life; they do not come into judgment, but have passed from death to life.*

On this day which the church sets aside to remember All Saints, we are reminded that we are called to be saints ourselves, flesh and blood saints, like those saints whom the church recognises. Don't be worried that you feel you could never attain such a degree of holiness. The Saints the church honours really weren't like those we find in stained glass. Portrayed in our own lovely windows, they are very often beautiful, surrounding us as they do, fixed and immovable in a rictus of holiness, complete with painted halo! No! The Saints were flawed, they got things wrong. Some of them we probably wouldn't get on with at all, but nevertheless they strove to live the Resurrection life which Jesus calls us to.

The church honours Martha, Mary and Lazarus as saints, and look at them: Martha complaining about her sister, Mary never picking up the duster - real people. And Lazarus – who hears the voice of Jesus calling him to Life and is unbound from the winding cloths which hold him in rigidity, called to life in the here-and-now, a foretaste of the promise of incorporation into God's infinite love.

The richness of our other readings today gives us a vision of this Resurrection life in its full beauty. Sometimes, it seems impossible for us to aspire to this. But amidst trials and tribulations we can experience the deepest joy and consolation which Resurrection life promises by trusting in God's infinite love - revealed in its most tangible through Jesus - the journey of Faith which leads us towards the reality of TRUE life and resurrection.

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.





Chichester Cathedral – The Raising of Lazarus

Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace.

For though in the sight of others they were punished,
their hope is full of immortality.
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,
because God tested them and found them worthy of himself;
like gold in the furnace he tried them,
and like a sacrificial burnt-offering he accepted them.
In the time of their visitation they will shine forth,
and will run like sparks through the stubble.
They will govern nations and rule over peoples,
and the Lord will reign over them for ever.
Those who trust in him will understand truth,
and the faithful will abide with him in love,
because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones,
and he watches over his elect.

Revelation 21: 1-6a

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' 6 Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

John 11: 32-44

32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34 He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35 Jesus began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' 37 But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' 38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' 40 Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'