

Reading John 11. 1-45

Good morning everyone. I hope you are all keeping well – physically, spiritually and emotionally. I'd much prefer to be with you in person, but by the miracle of technology you can hear me in my study in Welwyn Garden City. This has the benefit for you that you can pause me, mute me or fast forward me if I go on a bit – something not usually available on a Sunday, so don't get used to it!

Many of you will have been receiving the Thought for the Day we've been putting out via the website, email and WhatsApp. On Tuesday, based on the song from the Sound of Music, you were asked to give thanks to God for some of your favourite things, and lots of you shared your favourite things – ranging from blossom to pairing up odd socks.

One of my favourite things is the patch of ferns in my garden. From a gardener's point of view these are trouble-free plants which give good ground cover, happily self-reproduce and in autumn they turn a beautiful bronze colour. They are also pleasingly pre-historic.



About Christmas time, I cut them all back – here's a picture so you can see what one of them looks like now. Dead, brown and not terribly attractive. Yet, in the next week or two, a miracle will happen. The nobbly, brown lump will open to reveal a lovely fresh green. Then the leaf will emerge. It will be curled up tightly on itself. A young fern leaf is a magical thing, straight from a fairy tale. All too quickly the leaf will unfurl and there will be a large green fern leaf which will adorn my garden until late autumn.

Each year these plants, and many others indeed, are resurrected. To all appearances they are dead, and yet suddenly they burst into life. And today we are going to think about resurrection because you and I are called to be resurrection people.

Our faith is based on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the story of God in the Old Testament, the tales told of Jesus in the Gospels and the antics of the disciples retold in Acts show us that resurrection is a constant presence in our faith story. Jesus might be the supreme example, but as today's Gospel reading shows quite clearly, he is not the only one to come back from the dead.

While my fern plants are, in fact, just resting during the winter, both Lazarus and Jesus die absolutely. In the Jewish faith, the soul had left the body by day three, which was the point of no return.

Today we have heard the story of Lazarus, brother to Martha and Mary, all three friends and followers of Jesus. For once we get a huge amount of detail about a miracle – the reading is a whopping 45 verses long. It's a story only retold in John's Gospel and I do wonder whether that is because someone in John's community was a witness or knew someone who was there to see the dramatic events unfold. It certainly reads like an eye witness account.

Through this narrative, we learn a lot about Jesus. We learn that he is fully aware of a plan which God has, and of his part in it. We learn he cannot do as any friend would wish and rush immediately to save Lazarus, because that isn't part of God's plan. And we learn that the suffering this causes, breaks his heart. It makes Jesus weep.

And then we learn that sticking with God's plan results in the best kind of happy ending. When all appears to be lost, when all hope is gone, God's saving grace reaches out to the grieving and the lost. God gives Lazarus and all around him the gift of resurrection.

We are at the moment experiencing a time when God might seem a long way away. When we cannot see that what is happening could possibly be used fruitfully by God. We might struggle to believe that we need to wait. We feel the need to weep and it is hard to hang onto the hope that some form of resurrection is eventually going to be revealed.

I do not believe the virus is part of a wider plan of God, just as I do not think that God caused Lazarus to die to make a point, or indeed for any other reason.

I do believe that this current moment might teach us something about ourselves and others if we are willing to listen and learn. Lazarus' death resulted in many believing in Jesus as Messiah. But it also signalled the stepping up of the campaign to kill him. Good Friday is not far away. And I think that what we are experiencing now could result in great good globally and locally if we let it. It could also result in great harm.

Unfortunately, the signs internationally are not promising. As China recovers, its media is already suggesting the virus originated in Italy or was planted by the USA, while few countries have shown an inclination to work with others for their mutual relief and comfort. Enemies have remained enemies. That is such a shame. If humankind cannot learn to work together against an implacable invisible enemy, then I am absolutely sure that God is weeping in Heaven.

As a resurrection people what are we called to do?

We are called to hope, even when all hope seems gone. After all, hope is not rational.

We are called to care, when being selfish seems a lot more sensible.
We are called to continue to believe that God is good and has some kind of benevolent plan for us even when that seems unlikely.
We are called to look forward to a future when all manner of things will be well.
And we are called to weep because there is so much pain, hurt and suffering about which we can do little.
We are called to wait patiently or impatiently for the future, like my fern leaf, to unfurl and reveal itself.
We are called to wait for God's kingdom. Sometimes we can work actively for that. Sometimes the waiting is itself the work.

But all our past experience of life, of God, of my simple fern leaf, tells us that this time will not continue for ever. That resurrection will come, and when it does it will be glorious.

I would be lying to you if I pretended that I am not hurting. And that much of that hurt is entirely self-centred. I hate the lack of routine. I mourn that our churches are locked up. I hate being told that I should not see my son, my friends. I am heartbroken that my daughter's wedding has had to be cancelled. It makes me want to weep because I don't know when I will see my parents or oldest daughter again.

I hate it all. At times I feel so sad and frightened. I am guessing that many of you can identify with much of that.

So, I am preaching to us all when I say that we are called to be resurrection people. I know that it is ok to weep when it hurts - because Jesus wept when it hurt. It is ok to feel helpless at the loss of control, because he did, too. No one understands better than Jesus that the time before resurrection can be agonising.

I need to cling onto hope, we all do, and one of my dearest hopes is that we will soon be together in person to worship God. That we will be back to our usual hugs and handshakes. That we will be able to share the bread and wine as we remember Jesus.

Because I need something to look forward to, and we all need hope for the future, I'm going to issue an invitation.

When this is over, I'm going to hold a garden party and you are all invited. I promise you my garden will never ever have looked so tidy. And you can come and admire my ferns. They may in the process of unfurling. They may be green and luxuriant. They may be bronzed. But whenever it happens, we will rejoice, because we are people who believe in resurrection.

Before we say goodbye, a blessing:

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in Him,
so that you might overflow with hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Amen