

# Raised up!

**Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 March, 2020**

**A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell**

**Lent 5A**

**John 11:1-45**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

These days, COVID-19 virus is the only topic on the lips of both politician and public, and the developing news seems to be changing every hour. The responses from country to country range from cautious to knee-jerk, from thoughtful to mindless, from reactionary to pro-active, from self-preservation to selflessness, from ignorant to wise, from panicked to calm, from unthinking to considerate ... and no doubt, you will be able to think of a few comparisons of your own.

After and during the bushfires, many people expressed extraordinary praise on the volunteers, especially the RFS, who gave their lives and time to the protection of the community. We are being reminded that though the bush-fires are officially extinguished, there is still need to give support for all those who have been affected.

Conversely, the reaction of some members of the public during the COVID-19 crisis, has been precisely the opposite, with the unnecessary hoarding of the likes of toilet paper, hand sanitisers, rice, flour, cereals, long-life milk and, as I write, seeds are the latest stock-pile commodity. The community response to each, bushfire and COVID-19 has made for revealing social studies and the comparison of behaviour.

However, there have been rays of sunlight in the expressions of small acts of kindness where strangers have offered their generosity to other strangers. It is a sign of hope amidst the hideous behaviour of some who live in the dog eat dog world of every person for themselves. The COVID-19 virus has prompted the full gambit of responses that happens in times of crisis. Once again people have the choice of considerate calm and positive action, to panicked self-focus and non-awareness of others' needs.

It has been interesting that many have turned this time of possible turmoil into seeing it as an opportunity for positive change. I read in one of the news articles, as the world seems to be grinding to a halt, that has given opportunity to breathe again even to the point that climate change has slowed as well. There are clear skies in China! The earth is healing at a surprisingly rapid rate, and there are signs of new life evident.

It would appear that those who live in the world of hope, are the same ones whose behaviour is centred on the needs of others. Amidst the rude reality of our heaving, churning and busy world with its concretised and fixed systems, we people of faith are called to defy that tyranny in the same way that Jesus defied the bound-up religious hierarchy, and the threat of the Roman Empire. We are much in the same situation.

Hope is the key word in the gospel passage for today. It is the call to hope in the depths of hopelessness. In this uncomfortable story about death to life in the Gospel of John, we pose so many “why” questions as we listen once again. Why did Jesus wait? Why did he not come sooner? Why did Jesus come when hope had gone? Why?

The gospel reading today is not only about death to life, but also about God who has power in death and life. While 21st century people ask the question of this story, “Did this really happen?” We also ask the question of who is this man, Jesus? The identity of Jesus is revealed in this story as he too confronts death in a very personal way.

Death is in our focus in this week’s gospel reading. And it is poignant that as the death toll mounts world-wide at an alarming rate from the COVID-19 virus, we are confronted with a story about unbelievable change from death to life. As we stand in this time in March 2020, dare we imagine life when the experts tell us that things will get worse before they get better? We live in a time when we have to dare to hope.

There is Lazarus, (in the gospel story) dead for four days, stinking in a tomb, and because he has been dead for over three days, according to Jewish understanding, is beyond hope of living.

In the last few weeks there have been stories of death to life. Nicodemus asking how is it possible to be reborn? The woman at the well asks how can she have life amidst the messiness and humiliation in her life? The blind man stumbling across Jesus and being given sight for the first time in his life, and those closest to him wondering how this could be.

And in today’s story, Lazarus is dead beyond hope. It is little wonder that Martha and Mary are grief stricken. But unlike the disciples, they still look to Jesus for possible life even in death. They hope beyond hope. They turn to Jesus amidst their hopelessness, their end of the road of human despair and anger, as like us, ask the question, “Why?” Why was Jesus not there when they needed him? Why was Jesus not there when Lazarus has the smallest morsel of life and there was some hope? Why? Martha and Mary understood, that it was only Jesus who could restore Lazarus to full life. When their hope had expired, they were left with their faith in Jesus.

And we too are left to realise that only the power of God can raise us so we can truly live.

So this week, we acknowledge that Lazarus is us. We are dead. We are stinking dead. And like him, we have hope of anything, other than further demise and decay, only through the power of Jesus Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life.

The call to Lazarus is to come out, to leave the tomb behind.

Jesus Christ calls us into no lesser destiny, in this time and in times to come. To leave death and all its ways behind. And as he calls us to leave the tomb, we see in the story of the raising of Lazarus, he truly calls us, calls us as a community, and not simply as individuals, but also to support the deliverance of others from death as well.

Jesus enlisted some to roll away the stone. What stones are you helping to roll away from those who are dead or left for dead?

He commanded others to “unbind him and set him free”. What bonds are you loosing from those kept in the tyranny of sameness of thinking and entrenched attitude?

In raising Lazarus, Jesus not only restored him, but called the community around him to complete what he had begun. With him and with the community, we are never alone, even in this time of personal separation.

But respond we do. Jesus responded to Lazarus’ death ... with Martha and Mary, he wept. His response was so very human. He too wanted Lazarus to live. We need to hang on to that moment– this moment when he wanted Lazarus to live. To grasp that our wishes do not always come to fruition. Jesus had to sit with that and discard his feelings and his needs. His prayer to God was not about the fulfilment of his needs, but that God’s glory may be revealed.

We know the end of the story. Lazarus came back to life, but the miracle of the outcome was not that Lazarus lived once again, but that people came to believe in God. Not that Lazarus lived once again, but that people came to believe in God.

New life, new possibilities brings challenge –there is an element of holding back when confronted with new ways of being? What fears do we face as we move into an unknown future? Or are we sometimes called to hang on in faith when all around us have given up?

Like Lazarus, we have died to an old way of being, and have been delivered into the opportunity to live again. Could it be – could it be - that COVID-19 is our wake-up call to strip ourselves from the grave-cloths that have bound us, into being recreated to a new way of living?

Let us respond to God in having the faith of being raised up to live again. Let us live beyond our own hope, and live with the breath of God within us ... the breath of life.

Let us pray:

When we are overwhelmed or in despair, we turn again to you, O God, for you feel our anguish and will lift us up. Breathe your Spirit into us and give us new life so that we may walk in hope. Amen.