



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Lent Year A

Lazarus

Readings: *Ezekiel 37: 12-14, Ps 129, Romans 8: 8-11, John 11: 1-45*

The other week I was walking back to church from the centre of Bodmin. I had just been on the St Piran's Day parade and, in view of the very cold weather and persistent freezing rain, I was in full winter cassock and the substantial covering of my old woollen cloak - now in its 45th year of service. An elderly man in flat hat and waterproof jacket came striding belligerently downhill towards me. Thrusting his face into mine he let forth the complaint, 'You look like the Grim Reaper!' I laughed – which didn't help matters. And then I added, 'Early warning, pal'. I was clearly not at my most pastoral. But it was just another symptom of what I have encountered all too frequently in men of my generation. Anger and outrage in the face of mortality.

We have grown up, we 'baby boomers', probably the most privileged generation in history, lived lives of ever growing prosperity and hedonism, abandoned God and all that sort of 'superstitious tripe' for a sort of half formed materialistic atheism without the intellectual wherewithal to back it up. As 'boomer' man ages, he encounters the awful reality that he is no longer in his pomp, his body is rapidly running downhill, his ungrateful successors do not, on the whole, care what he thinks or indeed if he thinks at all. He retreats to the lonely

fastness of his self-approval and delusion, wears provocatively risible t-shirts that say 'Old Guys Rule' and above all blames and deeply resents the God in whom he does not believe.

The old man on Fore Street was merely a replay of a lot of similar encounters at social gatherings, weddings, parties etc where the same furious face has loomed out of the crowd to berate me for my idiotic faith, the non-existence of my 'imaginary friend in the sky', with a pot pourri of headlines supposedly drawn from Dawkins, Darwin and St David Attenborough. Coincidental to His non-existence, my God is also to blame for all the injustice and wickedness in the world. But, of course.

But I do not delude myself by thinking that this resentment is restricted to elderly male atheists. There is, in the man's wholly irrational approach to reality, a feature common to us all. The notion of mortality, ubiquitous and inevitable as it is, rankles. At its most obvious this resentment manifests when people die, in our view, untimely. The death of a child for instance or a friend of our youth, or war victim or famine ravaged land. This resentment has, I notice, even reached the *ad absurdum* of folk of my generation saying things like, 'Well he wasn't that old. He'd only just turned eighty.'

Our 'resentment', believer and non-believer alike, is based on something absolutely fundamental. We have, inbuilt in us, by virtue of our creation in the image of God, a natural inclination towards eternity, a remembrance of the immortality of paradise and a longing for return. Even in today's Gospel we encounter the faithful and beloved Martha greeting the tardy arrival of Jesus with the scarcely

disguised accusation, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died !'

When Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again, we encounter the indomitable faith of Martha. 'I know that he will rise again at the Resurrection'. She is not concerned about her brother's ultimate fate in the providence of God but she still longs for him in the here and now. A powerful emotion and longing with which all the bereaved, however strong their faith, would concur.

For the believer this future beyond mortality ultimately makes sense of the suffering of this life and beckons us onward to the reconciliation and healing that alone can usher us into the Eternal Presence of the Beatific Vision. It does not reduce the pain of bereavement but it wreathes it in hope and love. It understands the journey through the gates of death as part of the journey – just as when we are born, we pass from the little world of the womb into the world we know in all its glory and trials. So, in dying, we will pass into the greater world than any we have seen or comprehended here. That is the vision granted to the believer. It is what Martha alludes to in her reference to the Resurrection – before it has been revealed in Christ. It is no accident that the day of a saint's death is called their 'heavenly birthday'.

Lazarus, whose miraculous restoration to this life will become the ultimate provocation and threat to the disbelieving authorities, will, we know, have to die again. So it is with any of us who have had a close encounter with the Grim Reaper. But by being in Christ, the divine life of God in Man, we will be transported from the dust of death into the future of the eternal kingdom and into the Resurrection Body.

For the non-believer, sadly but inevitably, death is the ultimate denial of meaning and the painful confirmation of the apparent utter pointlessness of their existence. No wonder the old men are angry. Pride prevents them from reviewing their prejudice. We have to find a loving way to help them climb out of the grave they have dug for themselves with the pick of pride and the spade of vainglory. We need to be able to tell them, even yet, 'I love you too much to let you die in this desolation and despair. It's not too late to ask Jesus to come to you'.