

Dear Friends,

Today we find ourselves at the threshold of the final journey to the resurrection of the Lord. As I said last week, the forty day fast of Lent has concluded, and we are in the brief respite before the fast of Holy Week begins. The Church marks this respite by giving us a relief from the strict rules of fasting: today, Palm Sunday, fish is once more permitted on the table, alongside wine and oil. And in this pause our attention is drawn to two stories from St John's Gospel – the raising of Lazarus on the Saturday, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday.

The two events did not, of course, occur in such swift proximity to each other. If we read St John's Gospel carefully, we will be aware that there is a significant time lapse between them. But St John ties the two stories together, telling us that many of those who came to meet the Lord at Bethany did so out of curiosity, because they had heard of the miracle performed on St Lazarus, and that the crowd who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem testified to the miracle and drew more people to them because they heard about this sign. In consequence the authorities decided that Lazarus, too, would have to be put to death alongside Jesus.

Although we may not be aware of it, these passages are crucial to the way St John tells the story of Jesus. We are so used to hearing little snippets of the Gospels in the church services, and have so often created a mental version of the Gospel story which runs elements from all four Gospels into one, that we fail to take account of the differences in both incident and emphasis which distinguish one of the Gospels from the others. Perhaps this Holy Week, shut up at home as we are and unable to participate in the public services of the Church (which themselves have been suspended) we could think about familiarising ourselves with one Gospel, reading it and noting what is in it and what is not, looking at the way in which the author arranged his material to tell his story and what that tells us about the story itself, and therefore about the life of Christ.

If we do this with St John's Gospel one of the first things we will notice is that he likes to count. The events of Chapters 1 and 2 take place over a period of about a week (four days in Chapter 1, and a wedding "on the third day" after this at the beginning of Chapter 2). And at the beginning of Chapter 2 and the end of Chapter 4 we are told of the first and the second signs (St John does not use the word "miracle") of Jesus' ministry. This should give us a hint. If we continue the count of signs we move through the healing of the paralysed man at the Pool of Bethesda (Chapter 5), the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on the water (both in Chapter 6), the healing of the man who had been born blind (Chapter 9) and finally the sign of the raising of Lazarus (Chapter 11). Seven days in Chapters 1 and 2; seven signs in Chapters 2 to 11.

As good readers of the Bible we are aware (or should be) of the importance of the number seven. It is the number of completion and of fullness. God completed the creation of the world in seven days, as the story is told in Genesis, and human beings progress through time in units of seven days. Each week was marked by the Jewish people of Jesus' time by a weekly celebration (the Sabbath), a day of rest from secular work in honour of God the Creator and the Deliverer of his people. (See Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 for the two reasons given to the Jews for observing the Sabbath as a day of rest.) And so, when we hear of Jesus moving through a week at the start of his story, and when we hear of his seven signs, we should hear these echoes, becoming aware that St John intends us to understand something beyond a simple chronology or catalogue. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear that first week encapsulates the whole of Jesus' ministry, and the seven signs give a complete picture of God's dealings with his world.

With the raising of Lazarus we reach the high point of St John's "Book of Signs" and we move into the second part of his Gospel, the "Book of the Glorification". The return of someone who had been dead for four days, and whose body was already decomposing, ends the first part of the story on a high note. But as Jesus has already said (in Chapter 1), "You will see greater things than these." The story that St John now embarks on takes us beyond the sevens of this world's completeness and into the Eighth Day of the renewal of God's Kingdom. The return of Lazarus to the life of this world is to be eclipsed by the resurrection of the incarnate Word of God to the unending and immortal life of the world to come. The week that marked the completion of the created world becomes a gateway into eternity. "Look!" says the risen Lord, "I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5).

And that includes us, if only we are willing to enter into that new life. In this respite period, as we gather our strength for the journey ahead of us, let us remind ourselves that we are part of the Gospel story that St John tells. We, too, are part of the world of signs, the world of the sevens. But in this coming week we will be moving through the completion of that world into the perfection of the new world of the Resurrection. And although this year we may not be able to share in the services of Easter in the same physical space let us in this week "purify our senses" so that we will "see Christ shining forth in the unapproachable light of the resurrection"; let us prepare to forgive all in that light, to call even those who hate us our brothers and sisters, and not simply to say, but to live the truth that Christ is risen! Amen.