

**Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist**

**The Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**26<sup>th</sup> March 2023**

It's the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent and it's a turning point. Passion Sunday, the beginning of Passiontide. We began this journey through Lent in the wilderness at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Now, only four weeks on, we find ourselves on a road leading towards Jerusalem, and the city walls that were a smudge on the horizon are clear now, and the sun flashes off the armour of the guards at the city gates. We're not heading for the gates, not yet. Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Bethany, a couple of miles outside Jerusalem, where Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus live.

There is a company with us on the road. I don't mean the company of the disciples. I mean another company, the people we have met on the way through Lent. Four people, four stories the lectionary has given us on the Sundays of Lent, in readings that have been used along the way of this journey for centuries. Four readings from the Gospel of John.

Four people. Nicodemus, who comes to see Jesus by night; and the woman Jesus meets at the well outside a Samaritan village; and the man born blind whom Jesus heals; and today Lazarus, who has died.

They were all bound, these four, when Jesus met them. Bound, trapped, captive, stuck. Dead. Jesus sets them free. He meets them where they are. But into where they are, he brings something freeing, something that unbinds them. We see how they respond, and we learn something about ourselves and how we respond. We are part of their company.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus about breath. The breath of God, the spirit, the wind of God that blew over the face of the waters, creating, blowing where it likes. He asks Nicodemus, a respectable man, a member of the Council, a pillar of society, to let the wind take him, to fly. To be reborn in the breath of God. You can feel Nicodemus's common sense, his caution, his solid respectability weighing him down.

[is that you? attracted, pulled, cautious?]

Jesus talks to the woman at the well about water. Living water, fresh running water, the water that gives life, the water that quenches thirst. The woman has a perfectly good well, and a perfectly good water jar. Does she need this other water? But she falls into conversation with this stranger at the well, and the conversation uncovers a dissatisfaction, a questioning – after all, she is looking for something. There's an incompleteness about her. In the end she runs back to the village without her water jar, with the news about Jesus.

[is that you? challenged, disconcerted, reoriented? and what happens next?]

Jesus doesn't say much to the man who was blind. He makes him whole with hardly a word, and with a handful of mud. And then he tells the man to go and wash. After that there's a whole drama while people run round saying 'who did that?' 'is he allowed to do that?' and the man patiently tells the story of what happened, over and over. About what happened, there's a great simplicity.

[is that you? made whole. inexplicable, unaccountable, it just is]

Breath, and water, and mud. But now stone. Lazarus is dead and there is a stone over his tomb. Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, are bereaved, bewildered, angry, desolated. Everyone is in a mess. They argue, they cry, they try to pull themselves together, they weep again. Jesus weeps. Jesus is there in the mess of the whole thing. Out of that, he summons Lazarus to life, and says to the others Unbind him and let him go.

[is that you? that's all of us. we come to life in Christ. we are reborn in Christ, and we need people, a community, to unbind us. We are made whole in Christ, like the man healed with mud, and we need to ask who we are now and how it came to be. We find the living water in Christ, like the woman at the well, and we know ourselves as we never knew ourselves before. Like Nicodemus, we recognise something freeing in Christ, something true, something that would bring us out of the night we're wandering about in, into the light of morning.]

We are of this company. And this is the company of the disciples. Jesus has said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' And they try to persuade him it'll be dangerous, and he explains about Lazarus, and it's clear that he's determined to go. Thomas says –

Thomas deserves a pause. The week after Easter there'll be the story about Thomas. Thomas wasn't there when the others saw Jesus, and he doubts just the evidence of what they say. He wants to see for himself. Thomas who gets called doubting. This is the same Thomas, and now, when Jesus is running into danger and there seems to be nothing more they can do about it, he says to the others 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

We are on the road leading towards Jerusalem, and the city walls that were a smudge on the horizon are clear now, and the sun flashes off the armour of the guards at the city gates. They will go into the city with Jesus, and so will the company of people we have been remembering who have been set free and come to life in Christ, and so will we. We die with him. We die in the death of Christ on the cross.

*Do you not know, says Paul, that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. Baptised in the water, grounded in the mud, breathed into by the Spirit who is life in us, and peace.*

The Very Revd Dr Elizabeth Thomson

Provost