

***“The Reach of Christ’s Voice”***

**(John 11.1-45)**

**Grant Bullen**

***Everyone But Me***

Many years ago, while I was running a Retreat interstate, a senior priest came to talk privately. It was one of the most chilling conversations I’ve ever had. Each and every week he stood in church preaching that God loves *everyone*... all people... for this is what he earnestly believed. But unknown to his congregation, behind his breath there was a caveat... *“Everyone except me!”* This was an absolute conviction he’d held over many years, and there was nothing I could do to challenge it. He had done *something*, (I never knew what), that he believed put him beyond the touch of God’s love. He was living in a realm that Christ’s voice could not reach. *‘God loves everyone, but He can’t love me because of what I’ve done?’*

What about you and me? Are there places in our lives where we believe Christ’s voice cannot reach? My guess is that we all have them.

***Waking Lazarus*** (John 11.1-45)

Throughout time, *death* has stood as the final frontier... the impenetrable shroud... the darkness that we enter never to return.<sup>1</sup> If there is a place that God’s voice is not heard, then surely death must be it. The ancient Hebrews had no concept resembling what we call ‘heaven’... rather they believed in *Sheol*, the shadowy underworld of the dead, and it was indeed a place that God did not enter.

But as Christians, we have the story of the *Raising of Lazarus*.

The story opens with reports of Lazarus being ill. And because we, the readers, are now well accustomed to Jesus healing the sick, we confidently expect there will be a happy outcome. But *this* is different. Lazarus is not just sick... he’s dying! By the time Jesus reaches him, he’s been dead four days (17). This detail is important as the Jews believed that the soul remained with the body until the third day, and then it was released. So Lazarus is irretrievably gone... and just in case we don’t get it, Martha graphically tells Jesus that by now, the body stinks in its corruption. (39) What can Jesus do with a dead man? Will his voice reach that far?

It’s important to pretend we don’t know the final reel, so we feel the tension. Everyone, friend and foe alike, is watching Jesus, for this is no sure thing. Even the disciples are confused and disturbed by their master’s behaviour. Martha and Mary, *do* have faith... to a point... but it is by

no means complete. They too are puzzled, and not sure what Jesus will do. They do, however, have sufficient trust to take him to the place where the body is entombed... and enough faith to roll away the stone.

Then... Jesus calls through the veil of death with a loud voice, *“Lazarus, come out!”* And the dead-man hears the voice of Christ, hears the call to life, and steps from the darkness of the tomb, into the light of day.

Jesus says,

*“I am the resurrection and the life.  
Those who believe in me,  
(those who respond to my voice),  
even though they die, will live.”* (25)

There is no place where Christ’s voice, his invitation to life, does not reach.<sup>ii</sup>

### ***Our Experience***

This is the conviction of the Christian faith... But what about us? Are there places in our lives where we believe God cannot reach? A place where we are deeply wounded... a grief buried in the dark recesses of our heart. A relationship, dead and decaying for so many years, that we think it’s beyond any resurrection. A deep-seated anxiety... or something so shameful that we’d never bring it into the light.

We may not ever think of these places – they’re hidden... pushed under conscious awareness because they’re too painful.. But just because they’re hidden doesn’t mean they’re not active. They play out in our lives all the time. They go toxic in the cellar of our being... breeding all manner of psychological, even physical, harm. And they block what should be the healing, life-giving power of our faith. Effectively we erect no-go zones to God’s Spirit... literally carving inner tombs of darkness guarded by an immovable stone. There are parts of our lives where we *never* invite God’s presence... where the gospel light never shines.

But today’s gospel calls us to have just enough faith, to take Christ to the place where the body is buried, to roll away the stone... and to watch what he might do.

### ***Expectations***

If we found sufficient courage to do this, what could we legitimately expect?

A miracle? Yes... but what sort of miracle? In scripture, tradition and experience, it's rare for God to transcend the laws of nature. There are times this happens, but I don't expect such a response to my prayer. Therefore, for example, I accept death as part of life – those I love *will* die and it would be madness for me to ask for it to be different. So what sort of miracle could we expect? What *is it* that Christ is offering?

Here's what I hear on offer... **That there is no place that *new life, resurrected life, cannot reach!*** There is no place, in the world, in the church, in this community... in my life... that is beyond the reach of Christ's voice calling us to life!

A broken relationship *can* be healed. Even the church *could* be renewed – the dusty barren bones of our carcass, brought back into a body of life as in Ezekiel's prophecy. (37.1-14) Even in death, God's love carries both the deceased and the bereaved to a new beginning. And in moments of faith, I do believe that the Spirit can reach and transform, even this stony heart of mine.

### **What We Look For**

These days, I choose to go to prayer without expectation of any specific outcome. This is what experience has taught me. In response to today's gospel, I will try to find just enough faith, to take Christ Jesus to the site where I've buried my dead bodies... just enough courage to roll away the stone over my heart... and then I'll stand back and watch. I'll be looking for any sign of movement, any hint of healing or new beginning... any unexpected stirrings of goodness and life.

Recently I came across a story from J V Taylor, that I think describes a Lazarus experience.

*“(I remember the day) when a West Indian woman in a London flat was told of her husband's death in a street accident. The shock of grief stunned her like a blow, she sank into a corner of the sofa and sat there rigid and unhearing. For a long time her terrible tranced look continued to embarrass the family, friends and officials who came and went.*

*Then the schoolteacher of one of her children, an Englishwoman, called and, seeing how things were, went and sat beside her. Without a word she threw an arm around the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. The white cheek was thrust hard against the brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeped through to her, the teacher's tears began to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap. For a long while that was all that was happening. And then at last the West Indian woman started to sob. Still not a word was spoken and after a little while the visitor got up and went, leaving her contribution to the family's immediate needs. That is the embrace of God, his kiss of life. That is the embrace of his mission, and of our intercession. And the Holy Spirit is the force in the straining muscles of an arm, the film of sweat between pressed cheeks, the mingled wetness on the back of clasped hands. He is as close and as unobtrusive as that, and as irresistibly strong.”<sup>iii</sup>*

There is no place where Christ's voice, Christ's light, cannot reach!

---

<sup>i</sup> Like the *Way of the Dead* in the *Lord of the Rings* – once you walk through those doors you will never be seen or heard of again.

<sup>ii</sup> Earlier in John 5.25 Jesus has said, “*Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.*” This teaching also connects with the tradition that after the cross, Jesus descends to Hell to preach to the dead. His reach knows no boundaries!

<sup>iii</sup> J.V.Taylor, “*The Go-Between God*”