

I am the resurrection and the life

As most of you know, I work in Canterbury, where I am lecturer in a department of Theology & Religious Studies. I have brilliant colleagues, who are experts in the world's religions. They read the ancient texts in their original sacred languages, like Sanskrit; and they teach courses and supervise doctorates on Kantian ethics, Parmenidean apophaticism, Losskian mysticism, Nietzschean cosmological aesthetics; trulkhor with the practices of *gTum mo* and *prāṇāyāma*; Chinese philosophies. I am always in awe of them.

But I blew them all away the other day in a staff meeting. I quoted them a Scottish philosopher I am very fond of, that they didn't know about. He's in the tradition of atheist or agnostic Scottish philosophers, those who are not sure about God, and he says – "I'm totally non-religious. ... I've absolutely no idea if God exists. It seems unlikely to me but then – does a trout know that I exist?" That, of course, is the great Scottish philosopher Billy Connolly. You've heard of him?

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I am constantly learning from my esteemed academic colleagues about the world's religions. And I am genuinely interested in the religions. In fact, I have a theory about religion and what we like about it. And here I'm talking about all religion, including the Christian religion. I think that, whatever else we might say, we really like the rules. We really like the do's and don'ts in religion, although we say we don't.

And we like that keeping the rules – or at least knowing that the rules are – gives us a sense of order in a world so often in chaos; rules give us familiar patterns in lives that are always vulnerable to change and the unpleasant surprise. Having rules in religion gives us a sense of control of our lives. Why? Keep them to a tee or buck

against them, in the end, it is we who are in the driving seat.

We of course also like that religion gives us teachings we can believe, – about the world, about ourselves, – hooks on which we can hang our uncertainties, our doubts, our insecurities; but crucially also our hopes and aspirations. Yet I think that what we really like is the idea that believing the right things, and specially doing the right things will make God happy with us. And we want to keep him happy....

So we specially like that we can schedule in religion. Sunday morning at 11am, once a week; or at morning prayer, or evening prayer, at whatever times we make for God. And this gives us the illusion that we can schedule in God.

And that of course is exactly the problem: we think we get to pencil in the rules, pencil in God, and so pencil in a win with God. And this feeds into our very human instinct to turn God to our advantage: we want to God to turn up when we're ready, to be there when we need him. And we want to be able to say, "Please, would you quietly go away; I would rather do my own thing just now, thank you very much."

Perhaps I only speak for myself: I certainly recognise in my own life the temptation to think that I can pencil God in at key points in the week. Which of course only means that I can just as easily pencil him out.

But you won't be surprised to hear that the God I choose to pencil into my life, is the one who tells me what I want to hear. And, – let's be absolutely clear, – I always want to hear from an always affirming, always warm, cotton candy God. That's the God I want. It ain't the God I need.

The God I need is the one Jesus shows us in the story of Lazarus – the one who blows out of the tomb, – that strange God that blows with Lazarus out of the tomb. Sadly, I would prefer to go on thinking that I am able to self-select how much of that strange God I need.

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In the story of Lazarus, Jesus shows us God who is the God of the NOW! God everywhere, God at all times. With or without the rules — we live in God’s present tense – in God’s active and eternal now! That cannot be scheduled in, or scheduled out, or controlled in any other way. That God can only be received, and lived, and be thanked, and shared with others, as we do today. I need that God, the first-person-initiative-God that Jesus is showing us in the resurrection of Lazarus.

When Martha says to Jesus ‘I know that my brother will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus says, ‘I AM the resurrection and the life.’ In John’s Gospel we hear Jesus refer to himself in that distinctive way: I am, time and again: “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the gate.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life” And now ... “I am the Resurrection.”

And each time Jesus says this, the words “I AM” draw his hearers, – a first-century Jewish audience steeped in the words of the Old Testament – back to a pivotal point in biblical history. In the book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and sends him to Egypt to lead the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom. That is not what Moses was expecting; and, if you must know, that God speaking from inside the burning bush was against the rules.

So Moses asks to know the name of God. The voice of God speaking from the burning bush simply says, “I am who I am.”¹ And now Jesus, – standing before the tomb of Lazarus, – makes it know to everyone around that even Lazarus, who has been buried for four days, is in God’s present tense, in the I AM that is God.

“Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I say this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe. And he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’” Lazarus comes out covered in burial cloths, “his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, his face wrapped in a cloth,” and Jesus simply says, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

But it’s no wonder that when Lazarus walks out of the tomb, the religious people want to kill Lazarus. That’s a part of the story we don’t often hear about. It’s in the chapter following the one we read. They want to kill Lazarus because God’s ever-living now goes against the rules: it means God cannot be managed or controlled, — either by religion, or by unbelief – God cannot be ruled in or out at will. For Jesus, God’s life-giving Spirit cannot be suppressed, and now erupts out of the tomb.

But the religious people need Lazarus to go back in the tomb. Because they cannot handle a God who is, quite frankly, out of control. And because the same God who spoke to Moses, the great I AM, now speaks again in Jesus. “Do you believe?” says Jesus to Martha. “Yes, Lord,” says Martha, “I believe it that you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’

But for the others, it’s an embarrassment, to say the least, to be laid open before a God who will not be shut in the tomb of unbelief.

I recently went to hear Mona Siddiqui, the well-known scholar of Islam, who is also on Thought For The Day. She was speaking about interfaith Muslim-Christian dialogue. Here is what she said, speaking of Jesus:

“I try to explain to my Muslim friends who Jesus is to Christians. As Muslims, we think in terms of a prophet, because Mohammed is for us the prophet. But for Christians, Jesus is not a prophet with a message. Jesus IS the message.”

¹ אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (Exodus 3.14); John Wycliffe, 14th

c. translated this as “I will be what I will be.”

She gets it. She gets that in the Gospel, Jesus is God's 1st person resolve, that God's present and eternal now is who Jesus is.

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But I think the story of Lazarus' resurrection is more simple than we think. But simple is hard to do. Let me illustrate this with a story. Carlos Kleiber was considered by many to be the greatest conductor of the 20th century. Kleiber was conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. And he was known as an exacting conductor, rehearsing things in minute detail. The musicians even found to their annoyance that Kleiber added his own markings on the musical scores indicating how they should bow their instruments, or he would indicate "smile" in the cellos or violin parts. Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians came from the best orchestras the world over. Some were irritated by Kleiber, others felt patronized, others were infuriated. But most knew Kleiber as an eccentric, and they were determined to show the legendary conductor how good they were. They started rehearsing a very difficult piece. It was their first rehearsal. The orchestra started the overture on the upswing, but Kleiber stopped the musicians after the first three notes. He said to the orchestra— 'Well, now, no, no, it's not right. As the overture starts, I want you to see a painting, there is a mist arising from behind the trees of a German forest...' The first horn at that point puts his hand up and says, "Maestro, can I ask you a question?" "Yes, sir, what is it?" "Do you mean play louder?" "Ah, yes, that is exactly what I mean."

Theologians are always being accused of making things more complicated than they need to be. And here I am telling on myself. But I think in the story of Lazarus, the message really is that we need help: we need God in the way Jesus shows us God, time and again: we need God, life-giving and resurrecting in us, time and again.

And we need the God who said to Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones – "Preach into the wind – and

tell the four winds to blow new life into these desiccated bodies – fill their nostrils, and by my Spirit, let them live."

In that reading, it is the Spirit of God who leads Ezekiel to find those desiccated bones that God want to bring to life.

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Many of you have been part of our Lent Film group, where we watch and discuss a film, and pray the various questions and emotions it raises for us at Lent. In one of the films we saw, the principal character concludes at the end of the film that "*Events unfold so unpredictably, so unfairly, human happiness does not seem to have been included, in the design of creation. So, in the end, we define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are in fact the sum total of our choices.*"²

It is a tragic moment in the story. But Ezekiel says that there is life beyond the choices we make: "The Hand of the Lord came upon me – and by the Spirit of the Lord set me down in the middle of a valley – it was full of bones. ... Then he said 'Prophecy to these dry bones.'"

We are not defined by the choices we make, but by the Spirit of God who chooses us to raise up new life. And so we need God to take us – in our final days of Lent – to those dry valleys in ourselves we would rather not visit. We need God to breath on us and soothe a pain, or to blow away guilt or a memory of shame; to disperse any lingering sense of doubt about God's unbounded love for us.

And so, in all the various ways we can participate in Holy Week this year, maybe this is the year, when we come on Maundy Thursday to have our feet washed. And we don't even check for holes in our socks. We just turn up! And we come forward for the foot washing, to receive the humbling grace of being served, being cared for, being made clean.

² Woody Allen, 'Crimes and Misdemeanors' (1989).

That's where the story is taking us: to the I AM WHO IS RESURRECTION AND LIFE. And you and I will go with him as far as Palm Sunday. But after that, Jesus will make his own way to the cross. Amen.