

## Homily Trinity 16

Our Lord's raising of Lazarus from the dead is one of the most familiar images in the New Testament. Probably it is so memorable because it is at such utter odds with our own knowledge. So far as any of us know from our own personal experience, the experience of our physical senses, when someone dies, that person stays dead. Thus it is a strange and enticing novelty to be informed that, in the past, some have indeed come back from death.

Our New Testament lesson for today centers around this miracle. At least, that is what we, in today's world would call it. But the bible has a different term for this event, The Bible calls it a sign.

The difference is important because it reflects a profound contrast between how ancient people and how modern people approach the world.

People today are very curious about how things work and curious as to what makes things happen as they do. A miracle is what we call something we don't understand or cannot be explained scientifically. A sign is something that points to a reality beyond itself.

In a culture devoted to science and technology, the hope is to be able not only to understand but to predict, and ultimately control, everything that happens in the world. Today, we live in such a culture.

But ancient man, especially Biblical man, had no such aspirations. Ancient man understood the natural world in terms of the supernatural and was content with that reality. When confronted with something that was strange or unusual, his curiosity led him to ask about its meaning, not the mechanics behind it.

Understand, It is possible to be both a man of science and also be a man of great faith. Many of our greatest scientists have been both and still are. But many people today deny that there is any reality

beyond what our senses can perceive. Nothing exists, they think, that that we will not eventually understand and control.

We, as a culture, have labored for years under that presumption. Many politicians as well as many scientists have come to believe that we can or should be able to make things happen that we want to happen and prevent things from happening if we deem them undesirable.

We have made great progress in that direction; we understand how many things work. Still, we are frustrated by the fact that a handful of people can hijack an airplane and fly it into an occupied building. We remain frustrated by the violence in our streets and by the fact that natural events like an earthquake or a hurricane can paralyze an entire city while they destroy both lives and property. We invented firearms but cannot control them. We discovered nuclear energy but cannot confine it to peaceful uses.

Today we live with the ever present worry that cyber-terrorists could shut down our computers and make it impossible to do business, or could even take over the computers that control our traffic or our weapons systems and turn them against us.

To paraphrase a familiar New Testament statement, he who lives by technology will die by technology.

Our artists, philosophers and our preachers have long tried to focus on the question of life's meaning and have tried to help us answer it. But we have become so obsessed with Mathematics and Science that we consign such disciplines as religion and the arts to elective status, especially when it comes to allocating educational resources. Partly as a reaction and partly as a surrender to that trend, Psychologists, Sociologists, and others who work in the field of human behavior are now at pains to see themselves as scientists and reduce their research to gathering and compiling statistical data and merely look at trends.

Even the study of government, which was once a branch of philosophy, is now called Political Science. Still we are frustrated by our inability to control human behavior much less the behavior of the wind or the oceans or the stability of the earth itself.

Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

A more spiritual age says to us, "There are more things in heaven and earth than your technology can control or comprehend."

"How does it all work?" is a legitimate question and an interesting one. Finding the answer may make us more comfortable but asking "What does it mean?" is an essential question, and finding the answer to that question is what will make us more human and more content with life.

This meaning of life discussion and the battle between faith and science brings us to the message we learn today from our second lesson.

The raising of Lazarus is a sign: it points to a reality beyond itself. The man was clearly dead; Jesus even delayed coming on the scene in order to make sure that everybody knew he was completely dead. Then Jesus called into the darkness of the tomb and Lazarus came forth in obedience to the Lord's command. It was the word of God that raised him from the dead. That is the message of the story.

Forget about the details of how such a thing is possible. What is important is to recognize that the Word of God is more powerful than death, and that Word, the same Word that called the world into being at the beginning of creation, was present in the person of Jesus. That is what this event signifies.

The raising of Lazarus harks back to the beginning of creation as outlined in the opening chapter of this Gospel:

*“In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. ... in him was life and the life was the light of men.”*

This sign, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is explicitly linked with the revelation of God's glory. All of the signs were revelations of who Jesus is and what he offers. The final sign, the raising of Lazarus, points most clearly to what has been at the heart of the revelation all the way through and what was emphasized in Jesus' keynote address in John chapter 5. Jesus is the one who gives life.

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.*

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”*

The irony, of course, is that he gives life by giving up his own life on the cross. A further irony is that by giving life to Lazarus, Jesus sets in motion his own death. The raising of Lazarus, then, is the final sign before the event that actually accomplishes what all the signs have pointed toward--the provision of life through the death of the Son of God.

Perhaps our most gifted thinkers are dealing with the wrong questions. Perhaps technology is simply a useful tool after all. Perhaps we should be thinking more about “What does it mean?” and not so much about “How does it work?” Perhaps we need to focus on the signs and not so much on the miracles.

To the only wise God, our savior Be glory, majesty, dominion and power Both now and forever. Amen

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