

CHESTER CATHEDRAL Passion Sunday 10th April 2011
Cathedral Eucharist 10am
Sermon by Canon Chris Humphries, Vice-Dean and Precentor

Readings: Ezekiel 37 v 1 – 14; John 11 v 1 – 45
Theme: Jesus, Lord of life and death

Cassius Clay, later to be known as Muhammed Ali, Heavyweight Boxing champion of the world, was not known as a modest man. You would hear him say:

“I am the greatest. I’m gonna wup that Joe Frazier. He’s ugly. I am the most handsome boxer there has ever been. I am the greatest!”

And although there was a degree of humour and tongue in cheek with all of this, designed to attract attention and get more paying customers to watch his fights, Muhammed Ali had a great career because he lived up to his claims. He did beat fearsome champions like Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman among others.

But it was his style that startled the British public who had never come across this degree of self-promotion by a public personality before. The British sporting style is more typified nowadays by the cricketer Andrew Strauss, or the Racing driver Jenson Button, a lot more measured and modest about their achievements.

How does this relate to our long and dramatic Gospel reading?
At first sight, Jesus seems to outdo even Muhammed Ali by his self promotion. Consider the number of “I am” sayings that we find in the Gospel writings. “I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the good shepherd, I am the door of the sheepfold, I am the light of the world” – all huge claims which would need to be backed up by subsequent events, but no claim was as striking as the one in today’s gospel reading where Jesus comforts Martha, whose brother Lazarus has just died, with the words “I am the resurrection and the life.”

If this extraordinary claim is not true, then we may well consider Jesus as deluded or as a fraudster and a fake. But if true, we need to be clear that this claim, more than any of the other “I am” sayings marks out the Christian faith from other world religions or philosophical standpoints. When I was a curate in Bradford I was interested to discover that my Moslem neighbours believed in Jesus. They believed that he lived and died. To them he was a great prophet. But they didn’t believe that he died

on the cross and rose again. In fact some of them believed that Judas was crucified in Jesus' place, after all, Judas was the traitor and Allah, being a just and righteous God would surely punish him, wouldn't he?

The claim of Jesus to be Lord even over death itself is hard to take for agnostics or people of other faiths, and its easy to see why, because once you believe that Jesus rose from death then you have taken on board the foundation of all Christian life and belief. And even before the Resurrection of Jesus himself, for the Jewish authorities and ordinary Jewish people at that time, the raising of Lazarus was a critical event. It made it hard to sit on the fence in working out who Jesus was.

On this Passion Sunday we need to see the bigger picture, the context for this remarkable event. In John chapter 11 the Passion story starts to gather momentum as Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem and, very publicly, raises Lazarus from the tomb. The initial delay of two days in going to Lazarus is puzzling. Why doesn't Jesus go immediately to the aid of his desperately sick friend? But we are now entering the final conflict and although Jesus has great compassion for Lazarus, he is keenly aware of God's timing. So when he eventually sets out for Bethany and Jerusalem it is with a clear realisation that this is the moment for confronting the compromise and convenience of the Pharisees; the religious observance that looks good, but doesn't ring true. And as Jesus sets out, the disciple Thomas realises that there is no going back. "Let us also go, that we may die with him".(PAUSE)

In fact later on we see that the raising of Lazarus produced very different reactions among the Jews. Some went to the High Priest and stirred up big trouble for Jesus, while other found that the claims of Jesus rang true, that they were borne out by the things he did and the way he lived – and those people believed and followed him, and thus in the end were prepared to change their traditional Jewish beliefs to accommodate a Messiah who was a mere carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee. (PAUSE)

So what about this self-promoting claim? What exactly did Jesus mean when he spoke to Martha ? Let's look at all of what he said.

Jesus said to her "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

One thing is clear: Jesus was not thinking of doing the undertakers out of a job. Many of us can quickly bring to mind wonderful Christian people who have died in recent times...family members, church members, present day saints from across the world, and from our own community.

Jesus' own disciples died – Mark and Matthew, Peter and John. Every Christian has to face physical death as all mortal beings have to. So we must look further to see what Jesus means “they who live and believe in me shall never die.”

Firstly, the unlimited life Jesus was offering was in stark contrast to the death that sin brings. Not a popular or easily understood word, sin, but think of it as going our own way without reference to God, or consciously rebelling against God. Jesus was saying “Even if someone is dead in sin, or through their sins has lost all that makes life worth living, I can call them back to life again.”

Like the thief on the cross, there are striking examples of people seemingly snatched from the jaws of hell by the love of Christ. The writer A.M Chirgwin told the true story of Tokichi Ishii, a brutal and cold-blooded murderer. Awaiting execution he was visited in prison by 2 Canadian women who tried to talk with him and bring something of the love of Christ to him.

He glowered at them through the prison bars, but did accept a Bible which he later began to read. It was the account of the crucifixion that made the breakthrough, especially the words of Jesus from the cross “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” “I stopped” Tokichi Ishii said “I was stabbed to the heart as if pierced by a 5 inch nail. Is it called the love of Christ? Shall I call it his compassion? I only know that I believed, and my hardness of heart was changed.” Tokichi Ishii did pay the ultimate penalty for his crimes, but when he went to be executed he was no longer snarling and surly, but radiant and at peace with himself. The murderer had encountered the saving grace of Christ. *(quoted in William Barclay's commentary on John's Gospel)*

And if you feel that God is sometimes less than fair about who he saves, then think for a moment. People can be so self-centred that they are dead to other people's needs. They can be so insensitive that they do not consider the feelings of others. A person's life can be so hopelessly bound up with worldly priorities and desires that they are spiritually lifeless. Particularly in Lent we face the fact that that man or woman can be you or me.

Like Lazarus, the Lord will have to take dramatic measures to raise us to life.

Ezekiel's vision of the rattling dry bones comes to mind, and God's word that came to him: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” Breathe on us, breath of God, fill us with life anew.

Secondly, as well as the death of sin, and freedom from it, Jesus was thinking of life the other side of the grave. Our Christian creeds are clear about this. We believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus brings to us the sure hope that physical death is not the end. St Paul took the early Christians to task about this, especially those in Corinth – he urged them not to be half-hearted about this part of the Christian message “If Christ be not raised, then our proclamation and your faith has been in vain. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” Our hope of heaven gives our present earthly lives meaning and purpose. Through Jesus we are not riding into the sunset, but waiting for the dawn, for the sunrise. (PAUSE)

Those of you who have seen footage of Muhammed Ali in more recent years will know that he suffers from Parkinson’s Disease and that this mighty boxer and athlete has been physically frail. Thankfully it has not quenched all of his spirit, and he has continued with important charitable work. But like us, he is mortal, the pictures and accounts of his sporting triumphs pass into history.

Yet we can still say of Jesus that he is the Resurrection and the life. He still saves us from sin, transforms and remakes us, he still conquers death itself and points the way to the fuller life that is yet to be. To quote our Offertory hymn this morning: “But this I know, he heals the broken hearted, and stays our sin and calms our lurking fear: and lifts the burden from the heavy laden; for still the Saviour, Saviour of the world is here.”