

Session 5: New life merging out of death

Stillness

Take a moment to become still as we begin this session: Assuming you're alone and sitting and able to stand up, let's do something with the body . . . if you're in a public space or outside, micro-movements, or even imagining this happening instead will be fine . . . begin by standing up . . . let your back straighten and breathe in . . . keep breathing normally . . . What posture expresses how you are feeling today? . . . adopt that posture . . . let God look at you or be with you in any way that God wants . . . stay with that focus . . . how is God wanting you to move your body? . . . allow that to happen . . . let God look at you a bit longer . . . and return to your chair . . . We will now hear this session's reading from the Gospel of John.

Scripture (John 11: 17-19, 38-44)

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother..... Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Reflection

As we journey through Lent we come closer to the time of Jesus' suffering and death, a time that is foreshadowed by the events in Bethany recorded in today's reading. Jesus and his friends had been travelling towards Jerusalem for the Passover festival, when their journey was interrupted by a messenger bringing the news that Jesus' dear friend Lazarus was critically ill. There is a curious delay between Jesus receiving this news and actually arriving in Bethany – a delay during which he promises, enigmatically, that this sickness will not end in death but will reveal the greater glory of God. Yet when he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead and buried for four days.

If you make the Spiritual Exercises you will be invited by Inigo, and your guide, to spend some time 'in the tomb'. This will be a day or a few days spent simply being utterly empty before God and willing to wait in the darkness. Inigo knew this experience of emptiness in his own life, and also discovered for himself that new things grow in the darkness and that the tomb is like a chrysalis, holding at its heart the potential for transformation.

The events that follow are punctuated by three powerful commands issued by Jesus, the first to Lazarus' sister Martha, the second to Lazarus himself and the third to all those in the crowd that had gathered. Are they also commands to us in our own lives?

Jesus first tells the distraught Martha to 'take away the stone', prefiguring the miraculous rolling away of the stone that would cover his own tomb a few days later. She protests. It seems like an impossible thing to do, but Jesus insists. What immovable stones seem to be blocking our own path into the future we long to build for ourselves and for our Earth and all her creatures?

Once the stone has been removed Jesus calls out to Lazarus with the command to 'Come out'. Is Jesus calling us out of some tomb or captivity of our own? What is keeping us inwardly paralysed and preventing us from embracing the fullness of life that God is offering?

And finally, Jesus tells the bystanders to 'unbind him'. Lazarus is tightly wrapped up in a shroud. Unless he is liberated from this binding, he isn't going anywhere. Is God asking us to help 'unbind' each other, to help each other towards the liberation we all long for. None of us can be freed through our own efforts. We need God and we need each other.

In German the word for 'unbind' is 'entbinden', which gives a whole extra layer of meaning to this command. Entbinden, in German, mainly means to give birth. Birthing needs midwives. The shroud of death will become the swaddling clothes of new life. Are we being asked to be midwives to each other as, slowly and painfully, the fullness of the people we are created to be is coming to birth? Are we being asked to give birth to the 'better' on planet Earth.

Talk to God

For many people the future is blocked by what seem to be immovable stones. Stones such as poverty, exploitation, modern slavery, prejudice, armed conflict and every kind of injustice that causes those who are powerless and voiceless to be marginalised. These are very big boulders. None of us can move them in our own strength, yet each of us can add our own strength to the effort. Maybe this week reflect on any stones you see in the world around you, and ask yourself whether there is anything you can do, along with others, to begin to move them.

Reflect on any kind of entombment or confinement you may be living in yourself. What is preventing you from leaving the apparent safety of your 'tomb' and risking the bright dawn of a new beginning? What might Jesus' command to 'come out' mean for you personally?

All around you, new life is striving to come to birth, but it needs a midwife to unbind the shroud that confines it. Is there someone who needs your help to be unbound? Perhaps a listening ear to help free someone from crippling fears, or to really hear their voice that has been silenced for too long and no longer trusts itself to speak? What does Jesus' command to 'unbind' mean to you? Make a note in your journal of your own experience of being 'entombed', perhaps of the stones that keep you in your tomb or your response to the call to 'Come out'. Try expressing, in words or pictures, anything that is 'binding' you.



In the Third Week, or stage of his Exercises, Inigo invites us to journey with Jesus through his suffering and death. The story of Lazarus challenges us to recognise what love is asking of us as we journey together through the darkness. Lazarus' sickness does not end in death. It is the precursor of new life. May we have the grace this week to trust that promise and be given the courage to make this journey alongside Jesus and alongside each other.