

Along the track

Roll Back the Stone

The raising of Lazarus (John 11:38-53) is a complex and poignant story. When Jesus hears that his friend is ill, at the point of death, he delays, he puts off going to see him. He leaves it 'too late'. When He does arrive, Jesus is deeply moved by the death of his friend and by the grief of Lazarus' sisters. Together they go to visit his tomb and Jesus tells them to 'roll away the stone', which they do with some reluctance. And Jesus calls Lazarus to live again.

When a loved one or a close friend dies, something in us seems to die too. We miss them, not just for who they were to us or what they did for us, we just miss them, we miss having them around, being able to talk to them, to share our lives with them. Sometimes we would like to 'roll back the stone', to see them once more, to take her or him by the hand and lead them into the day.

I have never fully understood what is meant by the expression 'Christ conquered death'. Many people in Jesus' time believed in the afterlife in various forms. And people still die. How 'Christ conquered death' provokes all sorts of theological explanations, all of which I am sure contain some insights, not the least of them the transforming power of hope over hopelessness and despair. But I wonder whether it means, at least in part that Christ conquered death because he showed us how to live, he showed us what 'life to the full' could mean to each of us.

Did Virginia Woolf get it right when she wrote that: '*Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more?*' Value life more and live life more fully. The story of Lazarus reminds us that life is precious, and that those around us are too. The passage of time never completely heals the loss of someone we have loved. We would like to see them again, to tell them this or that – I wish I had done this or that. But we keep going, because we have to, because our loved one would want us to but we can't help but miss them, despite the fact that we believe in life after death, despite the fact that we still have the memories they gifted us, the good that they did, the love they gave us.

Valuing life more means deciding what to do with the time that is given to each of us, no matter what age we may be. It means deciding to be ourselves, to be the person we are meant to be, which means using our God-given gifts and talents, not hiding behind a façade, conforming to what others think we should or should not be. Life can be cluttered with unnecessary worries and with unnecessary cares about what others may think. Sadly, that can diminish life. When the bystanders rolled away the stone, Jesus called on Lazarus to come forth, to live again. He didn't ask for

someone else, just Lazarus. Quite often, we are asked to come forth too – not to be someone else but to bring to life the person we are called to be. Sadly, we don't always appreciate the richness of our own lives. We can be too stressed, too distracted, too busy, too angry or hurt or wounded or jealous or even too restless or afraid. We can think of our lives as small-time, dull, impoverished even – we can spend time looking at others, imagining how much better their lives appear. It is easy to miss the beauty and wonder of our own life, the love and grace and richness that lie within the ordinary moments of our lives, the daily invitations we receive to live life to the full.

Anything really worthwhile takes effort and commitment. Being sensitive to those invitations begins by having some sense of God in our everyday consciousness. That isn't easy today – we don't have the cultural software to assist us, as perhaps was the case in the past. We don't always have the humility to admit that there is Something or Someone greater than me in all this, that there are some things that just defy explanation. Death is one of them. We struggle too with isolation – modern technology can cocoon us – we can become cut off in our quest for self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment. We still need others, we still need friendship and love, we still need to be healed and to be healers of others, to be peacemakers and life-builders for others as well as ourselves. We struggle to know and genuinely follow our own hearts and minds as so many pressures tell us what we should think or how we should act.

In his eulogy to his brother Robert, Ted Kennedy said: *What we can do is to live out our lives as best we can with purpose, and love, and joy. We can use each day to show those who are closest to us how much we care about them, and treat others with the kindness and respect that we wish for ourselves. We can learn from our mistakes and grow from our failures. And we can strive at all costs to make a better world, so that someday, if we are blessed with the chance to look back on our time here, we can know that we spent it well; that we made a difference; that our fleeting presence had a lasting impact on the lives of other human beings.*

Regards
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