

PASSION SUNDAY 2014  
(Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45)

*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8.11)*

If you read your way through the first eleven chapters of Saint John's Gospel – not a bad thing to do at this time of year – you will find that Saint John seeks to elucidate the mystery of Jesus' character and mission by focussing on a number of signs that Jesus performed, coupled with a series of sayings – the so called 'I am' sayings - which reveal the character of God at work in him.

Among the signs recorded in these chapters are the transformation of water into wine, the raising of an official's son, the healing of a paralysed man, the feeding of the 5,000, and the curing of a blind man. Among the sayings are, 'I am the bread of life', 'before Abraham was, I am', 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the gate for the sheep / the good shepherd', and 'I am the resurrection and the life'.

Saint John offers Jesus' signs and sayings to us, not as isolated events and opinions, but as luminous symbols through which – if we choose to spend time mulling and reflecting on them – we can be drawn more deeply into the life of God. The last and perhaps the greatest of the signs recorded by Saint John – we heard it read to us this morning – is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Why should this be meaningful for us?

Robert Browning - a poet forever associated with this church through his marriage here, on 12 September 1846, to Elizabeth Barrett, an equally famous poet (indeed, more so, in her day) - explores the story of Lazarus in his poem, *An Epistle containing the strange medical experience of Karshish, the Arab physician*. Although the poem is written as a letter, it takes the form of a dramatic monologue in which Karshish, an itinerant Arab physician, writes to Abib, his old medical professor, to inform him of his medical discoveries in first century Judea. This, at least, is the expressed purpose of Karshish's letter; but this purpose is undermined by Karshish's bubbling consternation and excitement caused by having met a man called Lazarus, who claims he had been brought back from the grave.

At first, as Karshish describes his meeting with Lazarus to his teacher, he tries to maintain a pose of scientific objectivity by offering a medical explanation of Lazarus's claim resurrection,

    'Tis but a case of mania – subinduced  
    By epilepsy, at the turning-point  
    Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:

Try as he will, though, Karshish cannot dismiss Lazarus's claim to have been raised from the dead as simply an illusion, the result of mania caused by an epileptic coma. There is something about Lazarus' demeanour that confounds such a rational explanation. Rather than a medical diagnosis – "Such cases are

diurnal, 'thou wilt cry' – Karshish has found himself more and more strongly drawn, against his will and medical training, to accept Lazarus as a man who, having briefly inhabited the life of Heaven, has now been forced to resume his life on earth; who now lives with the almost intolerable contradiction of living in two worlds at once,

Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,  
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven.

The result, in Lazarus's case, is to have made him strangely indifferent to many fleeting human concerns – yet he is not apathetic. Far from it for, as Karshish observes,

He loves both old and young,  
Able and weak, affects the very brutes  
And birds – how say I? flowers of the field –  
As a wise workman recognizes tools  
In a master's workshop, loving what they make.  
Thus is the man as harmless as a lamb:  
Only impatient.

Perhaps fearing his old professor will think him mad, Karshish attempts to end his letter on a more formal note,

Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,  
Which, now that I review it, needs must seem  
Unduly dwelt on, prolixly set forth!

But Karshish's fascination with Lazarus bursts out in a final postscript, in which his own spiritual longing becomes plain. Having taken formal leave of Abib, he writes,

The very God! Think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too –  
So, through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
'Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
'Thou has no power nor mayst conceive of mine,  
'But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
'And thou must love me who have died for thee!'  
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

Under the influence of his meeting with Lazarus, Karshish has been forced to entertain such novel thoughts. Suppose, he seems to be saying to Abib, just suppose, that the All-Great God is the All-Loving too. What then? Imagine, that through the thunder of life we could hear God speaking with a human voice, assuring us that our hearts are made to beat in time with God's own heart, that our faces are now mirrored in Christ's face within the life of God. In relation to God, we humans have neither power nor comprehension of God's power, yet God's gift to us is love, with the intention that we find fulfilment for our lives in loving the God who died but lives for us. How can we know this? Because Lazarus – the 'madman' – said Christ said so. Karshish hesitates to accept his word; yet, through his description of Lazarus's character and demeanour we end

the poem with the sense that Karshish has been brought face to face with Christ. It is indeed strange.

Robert Browning's poem, *An Epistle containing the strange medical experience of Karshish, the Arab physician*, is a highly personal reflection on this morning's Gospel reading. But I think the poem is true to Saint John's stated purpose in writing his Gospel, because, through the disturbance wrought in Karshish's life by meeting Lazarus, we see him beginning to entertain the idea that Jesus might indeed be the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing this, to glimpse what it would mean for him to have life in his name (John 20.30-31).

We cannot meet Lazarus – as Browning imagines Karshish doing – but we can meditate on this story, and as we do so we may find ourselves moved by the picture of Jesus weeping at the grave of Lazarus his friend. By a strange and terrible symmetry, according to Saint John, Lazarus's resurrection was the trigger for Jesus' arrest and death. Lazarus lived, but at the cost of Jesus' life. "Greater love hath no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friend", said Jesus. Yet this is the love that God has for you and me.

Think, Abib; dost thou think?

So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too -

What then?