

I am the resurrection – Midweek reflection – Sarah Penfold

‘I am the resurrection and the life: whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’.

These were Jesus’ words to Martha after she had told him of the death of her brother Lazarus. She believed that Lazarus would be resurrected at the last day, at the end of time. But she had no thought of him being brought back to life at that point. Then as Martha watched Jesus called into the tomb.

Emphasis is placed in the story on the fact that Lazarus was four days dead – he cannot have been alive. He walked out still in the grave clothes and became a local sensation. A little while later on the first Palm Sunday John tells us that the crowds came not only to see Jesus but also to see Lazarus.

Modern day medicine has confused the picture for us. We may know of people who have technically ‘died’ and have been brought back fully into life by the knowledge and skill of paramedics and hospital staff. We may also be familiar with the fate of Aslan in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or Anna at the end of the first of the *Frozen* films. But is the reality any less amazing to us than it would have been to Martha as she watched her brother make his impossible journey out of the tomb.

As Christians we tend to think of resurrection in terms of Easter, of life after death, of Jesus willing to give up his own life for us. That willingness which brings into play a whole range of emotions. Am I worth the sacrifice? Could I be? Why would anyone do that? The desolation of nightfall on good Friday followed by the exuberant joy of Easter morning. I’m not really into ceremony but watching the Easter flame spread from a single taper to a church full of light, from the morning star to a glorious sunrise will always be worth an early start.

I have been conscious of a verse from Jeremiah. ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’. A reminder that resurrection can also mean a revival – a new life coming not from death but from the giving up of an old way of life.

A few years ago, Bishop David at a Diocesan conference encouraged everyone to share their stories, to talk about their own relationships with Christ, about events that had forged that relationship. The stories that I heard that day, while all coming under a general umbrella of lives transformed, did split into

two distinct groups. Stories about lives which felt unsatisfactory and had been transformed, and stories about lives which had not felt unsatisfactory at the time, but had still been transformed, or revived, by the love of Jesus.

Many of the stories hinged around incidents of illness, birth or death, of a desperate prayer when the feeling of not coping became over whelming and of what happened when that prayer was answered. But I remember in particular one person who described a life that was going nowhere, a feeling of nothingness and the hand that stretched down into his pit and pulled him out. His new and resurrected life was filled with joy and companionship.

As Jeremiah discovered God has a plan for each of us, and it probably doesn't much resemble any plan that we might have for ourselves. Over the last few months at Messy Church we have been thinking about unlikely Bible heroes. This month it has been the apostle, Paul. His life transformed by a single incident on the road to Damascus from a man who held the coats while the early Christians were stoned, to the first great preacher, church planter and writer, frequently in trouble with the authorities. God's plan was so different from Paul's plan.

None of us can say that we are unaware of how it feels to have our plans disrupted. Over the last year the Covid pandemic has affected the lives of everyone. We have been forced to rethink shopping, medical appointments, socialising and of course what church really means. The idea of church as people rather than buildings has become a reality. We have missed each other's company and I'm sure I'm not the only one looking forward to after service coffee and a chance to say, 'Hello,' to everyone again.

The Father that Jesus invites us to through him and the God who told Jeremiah that he should have hope and a future are of course the same. We may have to listen carefully to find out what that immediate plan is for us, as a church and as individuals. We are being invited to live more fully with Jesus, according to the plan that God has set for us, with the understanding that we may not understand what that plan is. But we can listen and then step forward along whichever path we are drawn to confident that our ultimate destination will be with the Father in heaven.

On landing at Stanstead one day the pilot having thanked us for travelling with them wished us a safe journey to our 'final destination'. What a luxury to know that we can have that hope!