Fifth Sunday of Lent

So much of our training in how to approach life is about achievement, so little about realisation, so little about actually just living. It was helpful for me to learn yesterday that one hard working bee in its busy bee life makes no more than one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey. Of course, it has many companions (up to 60,000) so, together, they may make enough to cover a piece of bread. But as they seem to enjoy their work, presumably they have different ways of assessing the meaning of existence and they must be less obsessed with quantity and individuality.

Today’s gospel is about the raising of Lazarus, a friend whom Jesus loved, brother of the sisters Martha and Mary whom he also loved. When Jesus arrived at their home, four days after his friend had died, Martha, a busy bee, came out to meet him. She did the same in the story in Luke where she becomes distracted by her many tasks and shows the classic symptoms of stress. Jesus reminds her to balance her over-achieving personality with the qualities of her contemplative sister, who is more into simply being. In today’s extra-ordinary and yet movingly human story, both sisters seem relieved that their friend has come to console them in their grief. When he sees them ‘Jesus began to weep’ and people say, ‘how he loved him’.

He then calls Lazarus back to this life. The dead man emerges from the tomb still wrapped in his funereal cloths. Jesus says, ‘unbind him and let him go’. Like other experiences that we recognise as authentic and yet cannot explain, we either dismiss it as a fairy-tale or we fall silent before what it is saying, in dense symbolic realism, about the person of Jesus.

As in his other extraordinary deeds, Jesus shows no interest in using his achievement to impress or recruit people. It seems to have no quantifiable meaning, nothing you can cash and bank. It is what it is. It changes a life and the lives of those people who share the individual’s life. For Lazarus it was a reprieve because he would die again eventually. So, it is not rising from the dead, as Jesus was to do. For him, the cycle of death-and-rebirth, which is the repetitive pattern of our everyday busy bee lives, was broken and transcended, giving us hope that we are not condemned to repeat the failures-and-successes of life endlessly.

Was this great act an achievement? Is Resurrection an achievement? Although the story of Lazarus made him famous and led to his arrest and execution, it is not described as something to add to Jesus’ defence. It was a sign rather than an achievement, a revelation rather than a proof.

This is another way of measuring the sweet honey of life, which is not always so sweet. In our slow-down and shut-down, social isolation and quarantine, can we make use of the time to do a life-itinerary in these terms? Forget the achievements we get credit for and the failures we are debited for. Look instead at what events, relationships, outcomes, sweet or sour, revealed meaning and illuminated our true nature.