



# THE LAZARUS DEMAND

## Overcoming Indigenous Poverty: A Biblical Reflection on John chapter 11 by Graeme Mundine and Jonathan Inkipin

*Jesus 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.”*

(Gospel of John ch.11 vv.43-44)

The raising of Lazarus is one of the most important stories in the Christian Faith. It is the greatest of the ‘signs’ and the turning point of the Gospel of John. It proclaims the power of God in Jesus Christ as the way to resurrection and life. Such resurrection and new life is not comfortable however. It makes demands upon us. It is to be shared with others...

The following reflection explores this Lazarus demand in the context of the pressing challenge of Indigenous poverty in Australia. For, understood in Aboriginal terms, the raising of Lazarus is a powerful challenge to all Australians to share fresh possibilities of new life with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters. After all, Jesus’ message of liberation is clear in John’s Gospel: *‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.’* (John 10:10) The problem is, as Pastor Ray Minniecon of Crossroads Aboriginal Ministries in Redfern has rightly said, *‘the first part of the verse is where Aboriginal people live. They haven’t seen much of part two.’*<sup>1</sup> The Lazarus Demand shows us how to put that right.



### Jesus and Lazarus (John ch.11) – an Indigenous story

Calling those caught in the powers of death to new life and calling all of us to unbinding the ties of death on others - it is not surprising that this dual challenge of the Lazarus Demand of Jesus speaks powerfully for Indigenous Australians. The story itself is symbolic of our journey from death to life, and full of Indigenous colour and style. It is about family and the pain of community experience; about a brother who is lost and sisters who are hurting; about the need for renewed identity and the power of the suffering heart. It is a message for us all.

<sup>1</sup> quoted in the Redfern Research Project report, NSW Ecumenical Council Nov 2004



## Who is Lazarus?

We are not told much about Lazarus himself because we do not need to know much. It is enough to hear that he is someone's brother and loved by Jesus – perhaps a cousin or close relative? At once an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person can identify and share the grief of Mary, Martha and Jesus. Lazarus represents all too many of our brothers and sisters entombed in death, literally and metaphorically, not least so many young men within our communities.

Many are the tombs in which Lazarus is trapped today. They include prison, alcohol and drugs, lack of self-worth and cultural identity, suicide, violence and poverty. All these are truly death-dealing: destroying life, community and rich potential; and cutting brothers and sisters off from one another, just as Mary and Martha experience (themselves, significantly, women, who are key victims of the powers of death in our communities today). Lazarus represents all our broken ones and all our own brokenness and loss.

## Who is Jesus?

In contrast, we see in Jesus a Spirit person, so much in touch with the God of compassion that he can make a new Creation out of our greatest pain and suffering. For Jesus here is not just a wisdom man of high degree, he is Wisdom itself – not, that is, the so-called wisdom of much non-Indigenous *head-knowledge*, but the Wisdom of God-in-Godself, physically connected, *embodied* wisdom, flowing from the heart with divinely human compassion. In other places in the Christian gospels, every great work of Jesus is a transforming sign, an act of Liberation, overcoming the powers of death, separation and evil through the power of love. So in this story, the greatest barrier of all – death itself – is overcome. As we see Lazarus brought home, we know that, in Christ, we too can come home - be liberated - from whatever death, exile or hell we experience.



## Jesus wept – the turning point

Many non-Indigenous commentators have agonised and split much ink over the words 'Jesus wept', all too often in terms of abstract theories. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians, such questions are truly academic. Of course Jesus wept. He cried out of the profound connection he has with Lazarus and our entire human experience. For He is one with us, one of us, and one for us. Unlike Jesus, Mary and Martha could not connect with their own pain, or let their distress out properly. They did not hear or respond to Lazarus' pain adequately. They seemed to want a wonder worker God, avoiding the depths of pain and compassion that is involved in real healing. Thus Martha appeals to Jesus as someone to put it all right, without involvement by themselves (vv.21-22). And, consequently, Jesus does not act to begin with, for pain and suffering are not just to be easily wished away. The real miracle is the *journey* to resurrection through all of this, and the connection which is made with Lazarus: his coming out of death, of pain, *despite* his suffering. Martha postpones the possibility of new life to another time (v.24).





## From death to life – a new dreaming



When Jesus weeps, rivers of healing flow, creating a new river of life. Where human hopes and efforts cannot shift the stone and decay of death, the Spirit of Jesus can. Note well, it is because that Spirit is ‘*greatly disturbed*’ that Jesus can command the stone to be moved (v.38). For it is only the greatest compassion – gut-wrenching compassion - that is able to break forth and (re)connect. Out of the depths of His being, Jesus cries out, and His voice is heard. Heart thus speaks to heart. The sacred heart of God speaks to the heart of Lazarus, rekindling the embers and rejuvenating the seeds of life. From the deepest depths, connection is made, strength can again rise up, out of our crying need and true compassion.

### The twin commands of Jesus: ‘*Come Out*’ and ‘*Unbind him, let him go*’

In our times, the demand ‘*Come Out*’ is thus a powerful challenge to Indigenous people. Come out of death, shame, destruction: this is the call of God. For Jesus says to Lazarus, you *matter*. You are a child of God, you are special. God cares - I care – I love you just the way you are, and I will have time for you. You do have respect. You do have a place. This time *is* for you. Don’t be afraid to come out and be who you are.



As Nelson Mandela (in Marianne Williamson’s words) similarly urged his own and all the world’s struggling people:

*‘We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.’*

Accept that you are accepted. Be proud of your identity, of who you are. Acceptance and empowerment is always the praxis of Jesus, and it is the message of Indigenous Christians today: be strong; go for your dream; we believe in you; live out your resurrection life beyond the walls of the past; you are not alone – we will walk with you.

Why does Lazarus come out of the tomb? He trusts in new life, because *heart speaks to heart*: because it is possible – in the power of the suffering, weeping Christ – to do something with our pain, however great; because we can find the power of compassion echoing within us. Everyone can do something with their pain and suffering: this is the witness of so many Indigenous Christians. Often very painfully and haltingly, we find hope and forgiveness and turn our pain and suffering into strengths for ourselves and others. We do not have to live in the shadows, and the tombs of the past, for ever. We can walk in the light and not stumble (vv.9-10).



But there is a crucial twin demand - *'Unbind him, and let him go'...*

*'Unbind him, and let him go'* is a challenge made to all of us, and especially to those who have power and wealth: which, in the context of Indigenous Australia, means most non-Indigenous Australians. Use, and let go of your power, says God. It is not enough, says Jesus, for the Word of God to be proclaimed and for Lazarus to respond. The Lazarus Demand is not for an individual alone, but for the renewing of the whole community. It is not merely an initiative of divine compassion. It involves human action and human compassion. It calls for new relationships, involving rights, respect and reconciliation.

Practically speaking, Lazarus simply cannot be expected to live the resurrection life without the help of others. How can anyone simply walk out of a tomb in which they have been confined for so long? In terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today, Boori (Monty) Pryor has expressed this in a powerful image:

*'Imagine somebody walking into your house and shooting you half a dozen times, in your body, arms, legs, everywhere. Somehow you survive. The ambulance is called and you're whisked away to the hospital and you're put in intensive care with all these tubes coming out of your body, and the machine monitoring your heartbeat is going beep, beep, beep. The next day someone kicks the door open, walks in and says, 'Come on, I'm taking you for a run.' You can barely talk but you say, 'Can't you see I've been shot? I can't run.' Then the person says, 'Well, walk.' And you say, 'But I can't walk.' And the person says, 'You're okay. Come on.' And they drag you off the bed. You fall over but they still drag you. So, there you are, half crawling along the ground, half being dragged by the scruff of your neck. They pull out the tubes. The gaping holes made from all the bullets are weeping blood.*

*There's blood all over the ground.*

*You see, that is like us now. We're still suffering from the first slaughter. We have gaping wounds that have never had a chance to heal. They only let us out of the concentration camps (about thirty years ago). We are still bleeding. Our blood is still pouring out, soaking the earth...the government of the day says, 'here's however many million dollars, go and change yourselves.' No race of people on earth could change and adopt a whole other lifestyle just with a click of a finger and some money.'* (Boori (Monty) Pryor *Maybe Tomorrow*)



**The Lazarus Demand** is thus a call to empowerment and to justice. It is a challenge to overcome the poverty and violence inflicted upon Indigenous Australians so that the freedom of Christ may be real. And it is an invitation to be brother and sister to Lazarus as Jesus was. For there is another story of Jesus and another young man (cf. Luke 18-25) who was trapped in a tomb. This tomb was made of power and riches, and, sadly, the young man was too proud to come out and he went sorrowful away. He had not opened his heart to the compassion of Jesus and he remained tied to death.

To heed the Lazarus Demand means to act with compassion, to open our hearts and connect with others. The Lazarus Demand involves untying the bonds of death and setting our brothers and sisters free, thereby setting all of us free. The Lazarus Demand is to **Make Indigenous Poverty History.**

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