Lent is difficult for many Christians because it is not only a reminder of the reality of human alienation and sin but also our inability to save ourselves from that reality. When we are faced with the various problems of contemporary society, whether it’s health (which is very much the case at the moment with the Coronavirus pandemic), economics, social justice or the environment, the usual response is to ask “what do we do?”

Scripture reminds us that it isn’t within human power to ‘solve’ the problems caused by human wrongdoing. The lectionary readings for this Sunday present a profound human problem for which the response might well be “what do I do?”

So Lent highlights not only the *depth* of human sin but also our inability to solve our own problems.

I suppose we could just sit despairing, feeling sorry for ourselves and wallowing in our sense of powerlessness but scripture calls for recognition that God, who alone holds the power of life and death, can and does bring about the triumph over what Paul would call “the realm of the flesh”.

For the 4th Sunday in a row, the Gospel reading comes from John. We have heard and thought about the stories of Jesus’ encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and now we have Lazarus and his family.

It might be a bit surprising to find this last story as a reading for a Sunday in Lent. The raising of Lazarus is often associated with the resurrection of Jesus and might seem to have been more appropriately placed *after* Easter. Nevertheless, I think that looking at the story *before* Easter and so close to Holy Week, gives us the opportunity to view the text through a new pair of glasses.

For instance, a study of the *structure* of the story reveals an extensive set of circumstances and conversations running from the time that Lazarus is first introduced until the time when Jesus calls him out of the tomb.

A lengthy introduction describes Jesus’ conversation with the disciples about Lazarus and the trip back to Bethany across the Jordan.

Then when Jesus *arrives* at Bethany, there’s a description of a long conversation with Martha and then another one with Mary and the Jewish mourners.

Even at the tomb, the raising is delayed by Martha’s protests and Jesus’ prayer .

Then the miracle is followed by an interesting account of responses to the event

So there is *definitely* much more here than just a basic account of the raising of Lazarus! As the story develops, Jesus perseveres, despite a number of would-be obstructions, to bring life to the dead.

First, when Jesus learns of Lazarus’ illness, the disciples urge him not to go back to Judea because of the hostility against him there. Then misunderstanding Jesus’ use of the word ‘sleep’ they argue that if Lazarus is just resting, then he should be ok!

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, Martha just can’t get her head around what Jesus says he intends to do and the mourners appear to be just annoyed that Jesus didn’t prevent Lazarus from dying in the first place!

At the tomb Martha is worried (with some justification in my opinion) about the smell of opening the grave of a decomposing four day old body.

Nobody seems to understand what is happening! No one really expects life to come out of death and no one ‘gets’ that Jesus IS the life-giving power of God. But thankfully he is not put off and he perseveres.

Against Martha’s conventional Jewish theology, Jesus declares “I am the way, the truth and the life”. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

To be united with Jesus means to receive *eternal* life. Then, amidst symbols of death – intense grief, sceptical and impatient mourners, the smell of decay – Jesus speaks and acts and THERE IS LIFE!

The text doesn’t seem to indicate much actual *rejoicing* at the raising of Lazarus and although some Jews then believed in Jesus, others felt threatened enough to plot to kill him. The story of giving life then leads towards a story of death.

We are told (11:33, 38) Jesus was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved”.

This is about much more than Jesus’ empathy with grieving friends. He is actually troubled. He sees evidence of death all around and knows that, at this point, its power is still very much in place. He sees sharp opposition that can’t tolerate his giving of life because the religious authorities feel threatened by his actions.

There is not much rejoicing in the raising of Lazarus. Since the giving of life offers a future full of many potential surprises, it turns out to be perceived as a threat to the people who think that THEY control the future and they respond in the only way they know – WITH VIOLENCE. They even plot to do away with the resurrected Lazarus.

But the larger story actually confirms that life will not be overcome by death. What remains beyond the raising of Lazarus is not only Jesus’ own death but also his resurrection and his persistent giving of Life!

I pray with all my heart that people either suffering illness or grieving for those that they have lost or about whom they are anxious, will extract a sense of peace and reassurance from the wonderful and encouraging message that Jesus gives us. The journey is often painfully hard but we do not travel alone – ever.

God bless you all. Amen.