

John 11: 1-45 – Jesus and the promise of victory over death

Prayer

Well, if you thought that was a long reading, wait for next week. In his Gospel John tells far fewer stories than Matthew, Mark and Luke, but we do get quite a lot more detail, especially with some of the characters around Jesus. There's Thomas not at all sure about Jesus going anywhere near Jerusalem saying to his friends, *Let us also go that we may die with him*. We can always rely on Thomas for a bit of good cheer.

Jesus had three friends in the village of Bethany – sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. And Jesus let them down badly – so it appeared when he delayed responding to their message about Lazarus being ill. And the disciples, not only Thomas, didn't get it either. They knew that Jesus could heal with a word, that he didn't need to be present with the ill person – they knew it because they had seen it before. But not this time. This time Lazarus died, and in line with the customs of the day was buried in a cave with a stone in front of it – remind you of anything? All done and dusted by the time Jesus got there with a group of confused disciples who didn't understand what he was up to and two emotional sisters who were not best pleased with Jesus to put it mildly.

I'm sure that many of us know about praying for something, not selfishly but praying perhaps for a friend or loved one who is ill, praying for peace in Ukraine... do you remember the Peanuts cartoons? There's one of Charlie Brown telling Snoopy about his discovery when it comes to prayer – *if you pray with your hands together pointing downwards, you get the opposite of what you pray for*. So how do we react when we pray and get the opposite of what we want, what we ask for? Do we give a Gallic shrug and *c'est la vie! That's life?* Maybe there's more of a wrestle. It could be we realise that Jesus simply doesn't operate according to our agenda. Maybe we need to learn to operate to his agenda which we may not quite understand.

Back to those sisters, chalk and cheese. Odd isn't it that you bring up your children in what you think is the same way and they turn out quite different. They don't work to our agenda either. Martha and Mary both open with the same question to Jesus – *Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died*. Same question but the tone... Martha came down the road to meet Jesus, all guns blazing. When Martha felt something she did not keep quiet. Mary on the other hand, turning her pain inward, kneeling at Jesus' feet and saying the same words but, I imagine, in a softer more reflective voice. *Lord, if...*

Jesus was the great pastor. He took Martha's anger, deflected it, engaged with her and said to her, *I am the resurrection and the life*. He invited her to believe in him, to trust him. She did – *Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world*. That's one of the great confessions of faith in Jesus. We'll come back to this, but first there's Jesus and Mary, and Jesus doesn't say anything that we know of. He is with her as she cries. Oh, for wisdom to know when to say something and when to keep still and just be there.

Next we find Jesus going to the cave and when he got there he wept. Was he sharing the sadness of the sisters and all Lazarus' friends in the community? Was it because he was sad himself at the loss of a friend? Quite possibly but there's that description that he was *greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved*. These are emotional words and speak not just of sadness and regret but anger, and it's anger at death and all it represents. Death is the great enemy. Death is the undoing of God's good creation. Death is not *nothing at all* as Henry Scott Holland wrote. He really should have known

better. We should be angry when people are faced with death whether that's through illness or war or exploitation or refugees, driven to the point where they don't care about risking their lives... Death and all it represents as a force undoing God's good creation made Jesus weep and made him angry. Here we begin to see Jesus' agenda, beyond doing what we would like him to do.

It's hard to know what Jesus will do next. He's not very predictable. No one expected him to tell them to take the stone away. They objected – for the obvious reasons. But Jesus prayed and summoned Lazarus out. He missed the medal positions because he came forth! Out he came looking like a character from a zombie film. *Unbind him, said Jesus, and let him go.*

Reality check – things like this don't happen. Of course, they don't, and people in the first century knew that just as well as we in the 21st century. In the real world death has the last word. Creation is undone; the Creator is defeated. But it was precisely this that Jesus came to reverse and put right. When he called Lazarus out of the tomb this was not the final victory. Lazarus, poor chap, would have to die again. And in the meantime he'd have to live as a local celebrity and a bit weird. This is what we find in John's Gospel is called a *sign*. It's a pointer, but more than that, it is an anticipation of the great work that Jesus would accomplish on the cross and then triumphantly at Easter. That was the defeat of death – not here with Lazarus. If we want to know about Jesus' agenda we need to come again and again to the cross and the empty tomb.

There are times, maybe lots of times, maybe now is one of those times, when we don't get it. We just don't understand what God is doing. We don't understand why Jesus does not seem to be paying heed to our prayers and desires. But as Jesus came to Martha in her rage and spoke with her or as he came to Mary in her pain to be with her, he does come to us, although not necessarily to give us an answer nor to do our bidding, but to go with him, not like gloomy old Thomas, to die with him. But to go to the cross and to the empty tomb and meet him risen and saying to you and to me, peace be with you. Then we are back with Martha and that wonderful confession of faith - *Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.*

When it comes to it, the Christian faith is about knowing Jesus, a person, rather than knowing either the answers or a way of getting God to do what we want.

Prayer

Lord, help us to know you in all the good things we face and all the challenges equally. You are the Lord, and we trust you. Amen.

The Collect:

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

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Post Communion Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do also for you: give us the will to be the servant of others as you were the servant of all, and gave up your life and died for us, but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen

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