

## **Welwyn Team Ministry**

**Weekly Reflections for Passiontide, week beginning Sunday, 29 March 2020**

**By the Revd Dr Justin Lewis-Anthony**

### **Gospel Reading for Lent 5**

*John 11.1-45*

A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So, the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So, the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But

some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he 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.'

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

## Monday

All the way through John's Gospel the evangelist has told us the importance of *signs*: the signs given to us by Jesus to understand who he really is, and the signs demanded by the crowds to drive away all uncertainty about Jesus's status. But the irony is that as much as Jesus gives people signs, they remain, for the largest part, unseen. There are none so blind as those who will not see – the Messiah staring them in the face.

Bethany is nowhere important. It is a religious and social backwater, not very far from Jerusalem, but far enough not to share in the status of David's city. It is not, as a friend of mine would put it, a "Zone 1" place. Even so, Lazarus lived there, with his two sisters, and they were sufficiently distant, geographically and socially, to be friendly with the Galilean preacher, Jesus. It is in the backwater that Jesus's real status is recognised, and one of his greatest signs will be made manifest.

Jesus gets the news that his great friend is gravely ill. Does he rush in with defibrillator, and surgical gowns, and medical intervention? No. And neither does he go with faith and prayer and the power of the Son of God. At least not immediately. He remains where he is, with his disciples, for a further two days. Jesus knows that although Lazarus will die, his death will not be the end of the story. God is the God of the living and the dead, and the powers of death are no power at all to Him. It is strange how, in this story, before Jesus's own suffering on the cross, and before his own death, that it is Thomas, of all the disciples, who understands this: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas is prepared to follow Jesus to death, because Thomas recognizes, even in a faint and untested way, that death has no power over Jesus, and because of that, no final, ultimate, power over the followers of Jesus.

Can we have the same confidence, this side of Holy Week, on this side of life?

## Tuesday

Sometimes the lectionary of the Church is a comfort, and sometimes it is a challenge. And this year, of all years, to prepare ourselves for an isolated Holy Week and an empty Easter thinking about the story of Lazarus's death will be particularly hard. We are surrounded by the possibility of widespread human illness, and the very real existence of death; for those we know, those we love, for our nation, and for our world. And yet we are asked to think on, pray about, the death of Lazarus, and the deaths of all Jesus's disciples.

Lazarus has died: well and truly and really and sadly died. There is a myth that sometimes goes about that people in the ancient world had a different attitude to death from us. Because death was more common, and came, usually, at an earlier age, than today, it was not as upsetting for our ancestors. This myth is, of course nonsense. Death had exactly the same effect on the living then as it does today. Death brought horror, grief, wailing and misery. Death was and is painful, and did and does violence to human relationships. In the face of death, the one true, unpremeditated response is to weep. Even the Son of God, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, when faced with the death of his friend, wept. Death terrified people then, as it terrifies people now. Death can mean the nullifying of all our dreams and hopes and achievements. Death told people then, and it tells people now, that we are only temporary, and there is no ultimate meaning to our lives.

Remember: this story contains the famous, shortest, verse of the Bible: "Jesus wept." Jesus wept at the death of his friend. Jesus wept at the pain and the suffering caused by death, the damage that death does to the deepest and most treasured human relationships. Jesus who was the Son of God, and Jesus who had faith in his Father's power to call a person from the grave. Even so, Jesus wept.

It is foolhardy for us to pretend that death is not painful, and that sorrows are magically kept away from all those who believe in Jesus. That was not so for Mary, Martha, or Lazarus. And it is not so for us. But that isn't the end of the story, and it isn't the whole of the truth.

## Thursday

The reactions of Mary and Martha to the death of their brother are completely understandable. They are the everyday, human, eternal reactions to the distress of death. The two sisters present Jesus with the saddest two words in the English language: 'if only'. "If only you had been here, Lord, then he wouldn't have died. If only you had asked God to spare him his life he would've been spared. If only. If only." I have heard those words expressed so many times in the face of sorrow and grief. And they are always expressive of guilt. Sure enough, both sisters express something of their belief in who Jesus is. Martha tells him "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." But it is also Martha who objects to Jesus's order to open the tomb. The Son of God can do nothing about the stench of death that will emerge.

This is where "if only" connects to two more words: "so what?" Martin Luther tells a story that shows this nicely:

A certain village mayor, when he was about to die, told his pastor, who had been debating the Resurrection with the mayor a long time in an effort to convince him of its reality; "To be sure, I am ready to believe this, but you will see that nothing comes of it".

It may be the case that there is a Messiah, and he is the Son of God, and he has power over life and death, but what difference will it make to me?

So, in this part of the story, who are we? Are we Martha and Mary, paying lip service to the reality of who Jesus is? Are we Martha objecting when Jesus does anything challenging or upsetting to our established idea of what is right? Do we still assume or think of resurrection as some sort of weird disembodied shadow existence? Do we think of it as some pious fairy story? "Yeah, yeah Lord, I know that we will all be given the resurrection at the last day..." Or do we, can we, *really* believe that Christ will give us life, and life indeed, and life more abundantly, even a life that we could never imagine or expect?

## Friday

What do you think the greatest danger facing a man who has been raised from the tomb might be? You wouldn't think it would be a murder plot, would you? And yet that's what Lazarus faces. Because Bethany is only a few miles from Jerusalem it was impossible to keep the story quiet. Everyone knew that the Galilean preacher had done another one of his "signs", and perhaps the greatest of them all. Great crowds of the Judean people came to listen to Jesus, and came to see Lazarus, "whom he had raised from the dead." So, the chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus, because so many Judeans, the people of Jerusalem and beyond, "were deserting and were believing in Jesus."

Thirty years ago, the filmmaker Martin Scorsese depicted this plot in his film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It is not a very good film, not Scorsese's best, and certainly not the best "Jesus-film" that has been made. Scorsese portrays the funniest line in all Biblical films, and that includes *Monty Python's Life of Brian*: "So, Lazarus, how are you feeling today?" And then Scorsese has the questioner kill the revived man.

I would prefer to follow John rather than Scorsese here, but even so the truth of the situation is that Lazarus's revival was only temporary. Lazarus would die again. His was not a resurrection into eternal life; rather it was a return into *this* life. And even this was dangerous. The crowds saw Jesus's power over death, and believed that God was working a new purpose out. The chief priests saw the power of Jesus reflected in the crowds around Lazarus. This was new and a threat. So, they planned to kill them both. This is the way and power of the world, isn't it? We ignore what distresses us; we exterminate what disturbs us, eliminate what troubles us. Jesus was a threat to the natural order, that dead men stay dead. The next thing is that he would be a threat to the natural, political, order. Therefore, Jesus must die.

This is the way and power of the world that Christ confronts on Golgotha. Violence opposing the purpose of God, subjugating humanity in patterns of despair and hopelessness, telling the great lie that meaninglessness is the true nature of the world.

Jesus was dangerous for precisely this reason. He showed in his person and in his actions that violence cannot obstruct God, the humanity's true nature is to live in joy and hopefulness, that the true nature of the is found in Love.

## Saturday

Have you ever wondered what happened to Lazarus after his experience in the tomb? If you have, you're not the only one. Lazarus is only mentioned one more time in John's Gospel, when, six days before the Passover, Jesus dines at the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. It was at this dinner that Mary anoints Jesus's feet with the costly perfume made of nard, an action later interpreted as a symbolic anointing for burial.

That is all the Biblical witness tells us of the post-mortem life of Lazarus. But that didn't stop speculation. In the Middle Ages, some of the most popular stories were compiled into the "Golden Legend" by Jacobus de Voragine, who tells us that Mary of Magdala (who was also Mary of Bethany), Martha and Lazarus all end up in Marseilles, where Lazarus becomes the first bishop of the Roman colony. The Golden Legend story lies behind the nonsense, albeit hugely popular nonsense, of Dan Brown's novels.

Lazarus appears many times as a character or subject in poems from the nineteenth century onwards. Poets such as Tennyson, Robert Browning, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, and even David Bowie imagined what Lazarus's life after the tomb in Bethany was like: the conclusions weren't cheering. Lazarus is almost always portrayed as regretting his calling back to life, and grievously waiting for death to come upon him again. It is a curious thing, in a time when we are less and less comfortable to talk about, contemplate, prepare for death, that Lazarus should play such a role.

For myself, I don't believe that to be the case: the joy, the healing of hurt and grieving relationships, the *life* that surrounded Jesus and was the gift to those who followed him, tells me that Lazarus lived a life in which the veil between this world and the world to come was thin, and the joys of heaven were the joys of life on earth. The best depiction of this I have ever read comes in *The Last Battle*, the final volume of C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. The old Narnia has been destroyed, consumed in the end of all things, and the seeming death of all the protagonists. And yet they find themselves in a new world which seems terribly, wonderfully, familiar. It is a new Narnia:

The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like [this]. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if ever you get there you will know what I mean.

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now."

When this virus is over, and when this life is over, we will come into the land we have been looking for all our life, and we will come into it, like Lazarus, being called out of the tomb by the One who knows our name and loves us.