

John 11:1-47 Sermon notes for March 29th

The British greeting “How are you?” has taken on a new depth of meaning in this time of restricted movement and social distancing as the world tries to grapple with Covid-19. Now when we ask it we really want to know how people are; not just, “have they got the virus?” but also, how are they coping emotionally and spiritually. That we all respond to moments of upheaval in our lives differently is a universal truth through history so I thought it would be helpful this morning, as we reflect on the Gospel for the day – the raising of Lazarus, to reflect on how the different characters that make up this story reacted in this moment of upheaval for them.

We begin with someone who has been defined through history by one specific moment. Thomas is known as doubting Thomas because he didn’t believe the other disciples when they said they had met the risen Jesus. However what we see of him here in John 11 is a far greater example of what being a disciple is.

Jesus and his disciples had escaped being stoned for blasphemy by leaving Judea. Then they got the message from Mary and Martha that his close friend Lazarus was seriously ill. Tantalisingly, John doesn’t tell us why Jesus chose to wait two days before deciding to go back to Judea, but the disciples must have been relieved so when he announced that they will “go to wake Lazarus up” they tried to dissuade him.. When he couldn’t be dissuaded it was Thomas who led with “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Thomas reveals a wonderful facet of his character – not here the doubting Thomas but the Loyal Thomas. He doesn’t understand Jesus actions and cannot see the logic of it – but will stay by his side even if it means death.

Here is an incredible picture of faith. He is not following because he sees how it all fits; he is following out of loyalty to Jesus himself.

Faith is following Jesus, not because we understand what is happening, nor because things are necessarily going to work out well for us – but because we believe Jesus is the true salvation for the world.

So let’s turn our attention to Martha and Mary. Their initial request is a model for our prayers – Their message:

“The one you love is sick!” presented the problem and not the solution. As such it is a model of intercession – which brings the need to Jesus, brings the anxiety, the pain and the desire of our hearts to Jesus, but rather than dictating the answer - allows him to decide what to do about it. So many of prayers are “Lord I want you to.....” Rather than “Lord this is the problem on my heart – I trust you to resolve it in your way and for your Kingdom.”

Martha was the first to greet Jesus and her greeting carried with a whole gamut of emotions: disappointment, possibly anger, grief and also continued faith in him:

“if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Martha's faith is absolutely clear that if Jesus had been there he would have healed Lazarus just like he healed others. There is a real poignancy in this. One of the most painful questions we ever have to face as Christians is why, if Jesus can heal and answer prayer, didn't he do so for the person I loved?" In this situation Martha shows a marvellous picture of continuing faith in the face of feeling let down. – Although Jesus hadn't done what she wanted of him –she still believed he had an intimate relationship with God and trusted him completely– the comment that "Yet I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask" is not an expectation of Lazarus being healed – but a continuing trust in Jesus as the Messiah – the one who was doing the will of the Father.

Even though Jesus has delayed coming to help, she continues to believe that Jesus is the agent of the gracious God—despite the fact that this graciousness was not present to heal her brother.

Martha is clearly comforted by her strong belief that Lazarus will be raised to new life in the resurrection of the dead at the end times. However Jesus, in effect says, "that's good but the reality is even better" "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"

This great promise includes what she already believed - life in heaven beyond this one – but it is greater than that – because, for those of us who believe in Jesus this new life begins as soon as we believe = and then continues beyond the grave.

When Jesus then asks Martha if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life she replies "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world*" Her belief is still a long way short of all that Jesus is, and is to do, but as he does for us today Jesus takes us in our limited understanding and leads us on to new depths of faith. Martha still hasn't grasped all that Jesus was saying about himself – but she was sticking with him and confessing as much as she knows - and that's what faith is all about.

Mary greeted Jesus with the same despair as her sister – "If you had been here our brother wouldn't have died!" John tells us that Jesus was deeply moved by all the grief and, as he approached the grave he wept. This wasn't the same tears of grief that Mary was shedding - he knew that he was going to free Lazarus from death – These were the tears of a Saviour who fully identifies with our pain. At that moment those he loved were hurting deeply and he shared their pain. When we too are hurting we know that Jesus isn't a God who stands far off – but fully enters into our pain and weeps with us.

When Jesus called Lazarus to come out he was still wrapped in grave clothes. Why do you think that was? You will remember that when Jesus rose from the dead at Easter he passed through the cloth that was wrapped round him – Surely if Jesus had the power to summon Lazarus back from the dead into his body he could have released him from the cloths that bound him? I believe the reason was that God chooses to work with us – not apart from us. He wanted those in the crowd to be more than observers to this rescue – he wanted them to be part of it – knowing that without them Lazarus would remain bound. Jesus is still in the business of setting people free from all sorts of things that bind us – sinful habits, loneliness, depression, guilt, feelings of inadequacy. He chooses to work with us. As many of you have discovered Jesus uses the love we have for each other and for others as part of his process of giving people new life and setting us free.

At the end of the passage the crowd is divided into 2. Some believed and joined Mary and Martha in accepting the new life that Jesus brings - others disbelieved and reported him to the Pharisees – setting in motion the chain of events which led to Jesus being crucified. Today Jesus asks us to choose – to join Mary and Martha in believing Jesus and stepping into new life with him – or joining those who refuse to believe and refuse to accept the life he brings.