

This narrative contains the shortest verse in the Bible. Verse 35 "Jesus started weeping" or in a different translation which I prefer "Jesus wept". It is a story in which, perhaps surprisingly, Lazarus is really a peripheral figure. First let me set the scene.

Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha live in the village of Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem; the sisters are concerned over Lazarus' illness. It is a short time, perhaps as little as three weeks, before the Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. They are close friends of Jesus; indeed it is Mary who will anoint Jesus' feet with oil shortly before the events of Passover.

Jesus and his disciples are located a full days walk away from Bethany, the other side of the River Jordan, having retreated there from Jerusalem following the attempt by some Jews to seize and stone Jesus following the Feast of Dedication.

Lazarus falls seriously ill, sufficiently so for the sisters to send for Jesus:

Verse 3 "Lord, he whom you love is ill".

This shows the relationship must have been close; surely Jesus need only be informed and he would come. But he delays his departure: So that it is four days after Lazarus has died that Jesus and his disciples arrive and Martha goes out and on meeting Jesus, in her grief she berates him saying:

Verse 21

"Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died"

It is a raw, powerful, grief-filled accusation. Jesus you are our friend. Why didn't you come right away? We are your friends— you heal strangers and go to foreign lands to help people but fail to respond to your friends when called?

I think this is one of the most powerfully honest moments in scripture. I also think that every person who follows Jesus winds up having to go through what Mary and Martha went through. That's why this passage is there. When life punches us in the nose, we ask, "Jesus, don't you care?" Lord, why weren't you paying attention?

Lord, if you had been here, my child would not suffer from an incurable disease...I would not have lost my job...I would not have been abused and you can insert your own circumstances here too, I'm sure.

Lord, why didn't you stop this? It's a question I've cried out more than once; when in the police force as I held the mangled lifeless body of a 3 year old child killed by a drunk driver and during the final months of my first wife's pain filled life. I am glad the question is asked so pointedly to Jesus. It gives us permission to ask the question too. It is, after all, being honest with God.

Notice that Jesus was so moved by the grief of Mary and Martha that he wept. It's the shortest but most profound verse in the Bible. Think about that. Here lies the answer to our questions in all its fullness. Jesus is not going to prevent every bad thing that can happen to us.

We live in a world where there is free will, illness, death, and evil. It's a world where people do horrible things and not even being close to Jesus, being his best friend in the whole world, gives you a ticket out of suffering and pain.

But that doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't care. He weeps. Jesus wept even though he knew full well about the power of resurrection, but wherever there is a loss, there is grief.

But the other side of the same coin of grief is comfort. What is obvious in the exchange between Martha and Jesus is that he brought comfort to her as she grieved.

We see in verse 33 Jesus' humanity and humility as he is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved".

And those of you who know this narrative well will have realised that I have omitted all reference thus far to the most important verses in this Gospel reading, verses 25 and 26 "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will never die"

The words are at the heart of all Christian funerals when we are probably most conscious of the precious nature of life and significance of death.....That Christ is the resurrection and life is precisely the message we need to hear.

I suppose it is only natural that we should come to realise how precious life really is when confronted with death or the prospect of death. Physical death should be nothing to fear if we believe in Jesus and yet how true is that of people you know? .....How true is that of any of us here today?

It is a question often asked of me when I visit the grieving families; indeed only this week a truly distraught mother who raised this when we were arranging the funeral of her daughter killed in the prime of her life. But over the years I have come to believe that Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life;

not I was  
or I will be  
but I am.

That is the comfort, the hope which I must try to convey to those who are grieving yet it is probably the one thing which many of us struggle with....trying to find the right words, the best actions to offer comfort to others. We tend to not talk about death; about what happens after death. We have been brought up not to show our emotions, to be stoical; particularly if you are a man of my or previous generations where crying is seen as a weakness.

If you saw the documentary on BBC 2 on Tuesday about how Rio Ferdinand is coping with the sudden death of his wife you will know what I mean. That was a truly moving documentary lacking only one thing – any reference to how one's faith interacts with bereavement. Yet, that is exactly what the story of Lazarus does. Jesus grieved, Jesus wept. But he also comforted those grieving and offering comfort when grieving yourself is an integral part of our faith.

But I digress. Let me return to the miracle itself when Jesus ordered the stone covering the tomb entrance to be removed. Note that Jesus could have removed the stone himself but didn't – and that is the key to my final story.

As you know Jane and I were privileged to see for ourselves how the Tearfund project which this church supports works in action. It models a radically different approach to improving the quality of life in Uganda in the way it transforms both individuals and communities; and, of course it all starts with the people attending bible studies.

This is Joseph [photo], he was our driver for much of the time we spent in Uganda. You would have to go a very long way to find a more humble, unassuming, patient, compassionate and considerate young man than Joseph.

In response to many, many questions and in a totally humble way, eventually Joseph shared with us over a period of ten days how he had attended these bible studies and the one in particular that had started the transformation in his life was the story of Lazarus.

For him the penny or perhaps I should say the Ugandan shilling, finally dropped when he saw that Jesus got other people to do things – like rolling the stone away - and told people what to do – like commanding Lazarus to come out. But also as his faith matured and grew he understood that Jesus was compassionate; although he shared the grief being suffered by Mary and Martha Jesus also sought to be with them; to comfort them.

Joseph simply knew the time had come to become more like Jesus

Yet his early years and life were horrific. He was abandoned at 3 months and left to die in the outback by his mother; he saw his father and uncle being brutally killed in front of him; he had been badly abused, as indeed were his brothers and sisters, by his step mother – on different occasions she poured a pan of boiling water over him and stabbed him with a kitchen knife and at the age of 12 fled his village to live and survive in the drug and criminal infested underclass life on the streets of Kampala; whilst his siblings fled likewise to all corners of Uganda.

But it was in Kampala that Joseph started to attend the bible studies and also secured his first legal job; that of minibus driver for his church – his self taught driving skills acquired as a 14 year old car thief proved helpful – and as he put it – he started to think more about others than himself for the first time in his life. He saved up sufficient to pay rent on a small flat.

Every weekend for over six months he travelled from village to village finding his brothers and sisters and brought them to live with him; eventually he traced his birth mother and brought her to live with them. In due course, the family returned to a village location where one day his step mother who was now destitute and widowed again, turned up on his doorstep. Against very strong opposition from his siblings and birth mother; he embraced his step mother and she now lives with them.

His reasoning? Everyone grieves and everyone needs comforting. He was just doing what Jesus taught him to do.

And as for Jesus commanding people to do things for themselves or to help others.....well Joseph doesn't know the date he was born and his mother couldn't remember so he has adopted Christmas Eve as his birth date. And every Christmas Eve he loads up with as much food and gifts as he can carry and takes them to distribute them to the young children living under the bridge where he used to live for so many years.

There is so much more to Joseph's story which time doesn't allow me to tell. But if you'd like to meet Joseph in person, I'm arranging a further trip to Uganda this October and would be delighted for you to join me – I'm happy to tell you more details and likely costs afterwards. If you're not able to visit, may I encourage you to financially support Tearfund in this year's lent appeal.

Jesus wept, yet also comforted those who grieved. There are a number of you who do this already in our pastoral work with the bereaved and I thank you for that. This is a difficult ministry, and not suited to all – but the starting point for Joseph was bible study and that certainly is something we could all engage more fully with.

There are a number of people looking to form a bible study group or enlarge their current one – please speak to me or Jane afterwards if that interests you.