

John 11 25 - 44

Last week Archdeacon Olivia led us through a backward reflection on Jesus' 40 day fasting and temptation in the desert. Today, our focus switches forward to the events culminating in Jesus' death and resurrection at Easter. For me, and let me stress there is no scholarly support for this, I think verse 35 of today's reading expresses the depth of compassion that is integral to understanding Jesus' identity - "Jesus wept".

Two words illustrating that the word that had become flesh was indeed human just like you and me.

In the middle of one of the New Testament's longest narrative Jesus turns to face the tomb containing the four day dead body of someone he loves and begins to weep. At the climax of his public ministry Jesus weeps showing the passion for a loved friend, dramatically foreshadowing the events known as the Passion with a capital P; the events of the coming Holy Week.

On Thursday I met with Bishop Andrew for him to sign off my ordination application - yes I'm definitely going to the selection conference in May - and at one point he asked me to describe the good news of Jesus Christ and my first thought was this very narrative.

Because in this narrative we can see the good news of Jesus Christ -

He demonstrates the power and purpose of prayer

He shows that resurrection isn't a doctrine; it's a person and

He signposts that love is the key to God's kingdom

Let me explain what I mean.

A few verses before where our reading starts Jesus receives the equivalent of a 999 call from Mary and Martha. Quick, come and help, Lazarus the friend you love is ill. But instead of immediately responding he deliberately delays his departure and does not arrive until Lazarus has been dead for four days. So what was Jesus doing during this delay?

Well, we are not told, but more than anything else which is revealed in the gospels about Jesus is his commitment to prayer.

Just as Jesus commands us to do certain things I think it reasonable to assume that in prayer God the Father was commanding Jesus to wait and Jesus as always was being obedient. After two days of prayer Jesus knew what was going to happen, he knew Lazarus was dead.

First century Jews believed that on death the human soul departed but hovered over the dead body for three days hoping to re-enter it. After four days everyone at the home of Lazarus would have been in no doubt whatsoever; Lazarus was irrevocably dead.

It is not hard to imagine therefore that Jesus knowing that Lazarus would physically die had been praying that his body would be preserved from corruption and decay; that the body would remain physically and biologically complete ready to be summoned back to life.

Jesus prays again when he is outside the tomb but this time in public and aloud and thanks God for having heard him...yes, having heard his prayers during those two days before setting off to Bethany.

And at the end of his prayer he commands in what I imagine was a voice of absolute authority mirroring the voice of the omnipotent creator *'Come out'* and even a four day old dead body obeys.

2. Jesus' resurrection isn't an event, it's a person.

The majority of Jews in Jesus' time believed in the concept of 'a present age' and an 'age to come'. The 'present age' in which they lived ended when they died. The 'age to come' would be when God's new creation came into being and as one of God's chosen people they would be resurrected in physical form to share in that new creation.

I mention this because Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again and she says "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"

But Jesus corrects her:

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die"

No, here is a totally different meaning. Jesus is not merely saying that he will bring about the resurrection or that he will be the cause of the resurrection, though both are true, but something altogether different:

'I am the resurrection and the life' says Jesus, revealing that resurrection from the dead and genuine eternal life in fellowship with God can only be found through a relationship with him.

'Whoever lives and believes in me will never die'...in other words those who believe in Jesus during their earthly lifetime will ultimately triumph over their earthly death and enjoy eternal life in the new creation.

Martha thought victory over death was a future expectation but Jesus corrects her, showing that victory is a present reality.

No, no he says, you've got it wrong. The resurrection is a person, I am that person, I am the resurrection and if you believe in me now you are guaranteed eternal life in the new creation.

That was Jesus' promise to Martha and it is Jesus' promise to us today. This new creation burst upon the world when Jesus was resurrected and what God started on Easter day is continuing even to this day and will not end until Jesus returns at judgment day.

This is the promise that Jesus gives to us – we can have the resurrection life now if we acknowledge that Jesus died on the cross as part of God's plan to restore creation and we are prepared to stand by all that entails whilst living out what Jesus modelled in his earthly ministry then we will be blessed.

Blessed with eternal life - but only if we put our trust in Jesus, continue to believe in him and sustain our faith through prayer.

3. Love is the key to God's kingdom

There are six different definitions of passion in my dictionary but the one word most prevalent throughout each definition is love.

In verse 35 the onlookers name Lazarus as being the one loved by Jesus but in reality he is only a representative of all those whom Jesus loves, and that includes you and me and all humankind.

Earlier in John 3 we read that:

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'

Jesus was to be the ultimate sacrifice offered up by his Father to rescue God's created order including humankind and underlying the whole of the upcoming events of the crucifixion is the revelation of love, for God is love.

Jesus' death and resurrection assures us that God's love will ultimately conquer everything. During the crucifixion Jesus arrives at a point when he almost gives up and appeals to God to take away his suffering from him but he does endure and ultimately is reunited with God, his Father.

That almost incomprehensible depth of love, the reciprocated love between God the Father and God the Son ensures that our own earthly death is not the end of our life but the start of the promised inheritance that God has promised in the new creation.

That was the good news of Jesus Christ that I was trying to explain to Bishop Andrew; the compassionate nature of God's love manifested in the human life of Jesus Christ.

"Yes Lord" said Martha "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God".

Amen and amen again to that.

