

JOHN 11: ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH AND LIFE

[Chelmsford Word Alive 6/02/2011]

A little boy walks up to his grandfather and says, 'Grandpa, please make a frog noise'. The grandfather says, 'No'. 'Oh, **please** make a frog noise', said the little boy. 'Why do you want me to make a frog noise?' 'Because Mummy said when you croak we can go to Disney World!'

Did you hear about the man in Louisiana, who refused to buy life insurance. He said: "When I die, I want it to be a sad day for everyone!"

Tonight I want to talk about death – but also about life. I want to talk about the occasion when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The story is to be found in John 11.

It has been called "*the most spectacular miracle in all of the four Gospels*" (Craig Blomberg). True, in Mark's Gospel we read of Jesus giving life to Jairus' daughter (Mk 5.21-24; 35-43); and Luke tells us of Jesus interrupting a funeral procession and raising the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 10.11-15) – but both the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain had only just died, whereas in the case of Lazarus he had been dead for four days. He was well and truly dead!

Who was this Lazarus? The only other Lazarus in the New Testament was the character in the parable Jesus told about a Rich Man and a man called Lazarus who used to lie outside his house begging. All we know about this Lazarus is that he was the brother of Mary and Martha. Now, we know about Mary and Martha – Luke has the story of Martha complaining to Jesus that her sister was not helping her with getting the meal, instead she was just sitting at the feet of Jesus, drinking in his teaching (Luke 10.38-41).

In all the Gospels we have the story of Mary anointing Jesus. But nowhere do we hear about Lazarus. Who was he?

An Anglican nun, who happens to be a friend of mine, wrote a book entitled; *The Hidden Face of Jesus: Reflections on the Emotional Life of Jesus*. In that book she has a chapter on 'The Household at Bethany'. "It was an unusual *ménage à trois*. Why was Lazarus not married – given that marriage was obligatory for Jewish men with few exceptions? Why, too, were Martha and Mary unmarried since normally they would have been engaged, betrothed and married whilst still fairly young.... Was Lazarus perhaps handicapped – physically, mentally, or both? If so, it would help to explain the unusual composition of the household, the unmarried state of (it would seem) all three, and the intense grief of the sisters which was later to be shared by Jesus. A source of quite unique love would have been taken from them, for any of us who have lived amongst handicapped people will know all that is captured in that word 'unique'". Frankly, that is pure speculation – and yet a fascinating suggestion.

All we know about Lazarus is that the name means '*He whom God helps*' – and that was certainly true in the case of this Lazarus.

Interestingly, the names of all three family members – Mary, Martha and Lazarus – were found in ossuary inscriptions near Bethany. But in so far as all three names were pretty common, we cannot say more that this discovery was an interesting coincidence (Blomberg).

Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived in **Bethany**.

There was more than one Bethany in ancient Palestine.

In John 1.28 we learn that John the Baptist for instance was baptizing “in Bethany on the east side of the River Jordan”.

However, we discover here in John 11.18 that this Bethany was “**less than three kms from Jerusalem**” – let’s say, an hour’s journey from Jerusalem. It seems to have become a bolt-hole for Jesus. “*Near enough to be very convenient when Jesus went up to the feasts, and yet far enough away to offer peace, quiet and freedom from the pressure of being constantly surrounded by crowds*” (Magdalen).

1. MARTHA AND MARY ENCOUNTER DEATH

Mary, Martha & Lazarus, were obviously a very special family – for John tells us that “**Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus**” (11.5).

In one sense Jesus loves everybody – but clearly these three meant a great deal to him.

He could relax in their company. Their home was a haven of rest in the midst of unrelenting turbulence outside. Yes, Jesus had a very special place in his heart for this family.

And yet this special family was hit by trouble!

I find that significant: the people whom the Lord really loved were not spared trouble.

Indeed, as the story develops we find that those whom Jesus loved were called to go through a terrible crisis – not only did Lazarus become seriously ill, he actually died. You couldn’t ask for anything worse than that.

True, there was a happy ending. But at the time Mary and Martha did not know that.

All they could see was that their brother become ill and died.

God didn’t seem to care for the one whose name meant ‘the person God takes care of’.

They questioned

How would you react if all of a sudden you were to lose somebody whom you care for very dearly? I guess that you might well cry out, “*Why God? What have I done to deserve this, God? God, it’s not fair!*”

Yes, that is a very natural reaction.

And in many ways Mary & Martha seem to have reacted in that way.

Notice their very first words to Jesus. Both of them said to Jesus: “**If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died!**” (11.21, 32)

This was no mere statement of fact. This was an expression of resentment.

'Lord, what do you think you've been up to? Lord, when our brother was unwell, we sent for you, yet you delayed – you could so easily have come, but you didn't. Lord, if you had only been here...'

Yes, Mary and Martha are just like us.

For when we are faced with a crisis, we often say: *'Lord, if only you had answered our prayers – if only you had intervened – then we would not be in this mess'*.

Indeed, sometimes we go beyond such statements.

For in our anguish we begin to cry out against God, if not actually curse him.

In Richard Llewellyn's story, *How Green Was My Valley*, Gwilym Morgan lies crushed by a fall in the coal mine. When the news of his death was brought home to his wife, her first reaction was one of rage: *"God could have had him in a 100 ways; but he had to have him like that. A beetle under the feet. If ever I set foot in chapel again, it will be in my box, and knowing nothing about it"*.

Frankly God's actions – if God's they are – are sometimes baffling.

In the words of an old hymn, *"God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform"*.

There are no easy answers to the problem of suffering.

None of us can explain why a good person is struck down in prime of life, while a scoundrel lives to a ripe old age.

All I know is that here in this story Jesus says: **"The final result of this illness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory"** (11.4).

My experience time and again is that where the inevitable questioning takes place within the context of trust rather than of bitterness, God is able to bring about something good.

Indeed, that is what the Apostle Paul said in Rom 8.28: **"We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him"**.

But I digress...

They wept

It was with tears in their eyes that Mary & Martha spoke to Jesus.

They were upset – and not surprisingly so, they had lost their brother.

Lazarus was gone, never to return.

Interestingly, not only were they upset, Jesus too was upset.

John tells us: **"Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and he saw how the people who were with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved"** (11.33).

In fact, he was so moved, that he ended up crying too. **"Jesus wept"** (11.35) says John – the shortest verse in the Bible.

There has been much discussion as to why Jesus wept. Was it because of grief for Lazarus?

"Certainly not....: his illness and death had been stated to be for the glory of God (v4), and Jesus

was now advancing to his tomb to call him from it, not to weep beside it. It is possible that the tears were motivated by the unbelief that caused him anger... It is, however, perhaps more likely that they were brought about by the sight of the havoc wrought among people through sin and death in this world” (GRB-M)

If his tears were *“in sorrow at the sense of desolation and loss that death brought to those who were still in the dark about the future life”*, then *“this story assures us that Jesus understands and cares about human sorrow”* (Gordon Bridger).

Jesus wept. Here we have a reminder that Jesus was no ‘automaton’. Jesus knew what it was like to be sad. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, Jesus became like us “in every ways (2.17) – he can “feel sympathy for our weaknesses” (2.15).

Not only did Jesus weep – so too did Mary and “the people who were with her” (11.33).

Death is always an upsetting experience.

Sometimes when I visit the bereaved, they apologise to me for crying. They say, *“I am so sorry for crying”*. My goodness, I would be sorry if they didn’t cry.

If we have truly cared for a loved one, then death will cause us great distress.

But the good news is that all need not be black where Jesus is involved.

There is weeping and weeping. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians who were distressed by the loss of some of their friends: **“Our brothers and sisters, we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not ‘grieve’ [GNB: ‘be sad’] as those who have no hope”** (1 Thess 4.13).

For Christians death is not the end. Although for a while we may be parted, we can look forward to the day when we shall be re-united with loved ones who have died in Christ.

But for Mary and Martha this hope was not really there – the outlook was bleak.

2. LAZARUS ENCOUNTERS DEATH

He died!

“Lazarus is dead”(11.14), said Jesus

Excuse me for stating the obvious, but some people have questioned whether he really died.

- Some sceptics have suggested that he simply went into a deep coma; and that Jesus then brought him round
- Others have suggested that Lazarus only died spiritually, whereas physically he remained very much alive. *“Lazarus had committed some terrible sin which shattered the home in Bethany, had done something which made his name stink like a corpse, he was dead to share and honour”* (William Barclay)! Frankly, if you believe that, then you will believe anything!

Let's not pussy-foot around: Lazarus actually died!

Here lies perhaps part of the reason why Jesus delayed going to Bethany: Jesus wanted to ensure that Lazarus was really dead before he reached him.

According to popular Jewish belief of that day, the body bursts on the fourth day and the soul which has hovered over the body until then, finally departs.

This perhaps is why Jesus did not arrive until the fourth day (11.17).

Yes, Lazarus died – just as we all shall die one day.

Death and income tax are the two universal certainties.

Death is so inevitable that some people have called life 'a terminal illness'.

Indeed, according to Voltaire, "*We begin to die as soon as we are born*"

He was raised to life

But for Lazarus death was not the end.

John tells us that Jesus ordered the stone to be removed from the entrance to his tomb.

Martha, as practical as ever, objected: "**There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried four days**" (11.39).

But Jesus insisted that the stone be removed.

He then prayed – "**he looked up**" (10.41), i.e. to heaven, to his Father in heaven. Here we have a reminder that Jesus did not operate in his own strength – he was dependent upon his Father. In his prayer he affirmed his faith in his Father God: "**I thank you, Father that you listen to me**" (11.41) – it was pretty brief prayer – I find it significant that it was a prayer "*uttered in the midst of activity* (Coggan). Prayer is not just for the beginning or end of the day – we can, like Hezekiah, shoot up 'arrow' prayers.

After praying, he "**called out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out'**" (11.43).

John tells us: "**He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth round his face**" (11.44). Imagine the scene – "*a cadaver wrapped from head to toe*" (Peterson). With all the wrappings, Lazarus could only have shuffled out of the tomb!

It is an incredible story – the mind boggles!

Frankly I just don't understand what happened – the dead do not come back to life.

But then, this was no ordinary man who commanded him to come out of the tomb – this was Jesus, the Son of God, and with Jesus nothing is impossible.

True, eventually Lazarus died

In fact we should not use the 'resurrection' word for Lazarus' coming back to life – he was simply resuscitated. But for John the story of Lazarus' return to life is a 'sign' of the resurrection hope that is ours in Jesus. The life that Jesus gave Lazarus points to the new life that Jesus will give those who trust him today.

3. OUR ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

Face up to death

But let's bring the story right up to date. One day you and I must encounter death. So let me encourage you to face up to your own mortality. For as the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, once wrote: "*Death is something which nobody can do for another*".

Yes, I believe that even younger people do well to face up to their own mortality. Death is not something reserved for the old: one of my cousins died at the age of 17 in a sailing accident on the Norfolk Broads; another of my cousins at the same age died at the same age – he was sucked to death in a grain silo. Yes, we need to face up to the fact that death can come quite unexpectedly.

Face up to life

But more especially, let's face up to life – and to the life offered to us in Jesus. The life that enables us to face death with confidence. The life that enables us to shout out with the Apostle Paul: **"Where, Death is your victory? Where death is your power to hurt? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"** (1 Cor 15.55,57).

Jesus faced up Martha with the reality of this life when he declared: **"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die"** (John 11.25, 26)

What wonderful words – I begin almost every funeral service with these words. What confidence they bring.

But notice to whom these words of hope are addressed: they are addressed to those who are prepared to believe. To Martha Jesus said: **"Do you believe this?"** (11.26)

- In one sense Martha already believed in life after death. For when Jesus said, **"Your brother will rise to life"**, she replied somewhat mechanically, **"I know that he will rise to life on the last day"** (11.24). 'Sure, he'll rise – I've heard that one before'. But somehow she was just mouthing a platitude – this thought brought no comfort to her heart.
- But then all of a sudden an intellectual creed translated itself into true faith: **"Do you believe this"**, asked Jesus. *'Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?'* **"Yes Lord! I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God"** (11.27). She believed in a way she had never believed before.

The question arises: do you believe?

Do you truly believe with all your heart in Jesus, as the resurrection and the life?

CS Lewis wrote a little book entitled *A Grief Observed*. There in the context of his wife's death he wrote: *"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth and falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a book. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then discover how much you really **trusted** it?"*

Yes, that's the nature of true Christian believing: F-A-I-T-H ['Forsaking all I trust him'!]

Let me encourage you to believe in Jesus – to believe in Jesus who died for you that you might be forgiven; who rose for you that you might have life; who today is knocking at the door of your heart, longing to enter in to be your Saviour and your Lord.

Believe – and in believing discover that death is not the end – but rather a doorway into God's everlasting Kingdom!

Yes there is a place for tears when a loved one dies – we are sad – we grieve our loss.

But there is a place for tears of joy – for those who die believing in Jesus have entered into the very life of heaven.