

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

In John’s gospel over the last three weeks, we have heard about several interactions Jesus had. Jesus has spoken with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the man born blind. Here in chapter 11, Jesus has a conversation with his disciples before returning to Bethany to visit his dying friend.

Just before this gospel reading, Jesus has declared to many Jews, the truth of who he is; that he and the Father are one. And they chose not to believe him. They tried to stone him, but Jesus escaped and made his way back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising. Many people came to visit him there, and one brought an important message.

The message was that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, is very sick and likely to die. Yet when Jesus hears this message, he stays where he was two more days. So why did Jesus wait? It seems very puzzling, knowing that Lazarus and his sisters are his best friends. Mary and Martha have sent a message to Jesus, and they obviously trust him, and don’t even need to ask him to come to their aid. They expect it. Jesus has healed so many people at this point, so he will also heal Lazarus. But Jesus replies. “This sickness will not end in death.” And Jesus stays where he is another two days. It seems heartless, when Mary and Martha clearly would not have sent for Jesus, if the illness had not been serious. Did Jesus lack compassion? Did he truly love Lazarus? He was quite capable of healing him then, and he didn’t. We don’t know if Lazarus heard Jesus’ response before he died, but Mary and Martha certainly did, before Jesus eventually came to them.

Would seeds of doubt about his power to heal begin to form in their minds as it seemed that Jesus wasn’t coming to their aid?

Do we struggle with similar doubts? When we or a loved one is sick, do we have doubts that God will come to our aid if we pray hard enough? Or does Jesus’ delay highlight the fact that God’s timing often differs from our expectations, both for Mary and Martha and for us? In our troubled world today, we long for Jesus to come to our aid and intervene to end the wars, conflicts, starvation and homelessness that never seem to be resolved.

Like Mary and Martha, we ask ‘where is the Holy One in all of this?’ Where is our help in times of distress? Has God deserted us and is ignoring our trouble? We don’t know how God sees all of our troubles, but we just wish they were over, and we could live in peace and harmony. It’s always been like this though. There have always been troubles in the world. But knowing that, need not lead to our despair, but to our continued efforts to bring in the Kingdom of God, each in our own small way. We can be part of the good news.

So, for Mary, Martha and Lazarus, what is the good news in their lives? Though Jesus waited, he did go to them eventually. He had compassion for their plight and so returned to Judea at great risk to himself and to his disciples. When Jesus was near to Bethany where the family lived, Martha came out to meet him, having heard he was close, while Mary stayed at home. Martha was understandably grief stricken, as Lazarus by then, had been dead four days.

But she was still hoping for a miracle. She said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”

Jesus consoles Martha and assures her that her brother will rise again. But Martha misunderstands, thinking Jesus means that Lazarus will rise again at the resurrection on the last day. Then Jesus explains to Martha who exactly he is. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Martha then acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world. What good news that was for Martha and for the world. Jesus comforted her with the truth of who he is. But still, Lazarus is dead.

When Jesus reaches the house, he meets Mary and all the Jews who had come to comfort the sisters. Now it’s Mary, who, kneeling at his feet, says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mary and the Jews were weeping, and Jesus, displaying his humanity, was also deeply moved and disturbed in spirit. He asks, “Where have you laid Lazarus?” And the crowd say, “Come and see.” Then Jesus, overcome with emotion at the death of his friend, also begins to weep. Jesus, who has just told Martha that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, weeps. Jesus, who knows he can resurrect his beloved friend Lazarus, is nevertheless overcome with grief.

This is not a Messiah who will go into battle and overthrow the Roman occupation of the land. But this is a Messiah who feels our pain and sorrow, and weeps with us, and weeps for us.

In our gospel story, Jesus then raises Lazarus to life, even though he has been in the tomb for four days and there is a stench coming from his body. Lazarus walks out of the tomb with his hands and feet bound with strips of burial cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus says to the people near him, “Unbind him, and let him go.” He walks, alive again.

The same good news that Mary, Martha and Lazarus experienced, is also good news in today’s world. That is the good news that if we believe, we also will see the glory of God. We will see that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and those who believe in him, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in him will never die. This is the heart of today’s gospel lesson. This is not a promise that believers will not die physically. Lazarus died, as all of us will die. But this is Jesus’ promise that spiritual life is possible after physical death; that physical death can be a prelude to resurrected life. Jesus has the power over the ultimate enemy, death. And he also has power over our lives in this world.

So maybe we are to see ourselves as Lazarus, whose name means ‘God helps.’ We are to see the miracle of the restoration of his physical life, as the beginning of our entry into eternal life. That begins the moment we respond to Jesus’ invitation to us, to live our lives in Him. Lazarus is us, bound by death in our current lives, called to life by Jesus who is the Light and the Life of the world. Jesus stands at the edge of our tomb, shouting "Come out!" We are to substitute our own name for that of Lazarus, the one Jesus loves, hear his command, and walk into the light of day, pulling off our bindings and grave clothes as we go.

Thanks be to God,

AMEN