

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS – MARY, MARTHA AND LAZARUS

13th March 2016

John 11:1-15

This series of studies we have been doing during Lent has had the general heading "Encounters with Jesus." We have seen Jesus interact with Peter, with a blind man, with the woman at the well in Samaria and with the woman caught in adultery. Today we see him encountering a lot of people, three of whom at least, were not meeting him for the first time, but were old friends of his. Of course in any meeting of people there are at least two people present and at least two points of view. Today we are going to look at this encounter from the point of view of the sisters, Mary and Martha, from the point of view of Lazarus, and from Jesus' point of view. We will begin with Jesus. What is Jesus' point of view in this episode? When you think about it, he does act quite strangely in this story. He hears his friend is dying and does nothing. He even says that the sickness is not to death, which either means he was wrong, or that he knew all along what would happen and what he would do. And yes, if Jesus is God, that is fair enough. But if the incarnation means anything, it means that when God became a man he took on all human limitations. All of them, including the limitation of not knowing just what will happen. And yet he says that the illness will not lead to death and that it has been given for the glory of God.

By the way, when you are ill, do you ever think that your illness might lead to the glory of God? I bet you don't! The nearest most of us would get to that is hoping that God might teach us something through our illness - we do like to cast God as the great teacher, often using what is unpleasant in our lives to make his lessons plain. But learning something is not at all the same thing as looking for God's glory to be revealed. We are so far from thinking the way Jesus thinks or seeing God at work the way he does. Jesus knew that it would lead to the glory of God and so there was no hurry, no rush. He could use this summons to take his time, finish up what he was doing where he was and instruct his disciples.

Jesus expected Lazarus' illness to lead to the glory of God, and he knew that by God's Spirit within him he could bring that about, no matter what, but nevertheless, when he came to Bethany, when he met with Mary and Martha, when he approached the tomb, which would be outside the village, he wept. He wept with his own sense of loss. He wept because of the grief of his friends. He wept, perhaps because the rebellion of humanity, our turning away from God means that there are graves to weep beside, and losses to endure. Jesus was about to do something that would show the glory of God, that would bring life in place of death and hope in place of despair, but still, when he reached the grave, he wept.

When we weep by gravesides, or at the thought of them, or on the occasion of our losses of whatever kind, we may know that loss and grief also saddens our Lord and

Saviour, and that he weeps with us, even as he works to bring good out of evil and reveal the glory of God

John 11:17-32

What, then, of Mary and Martha? The sisters have the reaction with which we can probably most easily identify. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." When things do not work out the way that we had hoped, we assume that God is absent, that Jesus is not there. Of course for the sisters, Jesus was not there. But that didn't mean that God was absent, or that God did not care, or that Lazarus was not safe in his hands.

The sisters did not really believe that Jesus could do something now, now that their brother was dead and buried, and again we can identify with that. We know that there are ends to stories. And so when Jesus says "Your brother will rise again" to Martha, she assumes that he is using religious language. "I know he will rise at the last day," she says, but that is not too much comfort to her right now. Her religion was sound but was not of immediate use in her grief.

"If you had been here". We assume that our desires and hopes are always God's purposes, that God exists to make life good for us, to do whatever we desire. How arrogant we are! God does not think our thoughts, or work in our ways; if he did he would be just like us. But God is not made in our image, we are made in his, and that is an important difference. How often do people who have not gained what they sought in prayer say "My prayers were not answered," when the proper follow up to prayer is to look for the answer in whatever happens, to search, if you like, for the glory of God.

Martha and Mary thought that the matter was ended. Jesus was too late. The story had moved on. We too may think that at times. But nothing is ever too late for God's Son, and the story does not end or move on until he says so. We are not the authors in our own life-tales. We are not puppets, either, but when we bring God into the stories, into the difficulties, the challenges and situations which we bring to him in prayer, then we have to leave them with him and trust him to have heard and to be in action. Leaving and trusting is not always our forte.

John 11:33-44

When I spent a summer in New Guinea there was a man in the tribe I was with who was known as Lazarus. He had taken that name for himself, because he had heard this story, and he identified with Lazarus. You see, a few years before I met him, this Lazarus had been gored by wild pigs. Gored very badly. His friends brought him to my missionary friends, one of whom was a lovely, down to earth, Irish nurse named Sue. Sue had never done any surgery, but she got on the radio to a doctor who was on the coast of the island, and described to him what was facing her. Then with a prayer in her heart, she did what he told her as he talked her through what was needed. Nowadays they would have used a video link, but then the doctor was advising her blind. And Lazarus, who knew he would have died, lived. He was a bit scarred in places, but he lived.

Lazarus is silent in this story. If this were a drama his would be a non-speaking part. We know he was ill, seriously ill. We can imagine him lying fevered and delirious as he approaches death. Who knows what his thoughts were, if indeed he was in any state to have coherent thoughts. Did he trust that Jesus would come? Did he lapse into unconsciousness and death with that trust still in his heart? None of us have gone

through what Lazarus experienced. The disorientation he felt when called forth from that tomb must have been extreme. No wonder we are not allowed to hear him speak! I expect it was dazed words and broken questions - Why? What? How? And so on.

The thing was, Lazarus really was dead. He hadn't been hidden in a tomb to provide a good trick for Jesus to pull, to flummox his critics. He was dead. He was in the tomb for four days and his sisters expected there to be putrefaction setting in. He was dead and Jesus gave him life again. He is the perfect parable of what happens with us, who are dead in our natural state, but who are given new life by Jesus, not just life after death, but new life in this world, just as Lazarus was.

In a fortnight we will be celebrating Easter, which is all about God's new life. Did you notice that in the story of Lazarus there are great similarities to the resurrection of Jesus? The same kind of tomb is used, with a tone that needs to be rolled back. There is the expectation of decomposition -that was why the women on Easter morning took perfumes and oils with them. There are grave wrappings. At the end of the story, Jesus commands that they "Unbind him, and let him go." Which is exactly what he wants to do for each one of us, to unbind us from all that holds us back from living his full and perfect life, from experiencing all that we were made to be. The story of Lazarus reminds us that new life is not just about the physical resurrection of God's Son, but is given to each of us, every day, as we need our lives renewed and made whole so that we can live in the way that Jesus promised and have life in all its fullness. Amen.

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