

John 11: 1-45 (Choral reading) The raising of Lazarus
 Revd Claire Nye Hunter

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Introduction

We have just heard one of the most brilliant and moving passages from John's Gospel, including the profound claim that Jesus makes:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

At the end of this account, Jesus demonstrated the truth of his words by raising Lazarus from the dead.

This event is one of the miracles/signs in John's gospel, given to reveal Jesus' true identity as the Son of God- with the hope that people will believe in him and put their faith and trust in him.

This passage is like an onion- with many layers.

I could select any number of possibly themes, eg

- The "I am" saying of Jesus
- The high Christology of John's gospel
- Our understanding of life and death
- The relationship between belief and life/eternal life
- Resurrection

As you know, I am on sabbatical for a large part of this year, immersed in John's Gospel. My particular area of interest, as a Social Worker and Priest, is to read the Gospel through the lens of a pastor writing to a community that I believe was in crisis. So today, I am not going to jump to the victory of the resurrection, to the happy ending, but rather look at some of the hard realities the characters in the story faced along the way, and consider some of the pastoral questions raised in this passage- to see what we can learn from them.

Jesus' delay in responding

Let's turn to the story.

An urgent message was sent to Jesus by two frightened sisters- Martha and Mary. "Lord, he whom you love, is ill" (referring to their brother and Jesus' friend, Lazarus). This was a desperate plea for help as his condition was critical. Jesus' responded by saying, "This illness does not lead to death, rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it". It sounds to me as if Jesus wasn't too concerned, and didn't take it too seriously. Even though the expectation clearly was that Jesus would drop everything and immediately rush to the bedside of Lazarus- here's the shocker...he delayed going for two more days! *(Jesus potentially shows the family dishonour. In terms of their understanding of friendship, he should have responded immediately)*

Jesus, what's going on?

It is hard to believe that Jesus deliberately waited, dawdled, put off responding? We are so used to critical illness being a sign for immediate action, that it seems unthinkable and uncaring that Jesus didn't make a plan to act more speedily.

In our parish in Bonteheuwel, as clergy we frequently received calls at all hours of day or night to rush to the bedside of someone approaching death. It was unthinkable that we wouldn't go asap!

Martha and Mary's hearts were breaking. Lazarus was a dearly loved brother. Jesus' presence with them would have been a tremendous comfort and source of strength, even if he couldn't or didn't heal him.

It is emphasised in the text that Jesus loved him. Have you ever wondered why then didn't Jesus come sooner?

Here is a tough pastoral issue to deal with. The absence of Jesus.

Have you ever been in a situation, like Martha and Mary, when you cried to the Lord for help when in desperate need and begged God to intervene and do something? (As the Psalmist wrote: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, O Lord, hear my voice" (Ps 130:1)).

- It seems nothing happened
- The heavens were silent
- Your plea fell on deaf ears
- You received no word, no answer at all
- Jesus didn't come!

When that happens, we tend to interpret God's delays as God's denials. We jump to the conclusion that

- God didn't answer my prayer
- Prayer doesn't work- it makes no difference
- What's the use? What's the point of praying anyway?
- God has forgotten me...maybe I'm not good enough/ not worthy/ not important enough for him to notice me and care about me

Is that the truth?

Strangely, what this passage seems to indicate is quite the opposite. In Mary and Martha's situation, we are shown that a delay in Jesus' answer was NOT a sign of his indifference or his failure to hear. Rather, it was a sign of his LOVE! Jesus said: "For your sake I am glad I was not there (while Lazarus was critically ill), so that you may believe (vs15). In other words, his delay was not intended to hurt them but rather to make them stronger and lead them to a deeper and more genuine faith and trust in him. It was better that they wait until God would do his full, complete work.

Sometimes when things are bad and we think they can't get worse, we demand that God must do what we want, and do it NOW. However, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us (55:8) "My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways, (my logic is not your logic)". We are called to wait patiently, in quiet and confident trust, that God does see, does hear, does love, does care- and will come and act, as he decides and in his time.

That is a hard lesson to learn!

(This reflects the experience of the Johannine community in that they experienced sickness and death at a time when Jesus was no longer visibly present. They turned to a seemingly absent Christ for help and received no timely answer Koester 2003:65)

It's too late now- he's dead

By the time Jesus eventually arrived, Lazarus had been dead and buried for 4 days!

OUCH!

Other people were there to console the sisters, but Jesus hadn't even made it in time for the funeral! (dishonour, shame). For the sisters, Lazarus' death was a particularly hard blow. Not only had they lost a beloved brother, but he was their social security- the only male supporter in the family. Surely Jesus was aware of that? Jesus came TOO LATE.

Coping with grief-and Jesus' response

Let's consider how the sisters coped with their grief, and how Jesus ministered to them. Maybe you will recognise yourself in them...

1. Martha

Martha is the one who took the initiative and went out to meet Jesus- confused but with expectant faith.

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

This is certainly a rebuke – the implication being that it was Jesus' fault he had died.

- Where were you when we needed you most?
- If only...you had answered our call for help, things might have been different (*does this sound familiar to you?*)

Personal:

Last year was, for my family, our "annus horribilus" (quoted Queen Elizabeth II)

- Andrew's father died
- My mother fell, broke 8 ribs, died
- My nephew lost sight in one eye in a surfing accident
- My brother-in-law sustained serious injuries in a car accident
- My cousin had a bone marrow transplant
- I had 2 stints in hospital
- Andrew and I were in an almost head on collision
- Three of our closest friends died unexpectedly- one being shot by terrorists in the Nairobi attack

I can relate to Martha: "Lord, if only you had been there, surely you could have saved the day?"

But notice that Martha doesn't get stuck in anger or self-pity. In fact, she seems to be fairly composed, no mention of weeping or emotion. Instead she shows signs of faith in the midst of her grief...

"...even now I know whatever you ask from God, God will give you" (vs 21). She doesn't understand, but she does trust.

So Jesus meets her at the level of faith- assuring her that her brother will rise again.

She interprets that in line with traditional Jewish hope for resurrection in the afterlife.

Jesus takes her beyond that belief, when he reveals his true identity. He puts life, faith into a new perspective:

"I am the resurrection and the life..."

He embodies resurrection and life, and is the source and provider of resurrection and life.

“... Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

In this statement, he promises life to Lazarus, points to his own resurrection, assures us all of our own resurrection after death. But this does not only refer to the life hereafter. He promises life in the present, life in all its fullness, life in the here and now, for all who believe in him- and this life will continue beyond the grave into eternity. He promises that believers will truly LIVE (rather than merely exist)- now and into eternity.

Jesus meets her at an intellectual, theological level with this divine revelation. He leads her into a deeper understanding of who he is, so her faith in him might be renewed and her trust strengthened.

Martha believes- and takes Jesus at his word (even before she witnesses the truth of Jesus' claim when he miraculously raises Lazarus from the dead. She is one who believes without seeing). She makes a full confession of faith “Lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (vs 27) (this is the confession that John wishes all his readers to make 20:31).

Can you relate to Martha? Have you had the experience when something difficult happens to you, which you find hard to understand? Perhaps in hindsight, as you grappled to come to terms with it, you grew to appreciate that through it you came to experience more of God, greater depths of his love, learnt profound lessons – in ways you wouldn't otherwise have experienced...

Personal: If I'm honest, I have to admit that often it has been through the toughest times, life's hard knocks, when God seemed absent, that I realise I encountered God in deep, unexpected ways. My faith has deepened, grown, been stretched, matured through it all. Painful as last year was for me (and I wouldn't wish it on anyone), I humbly acknowledge that some of the most profound and poignant days of my life were those spent sitting at my mother's bedside, holding her hand, overwhelmed with love, and eventually putting her hand into the hand of God as she breathed her last. Yes, Lord, you were there. I am eternally grateful.

In her grief, Martha reached out to Jesus in expectant faith. Jesus made himself known to her in new and unexpected ways, leading her to a deeper, renewed faith and trust in him.

2.Mary

Whereas Martha went out to meet Jesus, Mary stayed at home. She was overwhelmed with grief, and wanting to be alone. Perhaps she felt depressed, disappointed with Jesus, angry with God for letting her down.

Her words to Jesus are the same as those of Martha: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”. The same rebuke, but with no words of expectant faith. Implying that Jesus failure to respond was to blame for Lazarus' death, distress that he didn't come quickly when they called for help, feeling he could have saved him- but he didn't. Mary wept. No more words, only tears.

Does this ring any bells? Sound familiar? Can you identify with Mary? Have you felt disappointed or disillusioned with God? Unable to articulate what you are feeling? Your tears express what words cannot say?

See how Jesus responded to Mary. He showed his love- not by discussing matters of faith, as he had with Martha- but by weeping with her! The shortest verse in the Bible- “Jesus wept”. In so doing, Jesus identified with her in her grief and pain, and assures her of his presence. He does that with us as well.

We can learn from Jesus when seeking to comfort others. Sometimes words of faith- as those spoken to Martha- can bring hope and comfort. Other times, words are neither necessary nor appropriate – as in the case of Mary. Our tears are our prayers. By just being there, we represent the presence of Christ.

Often, there are no simplistic answers, no clear reasons to understand why we must suffer as we do. Let’s not pretend we know when we don’t! What we do know, however- is that God is with us in our suffering, he does know our situation, he does understand, he does love, he does care, and he will act- in his way and in his time.

The happy ending

The story ends on a dramatic note. Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb! He is raised from the dead!

I don’t think this means that we are called to a ministry of visiting mortuaries or graveyards to demand that the dead rise up! This was a unique event- one that anticipates the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of all believers. We are given the assurance that God will and does act- after death there is the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

However, this is not just about resurrection beyond the grave.

Yes, we will all face physical death (our own and that of our loved ones)- no one can escape that. We are given the assurance of hope in that as believers are joined to Christ in his death, through our baptism, and we will be raised to life with him in his resurrection.

Yet the reality is- life is full of deaths, and resurrections. Christians are not immune from suffering and hardship.

We experience death in numerous ways

- shattered dreams
- a relationship that comes to an end
- a job opportunity that never materialises, or the loss of a work, retirement
- closed doors
- hopes, desires not fulfilled

Life is tough!

As we journey through life, filled with deaths and disappointments- (as well as joys and good times), this story shows us that whereas death is real, it is never final.

God gives us hope and the promise of new life. After death, there is always a resurrection: New hope, new beginnings, new opportunities, a fresh start.

Deaths and disappointments are an opportunity to discover more of who God is and how much he loves and cares for us. God will act, he will come, in his way and in his time.

In the words of St Paul, we are reminded that “God works for good in everything, for those who love him” (Romans).

So today, Jesus invites you to come to him, like Mary and Martha. Come bringing your hopes and dreams; joys and sorrows; disappointments, fears and needs. Come bringing your confusion and your tears. Come in expectant faith- trusting in God who has not forgotten you, but who loves you. He alone is “The Resurrection and the Life”. Amen.

Note: *Readers of later generations would find analogies between this story and their own. They experienced sickness, death in a time when Jesus was not visibly present. They turned to a seemingly absent Christ for help and received no timely answer...*

The story correlates well with the consternation felt by various Christian groups when the believers died during Jesus' apparent absence (1 Thess 4:13-18), including the Johannine Community, which experienced a crisis when the Beloved Disciple died prior to Christ's return (John 21:20-23)

See Koester 2003:65ff)