

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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**The text below can also be heard in audio version at
<https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

Lent 5 – The Raising of Lazarus (29th March 2020)

Introduction

Hello again folks and thank you for taking the time to read through these worship notes. This is the second of these notes that I have produced due to the current restrictions of movement and gathering which make it impossible to worship together in the beauty of our own Church Sanctuary. That is something I am missing, as I am sure you miss it too. There is nothing to replace the sound of voices lifted high nor the sense of fellowship that we find in being together.

For just now though, we hold each other in prayer, and we keep fellowship by phone or email or skype or facetime. It is good to keep in touch!

By any standards this has been a difficult week for us all. At the start of the week we were all learning the art of social distancing... standing at a safe distance from one another... Within days, though, even those restrictions were to be replaced by the instruction that we should all – unless we have a real need to go out – simply stay at home. And the best we can do is to follow that instruction. We have, after all, a responsibility for each other.

The season of Lent, of which this is the fifth Sunday, is perhaps reflective of how many of us are feeling just now. We are caught up in the journey towards the Cross of Calvary's hill and the journey is not easy. As we journey, we face challenges and junction points along the way – junction points of choices and decisions. Not that the road is always a straight one for, along the way, there may even be diversion points.

Just, we might say, as Jesus had a journey to go on too – a journey which, we discover today in our bible reading from John chapter 11 – meant that even Jesus himself had to divert from the road he was walking on when he hears that one of his closest friends, a man called Lazarus, has become ill.

We will come to that story shortly but first - shall we pray?

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord God, at this season of Lent we journey with Jesus as he heads inexorably towards the cross where he knows what will happen to him and where he will fulfil the purpose for which he came amongst us – to bring the reality of your grace deep into the heart of our lives.

We cannot imagine what Jesus must have felt as he made this journey, nor the inner turmoil that it must have created in him. And we can barely imagine what we would have been like if we had been in his place.

Lord, we thank you however, that Jesus was prepared to make that transforming and inspiring journey for us.

We thank you that he was steadfast and resolute... focussed on the task in hand and willing to walk that road.

But we thank you, too, that he was willing to make even the occasional diversion when he was faced with the reality of human need.

At this time of isolation for so many – for us – we come to you this day to ask that Jesus would join us on the journey we are travelling at the moment. We pray that, as we worship you in the

security of our own homes, that we might sense Jesus with us, walking each step by our sides, gently reassuring us that we are known and that we are loved.

Lord God of journeys, journey with us this day and throughout this short time of worship as we bring our prayers to you in the words that Jesus has taught us saying:

Our Father

Who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading John chapter 11 verses 1 to 43

Our reading this week comes from John chapter 11 where we read from verse 1 all the way through to verse 43.

Now a man named Lazarus was ill. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is ill.'

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This illness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'

⁸ 'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?'

⁹ Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the day time will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.'

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.'

¹² His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and

Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ ‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’

²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’

²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

²⁷ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked.

‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’

³⁷ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ ‘Take away the stone,’ he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.’

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face.

Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

A Reflection

It’s not the shortest story in the Bible – the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death. Which raises the question, if we think about it, as to why John (our gospel writer) would devote so many words to it.

Why does John recount this incident at such length?

Perhaps, it is because what John is recounting here goes to the heart of our human existence. The power of this particular story is that contains so much that resonates with our own life experiences, especially the experience of grief when someone we love is lost to us.

The beginning of the story, however, begins not with loss but rather with a message coming to Jesus about an illness. To be sure the illness – the nature of which we are told nothing – must have been serious if Martha and Mary had gone to the extent of sending urgent word to Jesus about how poorly their brother, Lazarus, was.

Those who pass on the message do not, as William Barclay points out, even ask Jesus to come to Bethany where Lazarus was facing his illness. There is something, he observes, in the tone of their voice, and something in their expectations that seems to imply that they knew that simply telling Jesus that Lazarus was ill would cause him to drop everything he was doing.

The basis for their assumption was that Lazarus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary, were special friends of Jesus, perhaps amongst the most special of all. We know this because, at Luke chapter 10, we find the story of Jesus sitting at the dinner table with them. There was clearly a special bond between them.

So, if they were such special friends, they would have no need to ask Jesus to join them. When a friend is ill... when the need is the greatest, you simply go.

When it comes to our closest friends, as with our closest family, we do not sit and ponder about how we should react.

When the need is there...when the news is learnt... when the call is made, you get up and you go. That is what friends do.

But then again, it is not quite what Jesus actually does – is it?

At verse 6 of our reading we read the almost bamboozling words - “*So, when he (Jesus) heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days*” before John goes on to tell us that Jesus says to his disciples that they would need to go back to Judea and see him.

Hold on a minute...

Did we read this correctly?

On the one hand Jesus has heard that Lazarus is ill...

Moreover, he has admitted that they will need to go and see him...

But this is followed by Jesus’ decision to spend another two days exactly where they were.

There doesn’t sound much urgency here which makes us ponder – rightly or wrongly – as to what had happened to the compassion of Jesus in this situation.

The decision to delay going to help Lazarus seems at odds with what we have come to understand about Jesus.

We could, of course, spend our time trying to justify, as many have done over the years the reason for his seeming inaction here.

Lazarus, some say, was going to die anyway...

Or, perhaps Jesus delayed going to make sure that when he got to Bethany that Lazarus was actually dead thus implying that Jesus could do more for them after Lazarus had passed away than he could before he passes away.

Or we could simply accept, as William Barclay also suggests, that we really don’t know and that the reason we don’t know is partly because we are not sure what it was that was in Jesus’ mind when he made the decision to stay put.

Too often we try to construct a defence theory for divine activity. We try to explain away the bits of the stories where we read things that don't seem to make obvious sense when, in reality, the divine does not need our excuses! We simply need to acknowledge that somewhere in the middle of what is going on here with Lazarus, that Jesus knew what he was doing... and that should be enough.

It is not until Jesus arrives in Bethany that things start to become clearer even if, by the time he arrives there, the mourning for Lazarus' loss has already begun.

When Jesus reached Martha and Mary there are people mourning all around him. Lazarus has already been buried in the tomb, as was the custom in those days – scented with strong fragrance, anointed for burial, wrapped in bandages - after which the period of deep mourning (which lasts for four days) begins.

That four days has not yet ended meaning that, as Jesus approaches Martha and Mary's house, the first sounds he hears are those of grief stricken people.

If the first sound he hears are of mourners weeping loudly, the first words he hears are from Martha who, at verse 21, tells Jesus in straightforward fashion - *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"*.

A number of verses later, at verse 32, Martha's sister – Mary – says the same thing to Jesus: *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"*

The obvious implication of these words is that there was some relationship between Lazarus' passing and the absence of Jesus.

One would not have happened without the other.

If Jesus had turned up like the proverbial cavalry then all he would have needed to do was to say a few holy words... wave his arms in the air... do anything... and everything would be fine!

The emotions the sisters display are the same as any person who has ever watched a loved one face the reality of their mortality where the hope we have is bound up with the trust we have in the care that our loved one is being offered.

If there is any hope in the situation then surely it must be in what the skill of the Doctors diagnosis or the skill of a surgeon's hands can do. And we have learnt to feel that for all the right reasons for our frequent experience is one of absolute admiration of those who can do such profound things to help us in our time of need.

And we rightly admire, at times like these, the skills that are to be found helping those facing the most uncertain of days.

At the same time, we might ponder – could it be that Martha and Mary are expecting too much of Jesus?

Do we not all, just occasionally, expect too much? Not that we do not have a right to expect something... but too much can sometimes be too much... Sometimes enough will have to do...

John's gospel, from where this story is taken, often – we are frequently reminded – runs at two levels.

The power of the story lies not just in what is happening or even in what has happened. Sometimes, on the other hand it lies in what the gospel writer is trying to help us understand.

I like the way the American preacher John Buchanan puts it: *"What is the word of God here? What is God saying to us in this text? What in us is being addressed - or to put it particularly, what in us is being called out?"* (<https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2005/031305.html>)

Yes, we might say, *"called out"* just as Jesus called Lazarus out from the tomb...

Could it be, perhaps, that Jesus needed to be there, to be present with those in need – which he was – before he could do what he needed to do?

And when he was there, he put up with the perhaps unrealistic expectation they had of him. Along the way, however, he joins in their tears. This is the moment when he weeps with them... the moment when even the Saviour of the world is moved to tears.

And somehow, perhaps, that is all we need to know today in our own lives.

Jesus is there. And as he arrives, he shares with us... walks along with us for a while... perhaps he even weeps a little too before he does what Jesus knows he now needs to do at just the right time.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayers

Lord, this day we draw strength from the Jesus who came to be with Martha and Mary, who listened to their words and who wept with them. His actions bring strength and support to us at times like these when events unfold in ways that we do not always understand.

At this time, we pray for those who need to know that you are with them because their journey is hard. We recognise that whilst we are all walking a similar road at this that this will affect people in different ways. Keep us mindful of the needs of others even as we are aware of our own needs.

Bless those who are working in the frontline of our emergency services – police officers who still have their duty to maintain law and order... carers who continue to support people in their own homes... ambulance staff who seek to reach urgently those in need... nurses and doctors and all who work in the health service whether in our local GP practices or in the hospitals of our land.

And we pray for our leaders at this time that they might be given the energy and the wisdom to make the decisions that need taken even when those decisions are hard.

Bless us all, heavenly Father, with the knowledge of your presence and the assurance that you always do what you need to do just at the right time...

Blessing

*Now, may the Lord bless you and keep you;
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you his peace this day and forevermore.
Amen.*