

Dead Certainty

John 11

Woody Allen was once asked if he was trying to achieve immortality through his work, he replied that he was trying to achieve immortality by not dying. He is not alone, for most death is something to be avoided, even our language avoids it, “passed away”, “deceased”, but unfortunately the last thing we want to happen is the last thing that will happen.

Death is the ultimate level playing field, it affects us all, brings into question all that we are and all that we have done, as well as what we are worth. For at the end of the game, says the Spanish proverb, king and pawn go back into the same box. Or as one wag more bluntly put it “All men are cremated equal.”

Our reading today brings us face to face with death, with its mystery, its sorrow and grief and whilst it is a topic that we may wish to avoid we will see that in Jesus whilst we will certainly die we can be dead certain that there is hope.

JESUS ACTS ODDLY 11:1-16

John 11 starts in a way that is quite odd for John’s gospel. Very few people in the gospel are named: we do not know the name of the woman at the well, the healed lame man, the man born blind, all of whom are major characters in the narrative. But here in John 11 there is a rush of names. Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and they are repeated throughout the chapter. This encourages us to recognise the relationship that Jesus has with these people. Those in need this time are not just anonymous members of the crowd but people who loved Jesus and whom he loved in return. Furthermore this encourages us to read this narrative with a far greater emotional involvement, these are people Jesus cared about and so should we.

Yet despite Jesus’ love for them he does not come when he learns of Lazarus condition, saying that through this sickness God and he will be glorified. Stranger he finally sets out, glad that Lazarus is dead, or fallen asleep, as it will help the disciples.

The disciples are clearly bewildered but while they may be in the dark Jesus is confident he is walking in the light doing the Father’s work (9:5)

What the disciples do know is that Jesus was almost killed the last time he was in Judea. Thomas, not known for his robust faith, expresses what the others are feeling. “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” He reminds me of the character in the cartoon *Gulliver’s Travels* who would say “It will never work, we’re doomed.” That seems to be the tone. To go to see a dead man and to probably die in the process is questionable behaviour, but they will follow anyway.

QUESTIONING JESUS 11:17-37

Jesus arrives at Bethany and Lazarus is well and truly in his grave. Martha, showing the same kind of busy and active nature that we see in other gospel narratives, rushes out to Jesus and speaks to him full of questions and doubt, but also faith. “If only you had been here.” Lord, you are powerful enough to defeat any sickness but now he is dead. She shows faith in the face of her bewilderment and grief: she doesn’t

know what to think, what to do. Jesus assures her of the resurrection, a standard part of the Jewish faith of the time, but she seems to take this as a pat answer, she affirms that it is true in the future but it doesn't bring her much comfort in the present.

Jesus then makes his great claim, which is central to the whole passage. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives in me will never die. Do you believe this?" It is a question to which we will have to return.

Martha's response is to affirm what she understands about Jesus as the Messiah, God's Son. This is the kind of faith that John has written to inspire. Even if Martha does not understand all that she is saying she is on the right track, and she goes to get her sister.

Mary, contemplative, reflective Mary now comes out to Jesus and with her the other mourners, and again the same questioning faith is expressed. "Lord if only you had been here ..." Interestingly Jesus' response to Mary is quite different to that to Martha, perhaps they were closer but Mary's grief as well as the grief of the others emotionally moves Jesus deeply and as he goes to the grave we have the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept.

As they approach the tomb Jesus' actions are questioned this time by the crowd, surely Jesus with all his power could have kept this man from dying. Jesus' healing power is not in doubt but seen to be impotent in the face of death.

THE GREATEST RESURRECTION SINCE ... 11:38-54

Their attitude seems again to emotionally affect Jesus and spurs him into action. Jesus asks that the stone be rolled away which prompts alarm from Martha, it will stink, after all he has been dead for 4 days. The temptation to start quoting from Monty Python's Parrot Sketch is very strong here for John has been constantly reminding and underlining that Lazarus is really dead, deceased, fallen of his perch etc. Lazarus was certainly dead.

But Jesus again returns to the idea of glory of God, that through this somehow something of the nature of God will be revealed.

The stone is rolled away and Jesus thanks his Father for hearing his prayer and as the stone has been rolled away there is no stench, the smell of death is absent. Assured of God's presence with him and reminding his earthly listeners that it is God who is working through him he now calls out Lazarus. And the dead man comes out. V44 underlines that this is a resurrection not resuscitation, he was truly dead, but now he is alive and he has now been freed from death.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd has risked his life to come to rescue one of his own from death, showing his great power for those who are his own as well as increasing their faith. But not all are impressed. Whilst some are brought to faith others rush off to the Pharisees and in a panic the leaders of the nation decide that the only thing that can be done with this man is to kill him. In their short sightedness they decide to put to death the master of life. Raising Lazarus to life would ultimately lead to Jesus' death, but it was a price that Jesus was willing to pay for it showed the extent of God's power and in his own death the path of resurrection would be opened for all who followed him.



Four days? Boy! Time sure flies when you're dead!

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TO DEATH: JESUS WEPT.

This chapter then continually raises the issue of death. The disciples are concerned that Jesus may die as well as worried about their own longevity. Martha, Mary and the crowd are troubled by the fact of Lazarus' death, we are constantly reminded that Lazarus had died. It doesn't need to be continually raised but by doing so it highlights the problem that it creates, it questions all their faith in Jesus and seems to make any faith in him limited, questionable. In fact of all the characters in this chapter death is the silent but ever present one whose not so subtle stench pervades the chapter and threatens to undermine all that Jesus does.

This chapter about Jesus and death then gives us a chance to reflect on a Christian attitude to death, and we can see it all focused around the shortest verse in this long narrative, Jesus wept.

The Sorrow of Death.

The moving description of Jesus' emotional response to the death of Lazarus reminds us of the sorrow of death, there is real pain in the separation from loved ones. More than that not only here do we have an insight into Jesus' humanity but this is the word made flesh that has been moved to tears. This is God, the creator and giver of life, joining with his creation at the pain of death.

I find this enormously encouraging and comforting that in our grief and pain in death, God understands the pain we feel. Not only does he understand, he sympathises. For what moves him particularly is the weeping of Mary and those with her. Jesus knows and understands our pain.

This means that we should not hide our grief from Jesus, or from each other, grief in the face of death is a natural response and we should feel its force.

Not to grieve as those without hope.

Jesus though may also have been weeping almost in frustration. He is surrounded by people who are questioning him and his power, they are overwhelmed by death when he, the one who gives life to all, is in their midst. Jesus weeps that these people are seemingly grieving without hope. This is not the way that Christians should respond to death.

Paul could write "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." 1Thessalonians 4:13-14

With Jesus there is always hope even in the face of death, he has demonstrated this in raising Lazarus and one day he will raise us up. This means we as Christians can face death differently than the world around us, for death is not the end. There is hope.

The Death of Death in the Death of Jesus Christ.

Finally as Jesus weeps he may be looking towards his own death. There are many links between this passage and Jesus' own death and resurrection: the grave, the stone to be rolled away, the body having been there for a number of days, the grave clothes. Jesus knows what is in front of him and who could doubt that it would bring him to tears.

But he also knows that in the events that await him it will be not a battle to the death but a battle with death, and he will win not just a skirmish as he does here, but rather in his death it will actually be the death of death. As he rises unaided from the tomb, grave clothes left behind he will give true hope to all who will follow him. He was dead certainly, but now there is hope as a dead certainty. In the light then of his death we can live. The questions and doubts that come from facing death are answered in Jesus and his resurrection, and in him we know what we are living for, he who is the resurrection and the life.

This is why Christian funerals can be occasions of hope and thanksgiving and even joy. As followers of Jesus we can know that our Good Shepherd has given his life for his sheep so that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we need fear no evil, he is with us and we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Mystery remains

There is truly great comfort here, Jesus not only joins us in our suffering and grief but gives us hope. But we also need to admit that questions remain. The disciples didn't understand, Mary and Martha didn't understand and there will be things that we don't understand. We will also want to say to God, "If only..." And the hope that we have will not extinguish the grief that may come. Some Christians act and speak as if Paul said do not grieve, but that is not what he said, rather do not grieve as those without hope. A man whose wife had recently died told me of how many well meaning Christians had said to him that it must be a comfort that his wife is in heaven with Jesus. It made him want to shout out "That doesn't help me now!" He didn't but that is how he felt. We may do better to sit with people in their grief.

But as we deal with death with the faith that God allows us we may find that in unexpected ways we too will see the glory of God revealed in unexpected ways. I remember visiting a lovely Christian lady called Rena who was in intensive care and did not have long to live and she knew it.

I read to her from this passage and spoke the great promise of Jesus "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She looked straight at me and in her beautiful Scottish soft voice said "Oh yes". She had given me far more in that answer of quiet faith in her pain than I had given her by visiting. Here was one of God's own whose death was certain, but who knew where she was going for dead certain.

How about you?

Richard Humphrey, Dean of Hobart.