

Faith to see? (John 11:17-44) – Encounters with Jesus 15: Lazarus

In this passage, Jesus encounters two sisters in their grief at the loss of their brother Lazarus. What happens is amazing, but it points to an even more important truth.

Encounters with Jesus

This is the last in our series on John's gospel, which we've called, 'Encounters with Jesus.'

We've seen how John shows Jesus engaging with a wide variety of different individuals in his gospels, Peter and the other disciples, his mother at the wedding of Cana, the temple authorities, Nicodemus a top religious academic, a five-times divorced Samaritan woman, an official desperate for the healing of his son, a man crippled for 38 years, a hungry Galilean crowd, a man born blind from birth and more.

In these encounters the people have had to respond to the claims Jesus has made about himself. Some have responded with faith, others have been angered by Jesus and others have betrayed him.

This is often, although not always because of or despite of the signs Jesus has performed:

- i. turning water into wine,
- ii. clearing the temple,
- iii. healing the officials son,
- iv. healing the man lame for 38 years,
- v. feeding the hungry crowds with one pack lunch and
- vi. making the blind see.

Now we come to this encounter in chapter 11. It is a climactic encounter, which culminates with perhaps the most amazing sign.

The first sign, happened at a wedding, this one happens at a funeral.

There is a sense that in this story that Jesus is not so much encountering individual people, but death itself. Yet, the people are still important, and Jesus's encounter here draws out perhaps his most humanity more than any other story in the gospels.

Jesus knew the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus at a couple of points in chapter 11, we are told that Jesus loved them. He was particularly close to them. Lazarus had fallen seriously ill and Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus, hoping he would come and heal him.

At the time, Jesus was 4 days journey away and when he first heard he did not come immediately. Rather he waited another two days, until Lazarus had actually died, then decided to travel to Bethany and encounter the two grieving sisters.

So, in this story, we discover Jesus encountering three different people or groups of people:

- Martha and Mary the two sisters of Lazarus
- and the Jews who had come to console them.

An Unanswered prayer?

As he does so, though, there is a deep tension hanging over the scene that is expressed by each of these three fairly clearly:

Martha says in verse 21:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:21)

Mary says in verse 32:

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (John 11:32)

Some of the Jews say in verse 37:

"Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:37)

Why has Jesus allowed Lazarus to die? How can Jesus claim that he loves Lazarus and still let this happen?

Surely all of us who believe have asked similar questions. When there is a great loss in our life, whether it be the death of a loved one, the loss of a job of good health or a treasured pet or possession, we might well cry out - Why has God allowed this to happen? How can a God of love allow such loss, especially death to occur?

Such questions take on added power, when we have been praying fervently for God's help, when like the sisters reaching out to Jesus, we have reached out to God, knowing only he can help.

These questions are not abstract questions, they go to the heart of the reality of our lives and to the heart of our faith.

Yet, in contrast to these very real and understandable questions is the confidence of Jesus, that what has happened to Lazarus has a deeper more powerful and for the moment unseen purpose.

Back at the start of chapter 11, when Jesus first hears about Lazarus's illness he says,

"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." (John 11:4)

Later on when they hear of his death, Jesus says to the disciples:

"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." (John 11:14-15)

This tension hovers over the whole account: Has Jesus failed by allowing Lazarus to die or will this be a moment of glory for God and of bringing people to faith?

It is in the context of this tension, that the three encounters we have mentioned take place.

Encounter with Martha: 'Do you believe this?'

The first encounter is with Martha. She is perhaps the more practical, matter of fact and more private of the sisters.

When Jesus comes to the village, she slips away from the house, where all the grieving is happening in order to have a quiet conversation with Jesus. Martha is not so much overwhelmed by the emotion of grief as by the questions that the death of her brother has raised.

Her faith is shaken by the unanswered prayer, yet she still has a trust that Jesus is able to perform amazing signs. She says in verse 22:

"But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus responds by saying, 'Your brother will rise again.' Was this an indication of what he was going to do? Martha takes it as a reminder of the hope that most first century Jews believed. There will come a day when the dead will be resurrected.

This idea is expressed most clearly in Daniel 12:2:

"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

Death was not seen as the end. It was seen in a way as falling asleep and waiting to be awoken on the last day. Martha knows all this, but in the face of her brother's death these beliefs have taken a whole deeper level of meaning.

Jesus then responds with a radical statement:

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26)

Jesus roots the idea of the hope of life beyond death in himself. He is the resurrection and the life. This has two implications.

Firstly, many today may say that the idea of life after death is just wishful thinking. A lie people tell one another to comfort themselves in the midst of their grief. But Jesus says, that he himself is the guarantee of that truth. Martha would have known of the other signs and miracles Jesus had done and his powerful claims about himself. If these all point to Jesus as being the one sent from God, then his very presence as a human being facing the reality of death with other human beings gives us a deep confidence that God is indeed concerned to deal with our greatest problem: death.

Secondly, though, if Jesus is the resurrection and the life, then not only is he proof that God wants to save us, then he is God's solution to our death. Unless, we believe in him as that solution, then we will miss out on the life beyond death that God longs to offer us. We won't be part of the 'some' who receive everlasting life.

All this means that the question Jesus asks, Martha is the most fundamental one we face: 'Do you believe this?'

Martha's response is emphatic:

""Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (John 11:27).

It is a response that echoes John's conclusion to the whole gospel:

"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

Jesus asked Martha, 'Do you believe this?' Having shown us Jesus, John's gospel asks us: 'Do you believe this?'

In the face of the reality of death, the most fundamental question for all of us is: 'Do you believe in Jesus?'

Encounter with Mary: 'Jesus wept'

If we just had Jesus's conversation with Martha, then perhaps we could be forgiven for thinking that Jesus has no understanding of the reality and pain of grief and death. To lose a loved one is probably the hardest experience that any of us will face in life.

For me, I know that the emotional pain of the grief that came when my brother died was the hardest that I have ever faced and I am sure that many of you listening today have been through much worse.

No matter, how much we might believe in the hope of eternal life, the pain of grief is still real.

Having spoken to Jesus privately, Martha tries to secretly collect Mary so she can meet with him to. But, Mary was much more impulsive and emotional than her sister. When she hears Jesus is there, she jumps up in full sight of everyone and runs off to him, so that everyone else follows.

When she arrives, she starts with the same words as Martha, but this is no intellectual searching after truth in the face of death, this is a cry of despair, as she falls at Jesus's feet and weeps.

And Jesus's response to Mary is very different to his response to Martha.

It says he was deeply moved or greatly disturbed and troubled in his spirit. Many commentators, say that the word translated deeply moved or greatly disturbed, has the sense of being angry. It is a word that is repeated as Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus. The passage also goes on to tell us in the shortest verse in the Bible: 'Jesus wept.'

Faced with the reality of grief and death, Jesus is angry and sad. This also has two important implications:

Firstly, when we are caught up in the depths and emotions of grief, we like Mary need to know that Jesus is not distant from how we are feeling, he is there weeping with us. More than that he shares with us the deep emotional sense that death is not right. He rages with us against the brutality of loved ones snatched away from us.

Secondly, it shows us what Jesus is passionate about. For Jesus, death is the ultimate mark of a world turned against God. Faced with its reality at the death of his friend Lazarus he is enraged. His emotional response shows not just that he shares in our emotion, but it shows his passion to do something about it.

Encounter with the Jews: 'That they may believe...'

Asked, whether she believed, Martha says, 'Yes', Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.' It is this Son of God, who having met with Mary is now weeping at Lazarus's death.

Some of the watching Jews respond to seeing Jesus's emotion, by seeing his love for Lazarus, but others raise once again the question that will not go away: why if he loved Lazarus did this man who made the blind man see, allow him to die.

Jesus now responds to these questions, in the most emphatic and powerful way. As he comes to the tomb he orders the stone to be rolled away. Martha objects - Lazarus has been dead four days - his body will be decomposing and smelling. But Jesus says to Martha, 'Did I not tell you, that you would see the glory of God?'

Then when the stone is rolled from the mouth of the cave, Jesus prays a prayer that is more about the importance of the people present seeing this climactic sign and believing than about the miracle itself.

Then he cries out in a loud voice a simple command: 'Lazarus! Come out!' And Lazarus does, still dressed as a dead man, but now very much alive.

Finally, the tension is relieved. Yes, Jesus did not seem to answer their prayer, but it was for a bigger purpose to enable this climactic and powerful sign, that would glorify God and enable people to believe in Jesus.

The miracle was not so much about rescuing Lazarus, but about helping many more to come to faith. It was not so much about allowing Lazarus a few more years of life on this earth, but enabling many more to find faith in Jesus and so discover eternal life.

Encounter with Death: '...that one man die for the nation...'

And many did believe, but actually in the following verses, the raising of Lazarus also made Jesus's enemies even more determined to have him killed. For them belief in Jesus as the Messiah, risked creating an uprising that would lead to a Roman suppression and the destruction of the temple and their way of life. This could not be allowed, so the High Priest, Caiaphas says in verse 50:

"You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50)

There is a sense, that in order to allow Lazarus to live, Jesus had signed his own death warrant.

Yet, John tells us that the High Priest's comments unwittingly spoke a deeper truth. Jesus had come to die. Lazarus's death had allowed the glorification of God and the demonstration of Jesus's love and power over death, Jesus's own death would do that in an even more profound way.

Jesus's sadness and anger at the reality of death is what drove him to die for us and rise again. The cross and resurrection are the ultimate demonstration of his love and glorification of God. It is the means by which he brings us forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

The key question for us is the question he asks Martha: "Do you believe this?"