

SERMON – 15/5/22
'Martha and Mary'

John 11:17-44

“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”
(John 11:21 and 32)

As we mark the beginning of Christian Aid Week today we continue our series on people who encountered Jesus by looking at the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and in so doing I hope we can learn something of what Jesus brings to situations of need, whether that be the grief of personal loss as in our Bible reading or whether it be the global need that ravages our world as in today's Christian Aid focus, or whether indeed it is whatever situation of human need that is uppermost in your own thoughts today.

In recent weeks we have met Nicodemus who was hesitant about this unlikely Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth; we have seen how Jesus' own mother forced her son's hand in responding to a catering crisis at a wedding; and last week we compared the challenges that Christ brought both to an important insider, Nicodemus, a high-ranking Jewish leader, and to a nameless outsider, a Samaritan woman with a chequered past that He met at Jacob's well.

Today we have read part of the famous story of Jesus' intervention four days after His close friend Lazarus has been buried, and it's worth noting that in the verses before those we read this morning we are told that although Jesus had been called to come while Lazarus was lying sick, He consciously waited two days before even *starting* to travel all the way from Galilee to near Jerusalem. It is noteworthy, and in fact poignant, that when Jesus gets to Bethany and meets first Martha and then Mary, they both say exactly the same thing to Him – in the words of our text this morning: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” What was Jesus playing at? Well, we are privy to what Jesus has said to His disciples (although the sisters are not): 'This is for God's glory,' He had said. (John 11:4)

How often have you heard folk saying in the midst of tragedy – indeed, how often have you said it yourself – Where is God in all of this? And that's the question I would like to explore with you this morning.

As we look at the atrocities unfolding in Ukraine, as we are reminded of poverty and injustice, persecution and natural disaster in so many parts of the world, such as Zimbabwe that we saw in the video earlier, and as we all deal with the sometimes small but sometimes major troubles that affect us and those we know personally, we find ourselves asking how God is speaking into these situations and how God is speaking to us as we consider our response to human need.

In the face of troubles people react in different ways - some are paralysed by sad, some feel depressed, some are angry, some feel guilty, some are motivated to action, some need time to be still. As some of you know I was dealing with a family bereavement last week so that is the situation that is uppermost in my own thoughts today – it was an elderly cousin of my father's who died, she had lived a long and healthy life and for her in the increasing frailty and struggle of advancing years it was undoubtedly time to die, but there is still a deep sadness there: someone who has been quietly in the background the whole of my life is no longer among us and since she is the last of her generation on that side of the family there is a feeling of a light going out.

For you there will be other concerns – perhaps you too have been bereaved, perhaps you or someone you care about is facing serious illness, perhaps you have family members or friends facing difficulties that are making you anxious. People are concerned to different degrees about situations in the world around us – the fuel poverty that is affecting so many in our country at the moment, the threat to world security generated by Russian aggression in Ukraine, the injustice of poverty and persecution suffered by the world's most vulnerable people.

You will each react to these things in a variety of ways, and it was no different for Martha and Mary facing the death of their brother Lazarus after a serious illness. From elsewhere in the Gospels we

know that the two sisters were very different in character and temperament. On one occasion when Jesus visited, Martha was bustling around seeing to the practicalities of having guests in their home and was intensely annoyed with Mary for simply sitting at Jesus' feet listening to the Teacher when there was so much to do in the kitchen. Mary was focussed whereas Martha was distracted, but Jesus says that it is *Mary* who has made the better choice. In our reading this morning we see a similar distinction between the sisters – in her grief Martha has to be busy: she has heard that Jesus is about to arrive and so, hospitably, she goes out of the village to welcome Him on the road, while in a different expression of mourning Mary is sitting quietly at home in the company of those who have come to comfort the family. It's interesting, however, that when they both, separately, first see Jesus they both say *precisely* the same thing to Him, which suggests that it was a conclusion they had come to in conversation with each other before Jesus had arrived: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." And it's interesting that Jesus responds to each of them in two completely different ways.

With Martha He seems quite abrupt, almost dismissive as He says, 'Your brother will rise again.' If Jesus was just patting Martha on the shoulder in her grief and saying 'There, there' we would be rightly critical as we would be of those who respond to grief with pious platitudes and those who address the question of immediate suffering in the world with dreamy visions of Kingdom come. But Jesus was there to show God's glory and that involved Him in revealing Himself as the Resurrection and the Life and in acting with power to raise Lazarus from the tomb. Jesus is the Son of God and like Martha, in the face of human struggle, we need to wake up and smell the coffee – Jesus is able to bring transformation in the here and now.

With Mary, Jesus acts quite differently. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (v.33) Here and later in verse 38 the word that most English translations render 'deeply moved' actually describes the kind of bellowing with anger that most of us reserve for times when we are alone

or completely disinhibited by the awfulness of the circumstances we are seeing unfolding in front of us. And in, famously, the shortest verse in the Bible we read: 'Jesus wept.' (v.35) In the most vividly descriptive of ways we see here the Son of God in all His humanity, the One who is the Resurrection and the Life utterly scandalised by the sheer awfulness of death, and by this too Jesus is moved to reveal the glory of God by getting right alongside the suffering and vulnerable, prefiguring His willingness to get alongside us by sharing our death and our grave so that He might also share with us the resurrection that He would win for us and that He gave notice of by raising Lazarus from the tomb that extraordinary day.

With Martha Jesus exercises a ministry of truth and with Mary a ministry of tears. We need both, of course, and in Jesus we get both. This is the Good News – in the face of poverty and in the face of injustice, in the face of unspeakable suffering and in the face of death itself there is hope. It is true, for Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. Hallelujah! But this too is the Good News – right there in situations of human tragedy Jesus weeps, for God's heart is the first to break where there is suffering. War in Ukraine and anywhere else is a scandal; children going hungry, adults going hungry is a scandal whenever and wherever it happens; illness is a scandal and death is the greatest scandal of all and with Jesus we need to bellow with anger at all that is wrong with our world, not just to make a noise for its own sake but to propel us like a tennis player into serving the ace that will make poverty history, that will minister to the sick and the grieving and the dying, and that will make the vision of God's Kingdom a reality here and now.

So let us weep today with those who weep and don't dare let us sweep any situation of suffering we become aware of under the carpet with fine-sounding words but no action. Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that must compel us to make tomorrow's hope today's reality through a willingness to dream the impossible and work to make it a reality.

Martha and Mary both said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." But the fact is stuff happens and the question is how will the glory of God be revealed in the

face of the stuff that has happened. That is in the hands of each one of us. So what will each of us do this week to seek and to reveal God's glory in those situations of human need that come to our attention?