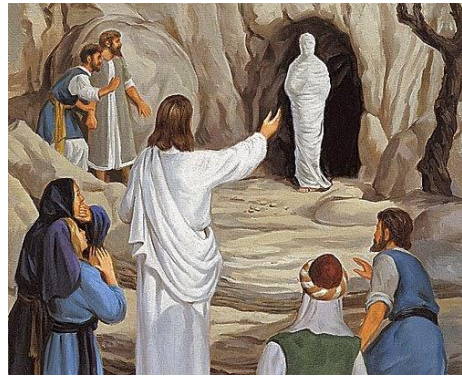


## How is the Pandemic death toll affecting our faith? Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 10:40 – 11:44).



When Jesus finally got back to Bethany, death was in the air. Lazarus was dead and buried.

Today, as I write this, there has been over 3000 deaths in Care Homes, just over 26,000 deaths in the UK as a whole and over 200,000 deaths worldwide linked to the coronavirus pandemic. Every day on the news there are heart-wrenching stories of loved ones lost as the totals mount daily.

In Bethany, Mary and her sister Martha were distraught and needed to express their disappointment in Jesus, “Where have you been? Why weren’t you here? We told you what the situation was with Lazarus and you didn’t come, and now you are too late.”

Similarly, at times, we may pray prayers like this, wondering where God is, why he doesn’t seem to act, or even, does he care?

But Jesus always knew what he was doing. After a torrid time in Jerusalem where the Jews had tried to seize him and stone him, Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the town of Bethany, east of the Jordan, near Jericho. This was a different Bethany from the village of Bethany where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. It was where John the Baptist had done most of his baptisms.

And when Jesus got the news that Lazarus was sick, he purposely stayed where he was for two more days. Why? Partly because many people were believing in him in Bethany and it was a time of fruitful ministry, and partly because he knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead and God would be glorified. His delay would give plenty of time for Lazarus to really die and really to be buried.

This seems extraordinary to us, but there are important lessons to learn.

Firstly, that God can be glorified through a person dying and secondly, God will sometimes delay in answering our prayers in order to strengthen our faith.

Whilst Jesus had said to his disciples, "I am glad I wasn't there so that you may believe", Mary and Martha were saying, "If only you had been here Jesus, Lazarus wouldn't have died."

When God seems to be absent, He is wanting to strengthen our faith. When people are dying, even then God can be glorified. So, underneath the shroud and the dark blanket of this coronavirus pandemic, there is both an opportunity for non-believers to believe and an opportunity for believers to strengthen their faith.

So how is our faith doing in the presence of so many deaths? For it is death which is likely to present the sharpest and most intense challenge to our faith. Let us look at the faith of those involved.

What about Jesus' faith?

Jesus' faith in the Father was total. And notice that there were never any 'no go' areas for Jesus. He could escape the grasp of those who wanted to seize and stone him in Jerusalem; he could bring a body, which had been dead for four days, back to life.

Jesus' faith enabled him to go into all areas of hostility, all areas of sickness, disease and death. Are we willing to go into the dangerous places with Jesus?

Our health workers, carers and others, it seems, are; and it is there that they will experience Jesus' presence with them because there are no 'no go' areas where Jesus cannot be found.

For the rest of us, who are in the relative safety of 'lockdown', we may be feeling frustrated by not being able to offer our services, but we can pray for those who are going day after day into the dangerous places.

What about the faith of Jesus' disciples?

They thought Jesus was crazy! "A short while ago the Jews tried to stone you", they said, "and yet you are going back there [to Jerusalem]"? Madness. And then Thomas pipes up, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

So, the thing which characterised the disciple's faith at this point was a kind of resigned pessimism. This could be our response given the coronavirus pandemic.

But what about Martha's faith? Well, it was strong in that she knew if Jesus prayed, God would hear his prayer; she believed that Lazarus would rise from the dead at the last day; and she was the first woman to declare that Jesus was 'the Christ, the Son of God'.

And Mary? Although she, like her sister, had been disappointed in Jesus' recent absence in their time of need, we also know that Mary had a deep love for Jesus as she was the one who had 'poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair'.

However, it doesn't matter how much faith we have, the death of a loved one can be a significant test of that faith. Multiple deaths, like the ones we are experiencing locally, nationally and across the globe, can cause even more mind and heart searching.

Having a doctrinally correct, intellectual faith is important at times like this, and, when someone close to us dies, we also need to be aware that it can produce a powerful emotional reaction. Grief, sadness and tears can be overwhelming.

Some of you may know Sir Michael Parkinson who over many years hosted the 'Michael Parkinson Show' on TV. He was a gritty, northern journalist who went into television and interviewed hundreds, if not a few thousand, celebrities on his show. He was a master of the interviewing art.

But recently he allowed himself to be interviewed by Piers Morgan, and roles were reversed. Sir Michael, now an older man of 85, was fine until Piers started to ask him about the death of his father, and at that point Michael broke down and wept and wept and wept.

The pain of grief is often linked to the extent of the love lost. Three times in this passage, love is mentioned; Jesus' love for Lazarus (twice), Jesus love for Mary and Martha, and we already know of Mary's love for Jesus. Theirs was a care home. And we can pray for our Care Homes which often operate as 'family' and where many are now grieving the multiple losses of 'family' members.

But one of the great reassurances we have as people of Christian faith is that we have a God who weeps with us when a loved one dies. Our God is not a God who socially distances Himself from our sufferings.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who had come along to Lazarus' tomb also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, and then he wept.

Why did Jesus weep? After all, he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

As well as sympathising with the mourners, I believe he wept mainly because of the awfulness of death, the way it intrudes, the way it brings things to an unsatisfactory end, the way in which it doesn't discriminate, taking the very young, the very old, and everyone in between. The way it ambushes life and steals, destroys and kills. This is why the Bible always says death is an enemy.

Jesus may also have been confronted here with the prospect of his own fast approaching death.

For some people, emotional pain can be greater than physical pain, but whatever the pain, as C.S. Lewis wrote, 'pain insists on being attended to..... It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

And then the miracle happens – Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. That creative Word which in the beginning said, 'Let there be light', now says, 'Let there be life', and death has to give way.

Shortly after the raising of Lazarus, which only John records, Jesus himself dies; giving up his life as a sacrifice for our sins. He committed his spirit to his Father and breathed his last. And after 3 days his Father raised him from the dead.

I remember the significance of words like 'breath', 'wind' and 'spirit' when my mother died. Outside the hospital ward, where she was dying of cancer, the wind was howling, there was a gale blowing. And inside, as I held her, her breath, her wind, her spirit gently left her worn out body as she died. She had held me when I took my first breath so it was fitting that I held her as she took her last.

“You that seek what life is in death,  
 Now find it air that once was breath.  
 New names unknown, old names gone:  
 Till time ends bodies, but souls none.  
 Reader! Then make time, while you be,  
 But steps to your eternity.”

(Baron Brooke Fulke Greville, 1554-1628, "Caelica 83")

Of course, not everyone is going to react with positive Christian faith in these present circumstances. There will be the cynics, the sceptics, those who are against Christ and Christians. Even miracles will not necessarily convince such people.

Some of the Jews who witnessed the raising of Lazarus immediately went to the higher religious authorities who then began to plot Jesus' death.

But John is writing his gospel primarily to encourage those of us who already believe, to go on believing ..... that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by continuing to believe we may continue to have life in his name (Jn. 20:31).

So today, in the midst of the global pandemic, as at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus **is** the resurrection and the life; those who believe in him will live, even though they die, and those who are alive when he returns will never die.

As we consider the impact that the coronavirus is having and especially on those who have lost loved ones, let's be pointing people to "Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Let's not allow present sorrow to dim the prospect of future bliss, when God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more.

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George Irving – 30/04/2020