

The Prayers of Jesus - The raising of Lazarus

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, You created the world to be without sin or disease but we messed it up. Your son wept because of Lazarus' death and because of the need to go to the cross to be the sacrifice for sin. Be with us in our times of disappointment and despair; raise our eyes to you that we might find hope and peace. Amen.

Introduction:

The story we are concentrating on this evening is, in fact, the longest narrative in John's Gospel apart from his recollection of the crucifixion. It takes place as the religious leaders grow increasingly opposed to him. There is no doubt that going to Judea will endanger Jesus and his disciples. But, in the passage we see how, despite all that is happening or about to happen, he decides to go to be with those whom he loves.

Although the actual prayer we will be looking at this evening is relatively short it needs to be understood in the context of the drama that was developing. The clouds are starting to roll in on the storm that will take Jesus' life. In the middle of the gathering gloom Jesus receives the news from Martha and Mary that their brother Lazarus is ill. The three were among Jesus' closest friends so they quite naturally expected Jesus to come immediately to Bethany so as to lay his healing hand on Lazarus. But Jesus, for his own reasons, delays the short journey from Jerusalem. Indeed when he eventually does go to Bethany Lazarus has been dead for four full days. We hear the disappointment of the sisters in the passage "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died."

Reading:

Let us read through the passage now:
John 11 v 1-7, 17-21, 32-35, 38-44.

Today we are thinking about the story of the raising of Lazarus, a Hebrew name which means 'God has helped'. And we will certainly see how this man, the brother of Martha and Mary was helped by Jesus.

The story of Lazarus is unique to John's Gospel and yet it delivers one of the most powerful messages to the world – Jesus has power over death and those who believe in him receive resurrected life. So it is an incredibly important story.

As we know, Lazarus was one of our Lord's closest personal friends. Despite this, Jesus was apparently in no hurry when he heard that Lazarus was ill. We can just imagine how perplexed the sisters would have been when Jesus apparently did not respond to their urgent message.

What emotions might they have felt? - no doubt they would have felt stunned, betrayed, angry, hurt, disappointed, confused..... Their friend, whom they dearly loved, has apparently let them down and failed them. They knew he could heal the sick – they believed in his healing power – yet he seemed to be ignoring them in their hour of need. Why could he not do for them, his friends, what he had done for others?

Of course, it was not the case that Jesus was ignoring their plea for help. When he got the news of Lazarus' illness while he was in Jerusalem, he 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'. So what was about to unfold was part of a much bigger picture – part of God's plan. The sisters were not aware of this, of course, and so they agonised over their brother's illness and subsequent death. Their plea, their prayer, was not to be answered as they had hoped or, indeed, expected.

How often is that the case with us? We pray to God for a particular outcome and then we are disappointed when God does not respond in the way we want or expect. Yet often it is that God's timing is different from ours or he may have a different plan. But we can be sure that no matter what the reason for delay God never sleeps and never forgets his people. So, in today's story Jesus was not ignoring the sisters' message but rather he was biding his time before he would intervene. By the time he got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four full days. Now the timing is significant. For Jews if someone was dead for 4 days then they were definitely dead! No chance of a mistake. It was also after 4 days that the evidence of the physical deterioration of the body became evident. So there was a plan in the timing of Jesus' return.

Now even though Jesus knew what was to unfold he was still moved with compassion at the plight of the sisters. In verse 33 we read how he was deeply moved and troubled at the plight of this family tragedy. The New King James version uses these words....'He groaned in the spirit and was troubled'- what a descriptive phrase. And so, in verse 35, we have the shortest verse in the Bible – 'Jesus wept'. Even though he knew that Lazarus would live he was still moved to weep with the ones he loved.....he cared about their sorrows.....and he was not timid to show his emotions. Again, in v 38, we hear how Jesus was intensely moved -New King James version...'groaning in himself'.

He asked to be taken to the tomb where he suggested that the stone be rolled away. Martha raises a very practical concern – what about the stench that would be released? Jesus challenged her faith in v 40 – 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' How often have we raised very practical obstacles when called upon to do something we are not too sure about? Or how often have we known deep down that God wanted us to undertake a certain course of action but we have come up with what we regard as very legitimate excuses. So we can understand Martha's seemingly very practical comments.

Now we come to the crux of our story. As we move to think about the great public prayer we are reminded of the contrast to last week's study. In that, we considered the context in which the Lord's prayer was relayed. In Matt 6 Jesus warns against looking for a public platform in which to pray, advising instead of the importance of going to a quiet place in which to commune with God. On that occasion He was warning that public prayers can be mis-used and only be for show. Today, however, is different. Standing in front of the crowd at the now open tomb Jesus looks up to the sky and makes this great public prayer – 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 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.' So, no quiet corner here for this great exhortation. Jesus is very content for everyone to hear what he is saying. His prayer does not specifically petition the Father to raise Lazarus but Jesus is thanking God for hearing his prayers. Our Lord's petition here is that men might believe that he has been sent from the Father and we know that the prayer is answered. It is intended to demonstrate that the miraculous raising of Lazarus is something that the Father does through the Son. It is a very public testimony to the fact that the Father hears the Son,

demonstrating his power and glory through him. We must remember that Jesus was not praying this prayer for his own personal benefit but for the benefit of the crowd looking on.(Ch 11 v 41-42). He knows that the Father will respond as a sign of His favour. And so this is a prayer which displays both Jesus' humanity and His intimacy with the Father. He does NOT ask God to heal Lazarus but rather He thanks Him for always hearing him. He looks to the Father to bring about healing and the Father answers.

Having prayed this prayer then Jesus follows it up with a great shout in v 43 – 'Lazarus, come out!'. No mumbling of the words under his breath, no hesitation, no desire for the people not to hear his cry. This is a clear case of 'cause and effect'. Jesus is the cause of Lazarus rising from the dead. The witnesses to this great miracle are very much involved in the outworking of the miracle. They see and they hear Jesus calling Lazarus out of the tomb. It is almost as though they are physically involved in moving the stone away and removing the funeral cloths which had been around Lazarus. And just imagine the joy of Martha and Mary on seeing their brother walk out of the tomb. What was dead comes back to life!

So, what was the impact on those who witnessed what had happened? Well, there were two separate groups. There were those who felt compelled to believe in Jesus as Messiah and then there were those who were still not convinced. Interestingly, though, not a single person challenges the fact that , after 4 days, Lazarus was definitely dead and was raised. The facts are clear and unquestioned yet those present reached two completely different conclusions. Those who refused to believe do not remain silent or passive – they go directly to the Pharisees to report on what they had seen. And, as we read later in the chapter, the Pharisees proceed to call for a meeting of the Sanhedrin. On the other hand, the believers go about proclaiming this great miracle attracting others to Christ.

This story of the raising of Lazarus and the great public prayer of Jesus is an important story in terms of Faith.

What does it say to us today about our Faith?

1. We learn so much about the importance of patience – of letting God do things in his time(no immediate reaction from Jesus on getting the message about Lazarus being ill).
2. We learn the importance of responding to God's instructions(Move the stone, Mary!)
3. We are challenged to better understand what it means to be fully alive in Christ.
4. It encourages us to have a Bold faith that defies logic.
5. It challenges us to be all that we are called to be.
6. It demands us to face facts – Jesus does raise people to life again(no one disputes the facts in this story).
7. We should focus not on the problem but on the resolution of the situation – just as Jesus did in this case which resulted in the demonstration of God's glory.

Lazarus is like a Guide to lead us on the road to life in all its fulness. No one is left in any doubt about Jesus' relationship with his father or about his miraculous powers. The scene is now set. The enemies are preparing the ground. Jesus' ministry is about to reach its great climax. The journey to Calvary is irreversible. It is a 'one way' road. In this passage we have witnessed the whole range of emotions – disbelief, pain, anger, disappointment, sadness but eventually rejoicing. If we truly believe, He will reveal His glory.

Questions for reflection:

- Which parts of this story speak most to you?*
- What does Jesus' prayer reveal about His character and His relationship to His Father?*
- Jesus said to Martha that if she believed she would see the glory of God – what does this kind of belief entail?*
- How do you think Lazarus felt when he walked out of the tomb?*
- How do you think the onlookers felt?*

Some final thoughts:

This story, which is the final of the seven signs/miracles in John's Gospel, echoes that of Jesus dying on the cross and coming back to life again. Jesus weeping at the death of Lazarus is mirrored by his agony in Gethsemane before He heads to the Cross. The devastation of the disciples and friends of Jesus over his death are replaced by the wonder and awe of His coming back to life. God the Father will make all things new through the sacrifice of His son.

The great news is that, despite all of the trials and challenges we may face, we can have confidence and depend on the promises of God to bring healing, hope, renewal and new life. No matter how dark times may seem God will, in his own time, answer our prayers. As we said earlier....God never sleeps and He never forgets His people.

As we move through Lent it gives an opportunity to ponder the faithfulness and love of our Saviour, shown beautifully in this story, through his tears at the tomb and His restoring to life what was dead.

Closing prayer:

Lord, when we are overwhelmed with grief and doubt your love and purpose, help us to know that you are with us and grieving alongside us. Give us enough faith to believe that You are good and that You care for us. Deepen our faith when we experience life in a 'tomb' so that when we enter a season of bright light we will not forget your grace.
Amen.