

*"The Price of Love"*

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*Reading: John 11.1-45*

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

The Gospel of John is often referred to as the spiritual gospel or even the theological gospel. Some people just love it – their favourite of the four accounts we have of the life and work of Jesus. It is replete with symbolic sayings and reflections about the identity of Jesus, and about the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God. It doesn't read as a simple story about a person in the way the other Gospels do. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* This is what theologians and Biblical scholars call a very high Christology.

Many of these Christological sayings are placed by the author of the gospel in the mouth of Jesus himself. In recent weeks we have heard him talk about himself as the Son of Man, as the source of living water, as the light of the world. Today's passage is the highlight – he identifies himself as the resurrection and the life. He often speaks in elliptical terms about the future – I lay down my life in order to take it up again, or, glorify your Son, so your Son may glorify you. The writer piles on the imagery as Jesus describes himself: I am the bread of life, I am the true vine, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth and the life. For some people this metaphorical language is wonderfully compelling, and the theological intricacies delightful and rich. But other people find the language flowery, suitable for stained glass windows – [and there they are – bread, water, vine, shepherd, pathway, light] – but really not all that helpful in figuring out how to live our lives as followers. It all just seems a bit – poetic. Well actually, incomprehensible.

Along with the grand religious symbolism, though, this gospel has some great stories, and this is one of them. There are really two versions of Jesus in the Gospel of John. One seems to be almost a disdainful didact, concerned only with whether people believe in him. But the other Jesus we see here is a man finding his way to a destiny beyond human dreams. So today we dig down below the high Christology to the more naturalistic story beneath, to consider what else it may tell us about Jesus. One of the ways to read this story is not as an implausible miracle revealing the divine nature of Jesus, but as a story about love and grief, revealing his humanity.

The story gives us a way to reflect on our own humanity. And if you have ever been affected by the death of a loved one, you will recognize parts of this story.

*Now, a certain man was ill ...* Lazarus is a friend of Jesus, not a disciple, a man whose sisters are also friends. Somehow, the three siblings have become close to Jesus, and their house in Bethany is a kind of retreat. The disciples pass on the message of his friend's illness, but Jesus doesn't really take in the bad news – he minimizes. Oh, surely he isn't *that* sick, it isn't urgent for me to see him – it is a pretty common thing, an easy error to make. Assume you always have time to see someone, to say goodbye. Sometimes we put it off because it isn't much fun to see someone who is in bad shape, or suffering, we make excuses. We are busy, we've got work to do, we'll go just as soon as we can – anyway, Jesus delays two days. And then it is too late. When he arrives, Lazarus is already dead.

Jesus walks in to the centre of a grieving family and community. We see the crazy thinking – the odd things people say when someone has died – if only you had come sooner, he wouldn't have died. What the grief experts call bargaining. There can be a kind of bizarre logic tinged with guilt – if only I had come sooner, he wouldn't have died. If only we hadn't agreed to that last treatment. Or the opposite, if only we had agreed to that next treatment. If only he had decided to stay home that morning. We think of ways to change the facts. We see the way common sense is set aside by pain.

Sometimes the mind plays tricks, what writer Joan Didion calls magical thinking – one evening a few days after my husband died, I was approaching an intersection as I drove home. The light was green but I could see the orange numbers flashing and then the orange light. I slowed down ready to stop – but I guess the electronic sensors had observed the lack of traffic, and at the last moment, instead of the usual orange to red sequence, the light switched from orange back to green. I have since noticed that this happens quite often, but it took me by surprise then. Without any reflection, I found myself thinking, 'Oh, time has reversed. I guess Coen will be alive again soon, and probably start getting better too. Good.' It was just a flash, and as I say, not even really a thought – but my mind just did it. A happy moment, though it didn't last long. Magical thinking. We do it all the time.

In Bethany, the people are milling around. Friends and neighbours, family, flood of tears. First Martha, and then Mary, say to him if only you had been here, this never would have happened. Well ... then Jesus himself, surrounded by the pain of others, asks to see the tomb of his friend. He enters the territory of grief. We imagine his sorrow –I wish I had had more time with him, what fun we had together, how much he taught me, I wonder if I appreciated him enough, how I will miss him ... all those thoughts and feelings. And Jesus begins to weep.

This is the true moment of his incarnation. Here, Jesus comes to know the price of love. If God is going to come to dwell with humanity, it will be in love and grief that God comes to know the human condition. For we know that in love we encounter the human condition at its most exalted and also at its most poignant. It is when we love that we experience both our most wonderful possibilities, and also our failures. We hold one another up, we let one another down. We are loyal, *and* we betray. When we love, our strength and our vulnerability are fatefully mixed.

Jesus now begins to understand his own destiny – to grasp more fully what it is that he is going to do. He begins to see that when his own life is laid down, this will be the result. The wretched, despairing grief. The pain when friends fall asleep, deny. The anger at missed opportunities, and might have beens. The loss. The price of love.

It is said that the story of Lazarus prefigures the central Christian story of death and rising that begins next week with Palm Sunday. Jesus calls out to him, and Lazarus emerges, covered in the bindings of death. You really can't read this as anything other than a miracle, for us, a metaphor. But go with the metaphor – it seems that the thing about love, along with its price, along with its pain, is that it will not stay dead. Love's energy will always, miraculously, return. Love will always produce life.

Here at the tomb of Lazarus, perhaps Jesus grasps too that it is his destiny not to admonish or to judge, or to teach or to heal, but to call out. To call us to life. The love that Jesus has come to know in his humanity will be the same love that redeems the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.