

John 11:1-53

The Gospel of John is a difficult book. There's so much in it that doesn't seem to make sense or is really hard to understand. For example the very beginning of today's story: 'Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days'. Wait, how does this make sense? If you love someone and hear that they're dying, don't you want to go over to say goodbye? Tell them you love them one last time? Be there for the funeral which in those days would take place immediately upon the person's death? But no, Jesus is said to love the three siblings and so he stays put.

One thing to consider here is that Jesus was under threat where they were – people wanted to stone him twice already. To go back is not an easy decision to take as he knew it might happen again – he knew his life was in danger if he returned.

That was certainly the reason his disciples didn't want him to go. When he says to them on the third day that they'll go, the disciples object on the basis of his – and their – safety. It makes even more sense to them when they hear Lazarus had died – why risk it if it's too late anyway? What's the point?

The second part of today's story which is difficult to grasp is the raising of Lazarus. Why did Jesus do it? How did it help? The immediate outcome of it is that Lazarus was alive and able to return to his duties whatever they were. The family was together again, the friends rejoiced. However – the direct result of Lazarus being raised to life is that Jesus' life was endangered. Some were not happy about this whole raising Lazarus back to life again business so they reported it to the authorities which in turn started plotting Jesus' demise – which we know was successful. If this wasn't enough, they planned to kill Lazarus as well. Whether he eventually died a violent death or of old age we don't know. What we do know is that there was an awful lot of upset as a result of the event and this meant a very hard life for Lazarus, his sisters and all who knew them. Was it worth it?

Before we answer all those questions, let's backtrack a little to the moment where Jesus meets two sisters on his way to the tomb and look closely at them. Both say the same thing to him and yet both are very different. Martha is the intellectual. She knows the teachings – resurrection of the dead was a common belief in those days among the Jews – and she believes them well. She understands. She believes in Jesus too and so she was hoping Jesus would come in time to heal her brother. He didn't and yet she professes her faith in him still. She's a very steady believer.

Mary is much more emotional. We do not know what she thinks or understands as she doesn't say much – except for this one accusation/confession of faith Martha uttered before her: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' She cries and stays at Jesus' feet. A side remark at this point – we read today in verse 2: 'This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay ill, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.' Now all very well but that story of her wiping Jesus' feet happens AFTER today's story – it happens in the next chapter. How come is it

mentioned here? Is it possible that this part of the Gospel was written after the next chapter? By someone else possibly who wanted the readers to connect the two stories? The compilers then didn't smooth it out but left it the way it was. It's just a suggestion for you to consider.

In any case Mary ends up at Jesus' feet over and over again – she is the emotional and impulsive one. I see both sisters as figures of all later Christians – some are more intellectual, some more emotional. The truth is that both of them – and all of us since – make the same mistake. If Jesus had only been here (i.e. whenever we need him), this wouldn't have happened. Both sisters think that Jesus is there to fulfill their own personal desires and needs. And those must have been great – since there is no mention of any other man in the family, we must presume the sisters were single and therefore their brother Lazarus was the only one who could provide for them. Without him they've lost not just a beloved brother but their means of surviving.

Don't we think the same sometimes? If only Jesus had been here, this wouldn't have happened. We think this week in particular of another school shooting in the States, people abused by those who were supposed to help them – workers of Oxfam this last week – or the rape and murder of a six-year-old girl in Pakistan. Daily we see photos of cars mangled beyond recognition after deadly accidents, people displaced by war or poverty or caught up in sectarian divisions. If only Jesus were there, these things wouldn't have happened!

Or would they? Today's story, however painful in all its ramifications, tells us clearly one thing – Jesus acts when he does and however he does not in response to human need but in response to God's designs. I'll say it again: Jesus acts not in response to human need but in response to God's plans.

He was only two miles away from Lazarus and yet he didn't run to heal him and protect the sisters' livelihood. The same way he didn't stop the shooter or the rapists.

There are a number of important things that I'd like to say at this point. First of all, many of those evil acts we perpetrate against one another. You cannot give people guns willy nilly and expect them not to be used. You can't put people in the position of power and expect them not to abuse it – some inevitably will. That's why we lobby for gun control in America, that's why we emphasise safeguarding in the Church of Scotland and in the society at large to protect but also to respond appropriately as soon as we hear something went wrong.

People do bad things to one another all the time. Bad things happen to us all the time – people die, people suffer. That is part of life however unpleasant and unwanted. Jesus never promised – even less so in today's story – that these things will not happen. He knew better than that.

Secondly, Jesus is the light and life in the midst of pain and suffering. As with any story in the Gospel of John, this one has two meanings – the literal where he raises Lazarus to

life and the metaphorical where he gives life to all who love him. He promises life in all its fullness but in a different dimension. If we trust him, he gives us life and light in the midst of pain and suffering of this world. He enables us to deal with the difficult lives we have. His love strengthens us and leads us on. There is more to life than just what we can see and touch.

Thirdly and lastly, I'd like to go back to Jesus responding not to the needs but to God's designs. We should do the same. The needs around us are overwhelming – there is so much suffering, so much pain and we cannot singlehandedly solve any of it. Our task is to listen to what God is saying to us, discern his will for us at the particular time and place we find ourselves in and act accordingly in whatever small way we are supposed to. Thank God for taking the pressure off. Amen.