

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

22. The Resurrection and the Life.

John 11:1-44. In Study 17 we met 3 people who had a significant part to play in the life of Jesus. Martha, Mary and Lazarus had a wealthy home where Jesus was made completely welcome, a haven where he could rest, eat a good meal, and talk of the things close to his heart. So it was natural that, when Lazarus became sick, his sisters should send to Perea to tell Jesus. They knew they would not even have to ask him to come to them: of course, because he loved Lazarus, he would come at once.

But strangely, Jesus did not move for the next 2 days: no explanation apart from his enigmatic words to his disciples, that this sickness would not lead to death but to the glory of God and His Son. At last he announced that they would recross the Jordan, back to Judea, much to the horror of the disciples, who were quick to remind him of the stoning he almost received there last time. But Jesus remained calm in the knowledge that, while in the line of his Father's will, he could come to no harm, and proceeded to tell them plainly that Lazarus had died, and that they would now go to him. The disciples were by now completely mystified, but just one, Thomas (whom we wrongly malign as the "doubter"), showed an amazing courage and loyalty, even if tinged with fatalism, by being prepared to stick by Jesus and even to die with him.

How hard it must have been for Martha and Mary to wait in vain for their friend to come, their feelings of puzzlement, anguish and disillusionment wringing their grieving hearts. They could not imagine the tremendous blessing that would soon come to them to make this waiting time infinitely worthwhile! Have you experienced God being "slow" to answer your desperate pleas, only to discover He did know best, after all! It helps to remember that God's delays are not God's denials.

Verse 17 tells us that by the time Jesus and company reached Bethany, they discovered Lazarus had been buried in the tomb 4 days ago. This is a very significant comment. It was the Jewish belief that the spirit of a dead person hovered around the tomb for 4 days, seeking to get back inside the body, but after 4 days the spirit finally left because it could not recognize the badly decayed face. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus was irretrievably dead! John's purpose in relating the miracles in his gospel was to show them as signs that Jesus was indeed the Son of God who had greater power than any human being. This story of the raising of Lazarus is the 7th, the final and greatest miracle narrated by John: it is John's last statement of the Divine nature of Christ and at the same time, a foretaste of the resurrection of Jesus himself. It would not have been half as impressive if Jesus had gone to Bethany straight away.

Bethany was about 3 kilometres from Jerusalem and **verse 19** says that many Jews had come to comfort the sisters in their grief. This would imply that the family was one of considerable social standing because, despite the Jews regarding comfort for the mourning as a religious duty, not many villagers would have rated visitors from Jerusalem.

In the warm climate, with no refrigeration, the body was always buried as soon as possible after death, but the time of deep mourning lasted for a week, followed by 30 days of lighter mourning: by the time Jesus arrived, the mourning would have been in full swing, the house full of family, friends and professional mourners. Inside the house there were set customs: before the burial it was forbidden to eat meat or to drink wine, or do any kind of study. No food was to be prepared in the house, and no food must be eaten in the presence of the dead.

Once the body was carried out all furniture was reversed and the mourners sat on the ground or on low stools. On the return from the tomb a meal was served - prepared by friends - of bread, hard-boiled eggs and lentils. During the first 7 days it was forbidden to anoint oneself, to put on shoes, to engage in any kind of study or business, and even to wash. To the Jew it was a sacred duty to come and express loving sympathy with the bereaved friends and relations of one who had died.

You have no doubt been to funerals both of believers in Christ and non-believers, and would have noticed the vast difference between the two. For Christians there is sorrow, for sure, but not despair, grieving but not anguish, because for them death is not the end but just a hiccup in the relationship. This funeral of Lazarus was the last of the old era: within a short time Christ would conquer death and guarantee that his followers who close their eyes on life would open them to eternal life in heaven with him.

We come to the very significant **verse 20** – As soon as Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him – but Mary stayed at home. The first time we met these sisters we were inclined to favour Mary for her deep spiritual hunger shining brightly in the dim light of Martha’s practical preoccupation. But now it seems the tables are turned. Why didn’t Mary go with Martha to greet their friend? Could it be that she was expressing her disappointment in a fit of the sulks? If so, it was a pity, because she missed out on hearing a tremendous statement of faith by this woman of action that was her elder sister, as well as perhaps the greatest statement of Jesus that is recorded in the Bible.

In **verse 21** Martha uttered a patently human speech – half a reproach that she could not keep back, and half with a faith that nothing could shake. When Jesus assured her that Lazarus would rise again, Martha revealed the belief that flickered in many Jewish hearts, that there would be some kind of life after death, however nebulous, and some sort of permanent existence in the presence of God. Jesus led her gently on in **verse 25** to the heights of spiritual awareness culminating in himself – “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Jesus was speaking not of physical life, for we all must die eventually, but of the eternal life given to the believer right here and now, and reaching its perfect fulfilment in heaven when we have finished with life here on earth. And then he gave her a mighty challenge – “Do you believe this?”

In **verse 27** Martha rose to the occasion. With faith and commitment beyond her understanding she replied, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” And then she demonstrated that her faith, as deep as Mary’s, was much more practical. At once she went back to the house and called her sister with the message that “The Teacher is here, *and is asking for you* .” If Mary was sulking, that invitation broke it all down: Mary followed Martha out of the house and found that Jesus had not moved from the spot until Mary came all the way to him.

Do we recognize ourselves in these sisters? Have you ever “sulked” with God because He hasn’t done just what you wanted? Even David the psalmist vented his anger occasionally at the Almighty! Because He is God, He doesn’t reject us for our behaviour, but lovingly waits, as Jesus did with Mary, until we come to the place once more of trusting Him. But it’s a pity to let our peevishness spoil our relationship with Him, for the worst of disasters loses its power to destroy us if we commit our trust whole-heartedly to Him. Lean as hard as you like on Him: He is strong!

For Mary, one sight of her Lord and the battle was over. In spite of her grief and despair she knelt at his feet and humbly gave vent to her feelings. There was no rebuke from Jesus, but as he saw her weeping, and her friends weeping with her, **verse 33** says he was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” The words “deeply moved” don’t really convey the meaning of the Greek word “embrimaomai” with its connotation of anger and even snorting like an animal. The same word in Daniel and Lamentations conveys the sense of fierce anger, so that Jesus, beyond expressing empathy and grief, was upset to the point of anger. Death was never in God’s plan for mankind and Jesus’ righteous wrath was roused at the human suffering which this death caused. The word for “troubled” (“tarasso”) conveys being agitated and stirred up in anguish.

Jesus asked to be shown the tomb and at sight of it he “wept”: a better translation would be he “burst into tears.” In awe the mourners whispered, “See how he loved him!” while others complained that if he had come when first asked, Lazarus would have still been alive.

Jesus as a man possessed all human emotions: Jesus as God possessed divine and perfect love. Here we see both sides of his God/man personality and find in him the perfect empathiser, the

perfect comforter. This would have had a profound effect on the bystanders. They would have known that Greeks considered their gods to be totally unable to feel any emotion whatsoever, to be beyond the place where any human joy or sorrow could call forth any response from them. Theirs was a lonely, isolated, passionless and compassionless god. Jesus showed us a God whose heart is wrung with anguish in the anguish of His people. This was a completely new picture of God. When shattered by some personal loss, remember that God is sharing your loss and feeling your sorrow; He is a God Who cares!

This well-to-do family would have had a fitting burial place and **verse 38** says it was a cave. Natural caves were often used for burial, with some man-made additions such as a main hall with niches cut into the rock. The bodies were laid in a pit in the hall for the first year, till only the bones remained, and these were then collected and placed in small stone boxes, called ossuaries. These miniature coffins were then placed in one of the niches: the cave was closed by a stone door and often a rolling stone was also provided for extra security. We could wonder how Jesus felt as he approached this tomb: it would not be long before he himself would be lain in such a burial place.

But now he faced the battle of life against death for the sake of his friend. Divine in his authority he ordered that the stone be taken away from the tomb. Dear practical Martha immediately objected, "But, Lord, there will be a bad smell! He's been there 4 days!" Even the embalming spices would have lost their effect. As he so often has to do, Jesus rebuked her lack of faith. "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

How often in the Bible do we see the words "But, Lord ..."? How often have we said that ourselves? Rather a contradiction, isn't it? I will trust you Lord, implicitly, I will obey you unquestioningly BUT Maybe the Lord quotes Shakespeare when he says, "But me no 'buts!' Just believe!"

In wonderment and maybe fear, they obeyed him, and took the stone away. (**verse 41**) Then Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven in grateful praise to his Father. It is important to note that Jesus always emphasised his power came from God alone and not himself. Here he did so for the benefit of the bystanders, seeking to lift their eyes from himself to his Heavenly Father. Wizards and sorcerers always muttered their incantations and spells: not so with Jesus, who, like a victorious champion in battle, cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" It would not be very long before he would utter another loud cry of triumph as he claimed the victory over death for all mankind.

Corpses were laid on a sheet of linen, wide and long enough to envelop the whole body including the head; the feet were bound at the ankles and the arms were tied to the body with linen strips. **Verse 44** gives the dramatic scene. Can you imagine the awe, the wonder, the incredulity, as Lazarus came shuffling out of the tomb? Dumbfounded, the crowd had to be prodded into action by Jesus' command, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Were they afraid to look on that decomposed face? They need not have been: Jesus had the power not only to bring Lazarus back to life, but to undo the corroding effects of death on his body. That power is still his: when we accept his salvation he cleanses us from all the putrefaction of our past so that our radiance may reflect his glory. Paul in **Ephesians 5:25-27** gives us a lovely picture of the beautifying work Christ performs on his Bride, the Church – "He loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

Do you notice that even in this miracle of ultimate power, Jesus did not do what the men could do for themselves? Someone had to move the stone and someone else had to unwrap the bound Lazarus. It is a challenge for us: is there anything in our lives, or the life of our church, which would hinder someone coming to new life in Christ? We must take away the stone. And is there someone newly born to this great new life who is still bound by the chains of the past? Ours is not to judge, but in love to teach and encourage: we must heed the words of Jesus – "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

“For Whom the Bell Tolls ...”

John 11:45-54. As usually happened when Jesus did any great work, the raising of Lazarus had the effect of polarising those who saw it. Many of the Jews now put their faith in him, but others thoughtlessly ran off to tell the Pharisees what had happened. If they thought that this event would convince their religious leaders at last, they were terribly wrong. The result was a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews, where, unbelievably, they acknowledged the miracle and plotted to kill the perpetrator! **Verse 48** is full of irony; the religious leaders thought that if Jesus gained too much of a following, the Romans would fear a revolution and take away what liberty they had under Roman rule. In fact the opposite occurred; because the majority of Jews rejected Christ and his way of peace, they rose up in revolt in 70 A.D. whereupon the Romans, tired of the insubordination, marched into Jerusalem and destroyed it and the temple. The nation was broken.

Verses 49-52 have great significance. Caiaphas was the high priest that year, and with rudeness typical of his Sadducean sect he scoffed, “You ignoramuses! Don’t you realise it’s better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish?” In other words, “This Jesus has to go!” But he was just as ignorant; he did not realise that what he was saying was a prophetic truth. And John goes further than the honoured high priest, adding that Jesus would not only die for the Jewish nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

Always remember that when Jesus died for us at Calvary, he won not only our individual salvation but also the wonderful bond of fellowship that Christians all over the world can enjoy as part of that great family!

The opposition from the religious leaders that had been building up steadily during the ministry of Jesus, now boiled over into active hatred. From that very day they plotted to take his life.

But Jesus still had a lot to teach his disciples and there was some time left before Passover. So he retired prudently from public life and stayed in the village of Ephraim, where in the grace of his Father he was afforded a time of unhurried fellowship with his followers before he would engage in the last great battle for the souls of all mankind.