



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Lent 5: The one whose love was stronger than fear

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John 11:1-15

1 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." 4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." 8 "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. 10 It is when people walk at night that they stumble, for they have no light." 11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." 12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. 14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

On our journey to Easter, we are directed to the Gospel of John and turn to one of the great, dramatic narratives, which follows on quite naturally from Jesus' encounters with Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman and a man born blind. We now see Jesus being brought to the home of Lazarus and his family.

Some may well wonder about its position in Lent. It could be argued that we more easily associate the story of Lazarus with resurrection. Such a judgement fails to recognise the extensive circumstances and surrounding conversations that are recorded for us in John 11.

Not too long ago, I listened to a presentation on what were called *The Four Primary Colours of Emotion*. It was suggested that all emotions flow out of just four—namely Anger, Sorrow, Fear and Joy. There are, of course, others but they may well be a mixture of two or more of the four on the paint pallet of life. John 11 draws us into the realm of fear, and how Jesus Christ helps us to overcome what can be a debilitating experience.

In turning to John 11, I conclude that although it is about 'the raising of Lazarus', the focus is not upon his deliverance from death to life, but rather on other people's response to what was happening. It is a lengthy and searching account and perhaps one of the most penetrating in John's gospel prior to the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. It leads to the declaration that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.

Jesus Christ is not only the preacher of the Galilee, the healer of the sick and the leader of a band of disciples—he is also the Lord and one of the ways we see this, indeed encounter it, is as he helps us to confront the power of fear.

There are many different kinds of fear. Books have even been produced, listing the various kinds of fear. Some of the more obscure examples are:

- Odontophobia—the fear of teeth
- Dextrophobia—the fear of objects on the right side of the body
- Levophobia—the fear of objects on the left side of the body
- Peladophobia—the fear of baldness and bald people

Some of these appear to be unbelievable—except to those who have to deal with them! But fear is a serious matter.

I heard of the cartoonist, Jules Pfeiffer, who discussed one of his comic strips. In it, a little boy was afraid to go to school because he thought his parents might move away while he was gone. The same boy didn't want to go to bed at night because he feared his parents might die while he was asleep. "Coping with fears is a terrific battle for a child," said Pfeiffer. "It's like being on 24 hour guard duty."

He went on to say that, following the cartoon strip, he had received many letters from adults. They shared with him that this was their experience too, emphasizing that you don't have to be a child to feel surrounded by fear.

In the midst of this passage in John 11 is a great deal of fear and not least surrounding the subject of death. We see Jesus confronting the matter and bringing peace.

Having received the news of Lazarus' illness, the disciples certainly struggle to come to terms with Jesus' decision to travel to Judea after a two-day delay.

- They had recently narrowly escaped a serious stoning (11:8)
- Jesus uses the analogy of Lazarus 'falling asleep' when in point of fact he meant death (11:11-12)
- Thomas demonstrates that he is unconvinced about their safety and they must prepare for the worst (11:16)

At the end of the tenth chapter of John, we are told that Jesus went into retreat, but still people came to him seeking his help. He spent time at the place where John first began baptising (John 10:40-42).

F F Bruce writes, "The signal for Jesus to leave his retreat in Transjordan and return to the main scene of action in Judea was not long in coming." The signal was, of course, the knowledge that his friend Lazarus was ill.

The account in John 11 begins with the identification of three Bethany family members, who were evidently well known to Jesus. This is the first time the family are mentioned in John.

As Jesus and the disciples approach Mary and Martha's home, the tension is palpable. Many other friends are already there (v. 18) and the atmosphere was one of weeping and lament. It was four days since the death of Lazarus. Scholars have pondered the meaning of 'four days' and there is good rabbinic evidence to suggest this is when the spirit was understood to have left the body.

A simpler explanation is there were usually three days of formal mourning; the fourth instigates a moving on. The presence of mourners seems to be important to the whole account and adds to the sadness and fear.

When Jesus arrived at the village and then the tomb:

- Martha and Mary express grief and regret that Jesus did not arrive before Lazarus died (v.v. 21 and 32)
- When Jesus saw Mary weeping, he was deeply moved and troubled (v.33)
- Jesus asked where Lazarus was laid (v.34)

This is one of those chapters in John's gospel describing a sign and then there is a following narrative. However, it is also the context for what is unquestionably the shortest verse in the Bible – and perhaps, at the same time, the most moving. There is no greater demonstration of the humanity of Jesus than what we read in this short verse:

“Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Fred Craddock comments that the portrait of Jesus being troubled and upset would not draw special attention were it in any other gospel than John – but here it takes the reader by surprise, in the light of the way the same gospel presents the glory of Jesus Christ.

The theme of tears is at once emotional—how could it be anything else? But it tells us so much about life's experience. The verse that follows is equally insightful:

“Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (v.36)

There are many different contexts for tears. We can understand tears through different doorways:

- The tears of loss
- The tears of rejection
- The tears of unresolved pain
- The tears of inability to do what once we easily achieved

These are just four in a list that could be very long.

The heart of Jesus goes out to his friends in their loss, which helps them to handle their fears about what has happened and what the future might hold for them.

There can be a wasting of tears

Although it is hard to say, it is important to recognise that not all tears are creative. The context of mourning here (and that which we find outside the home of Jairus, also in our gospels) has people gathering to mourn, some ceremonially.

The grief of losing someone must never be minimised. We can never help each other in such a situation of hurt, if we cannot see the point of tears. However, some tears are very different. Some tears can be selfish—and even this should not to be cast aside. But tears must help us to move on.

In contexts other than grief, tears can be a way of gaining sympathy, and tears can also be seen as a block to actually doing something constructive. It is not entirely wrong to cry for oneself, as long as it gives way, ultimately, to that which brings healing and growth.

The tears of Jesus are in stark contrast to the wailing that could be heard as he approached.

When I first preached on John 11, I recall saying that his was a silent weeping, based on the fact that I wanted to make it dignified and palatable to those who listened. The reality is, however, that his tears had a great spontaneity about them and were more like 'bursting into tears'.

There are three occasions in the gospels where Jesus wept:

- He wept over the unbelieving city of Jerusalem
- He wept here by the tomb of a friend
- And of course he wept in the Garden of Gethsemane

Tears must be part of a process or a release of emotion, but never that which does not give way to something better. It is perhaps worth reflecting upon the times when Jesus did not cry. There are no tears from Jesus at the cross; none as he is rejected and misunderstood.

The tears of Jesus appear to be for others and, even in the garden, Jesus was most certainly concerned about the ending of his work here on earth.

In another biblical context, when Jesus met the widow of Nain, whose son had died and who Jesus raised to life, we are told, "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.'" (Luke 7:13)

There is undoubtedly a time for tears, and Shakespeare was right when he said, "To weep is to make less the depth of grief." But to weep and weep and never to find healing is to miss so much of what Jesus has to offer.

It is possible for tears to be wasted.

Tears can speak of love

Love, of course, is so different from fear—and is the greatest antidote to its presence. Tears can express love.

As Jesus weeps, one way of understanding this is to see that it was a missed opportunity for the people. It would be wrong to assume that Jesus is weeping because Lazarus is dead and that this is final. Could it be that Jesus is weeping at the tomb because they failed to see the truth? They could not see who it was that stood before them and what God could do through him.

One of the ways in which we are able to combat fear is when we have those we love near us. The tears of Jesus reveal his humanity. His entry into our experience is total and he shares life at the deepest point of pain.

A critical point in the passage is the word of Jesus to Martha. She expresses her faith in a resurrection at the last day (v.24). This was a faith shared by Pharisees and others. As a correction to her, Jesus tells her that he is the point where death ends and life begins.

All of it is summed up in the great 'I am' statement: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.' Then he asked the question, 'Do you believe this?'" (11:25)

If we had been around during this encounter of Jesus with Lazarus and his family, I wonder how we might have felt?:

- Embarrassed: for Jesus, a man in tears
- Relieved: it's fine to cry
- Awkward: let's get on with it

Or perhaps you would have felt comforted, because his love spoke a clear word to you.

We are inwardly fashioned for faith. Fear is not the natural place for the Christian—so fear and faith stand at either end of human experience.

E Stanley Jones once said, "I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath, these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely."

A university doctor said, "We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than non-worriers, but that is a fact." But in simple understanding we can say that God did not make us to live that way. To live by fear and worry is to live against reality.

Fear will one day end

When we read that Jesus wept, we reach the final part of this wonderful chapter, which tells of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. F F Bruce once again is helpful when he writes, "The death of Lazarus, with its impending sequel of resurrection, is to be a paradigm of the granting of eternal life to all believers in Jesus Christ."

Jesus is not only the One who effects the resurrection at the end of time, but also the One who brings resurrection and life now. (John 5:25)

The essential truth as we draw closer to Easter is that we should have no fear because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. In our final excursion into John's gospel, we have been brought face-to-face with one of the great issues that we must deal with.

How can we find strength through the tears of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus? This is attained, in part, by recognising that death is not the end.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, we read of Christian and Hopeful coming to the river of death. They notice how deep, how wide, how swift it is, and they are afraid.

Suddenly two men with shining faces and clothes stand beside them. Christian and Hopeful enquire if there is a boat or a bridge that they can use to cross the river. The two men reply that there is no other way to the gate than through the river. When asked how deep the water is, the strangers say, "You shall find it deeper or shallower as you believe in the King."

The privilege of love involves the risk of separation and, within this account in John 11, we recognise that Jesus himself understood the pain that comes in parting. It is one of life's 'unchangeables'. It is in parting that we begin to understand the great mysteries of life.

The great composer Ludwig van Beethoven lived much of his life in fear of deafness. He was concerned because his hearing was so essential to his creation of music. When Beethoven discovered that the very thing he feared most was rapidly approaching, he was almost frantic with anxiety. He consulted doctors and tried every possible remedy. Eventually all hearing was gone.

He did, however, find the strength he needed, despite his great loss. To everyone's amazement, he wrote some of his finest music after he became totally deaf!

Whatever our fears are, perhaps even death itself, we can overcome it—through the love of God.

When John was writing his wonderful first letter, he affirmed the nature of God, who is love. Perhaps one of the most helpful things he said was, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

Jesus demonstrated this truth because he offered to us a love that was stronger than all fear.