

John 11 Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

These are words that come twice in the reading. Both sisters, Mary and Martha, utter them.

The reading is a classic Bible miracle story. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha dies, but then Jesus raises him back to life. But I think we’ll only understand the miracle if we understand what happens before and after. Both Mary and Martha separately say to Jesus “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.” They’re very different personalities, they grieve in different ways and they relate to Jesus in different ways, but their fundamental question is the same: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Martha rushes to find Jesus as soon as she’s in the area. Mary is quieter and waits until Jesus comes to her. But they both say the same thing: “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

And isn’t that what we all want to say to Jesus.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother, my sister, my son, my daughter, my father, my mother, would not have died. Lord, if you had been here, I wouldn’t have lost my job. Lord if you had been here, my relationship would not have ended. Lord, if you had been here, my health would be better. Lord, if you had been here, there’d be peace in the middle east and in Ukraine, and in the Sudan and in many other parts of the world.”

Don’t we all want to say some version of that to Jesus?

Whether we're Martha and scream those words in God's face, or Mary and sit quietly in our room until God enters our thoughts, we all want to know why God doesn't stop bad things happening. It is perhaps the most difficult question, anyone can ask about the Christian faith.

From this story of the raising of Lazarus, I want to suggest a wrong answer and a right answer. Why doesn't God stop bad things from happening? There's a wrong answer and a right answer.

The wrong answer is because God doesn't care. That is a wrong answer. God does care. We see this really clearly in Jesus' whole attitude to Lazarus' death. They take him to show him the tomb in v.34 and then, in v.35, it says "Jesus began to weep." In some translations, it just says "Jesus wept". At least in those translations, it's the shortest verse in the New Testament. It simply tells us Jesus is weeping with us.

Then shortly later Jesus approaches the tomb and it says he was "greatly disturbed." The translation "greatly disturbed" rather sanitises it. It's a word used of snorting horses. It expresses anger and frustration. It's that sense of wanting to scream and punch the wall, because of how bad the world is.

I don't know how grief makes you feel. For most of us, there's many aspects to it and we experience a whole range of emotions, jumping from one to the other.

Sometimes, we're angry. "WHY DID THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN?"

Sometimes we're frightened. "What on earth am I going to do now?"

Sometimes we're exhausted. "I just want this to be over."

Sometimes we're just really sad. "I miss so much how things used to be."

Sometimes we just want to give up.

These are feelings that Jesus experienced. At the grave of his good friend, Jesus felt our sorrow. Jesus knows how bad it is to lose someone you love. And I think therefore Jesus also knows what it's like to experience other kinds of loss, to lose your job, or your hope, or your relationship or your future plans. Jesus knew what it's like and Jesus wept.

We're asking the question, why does God allow bad things to happen? This passage deals with a wrong answer. The wrong answer is that God doesn't care. God does care. Jesus weeps at Lazarus' grave. Jesus snorts in anger at Lazarus' grave. God does care.

But if that's the wrong answer, what about a right answer.

Well, at the beginning of the story, in v.14, Jesus says: "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

Then in v.42, he prays to God before calling Lazarus out of the tomb: "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always here me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

In other words, Jesus does this, so that we may believe in him. Jesus allows Lazarus to die, so that he may raise him from the dead, so that Mary and Martha and all of us will believe that he is the conqueror of death and the healer of suffering.

After Martha challenges Jesus "if you have been here, my brother would not have died", they get into a discussion and Jesus ends it by saying: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then he challenges her with a question "Do you believe this?"

The whole point of this story is that Mary, Martha and every one of us believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and those who believe in him, though they die, will live.

Why does God allow bad things to happen? Wrong answer: because he doesn't care. Right answer: because he wants us to believe.

Of course, if you're Mary or Martha, or if you're someone here today who is grieving, for any reason, that probably rings a bit hollow. We can imagine Mary and Martha saying "Jesus couldn't I have not believed, or believed a bit less, and my brother still be here. I mean, Jesus, I like believing in you, but actually, I'd much rather have my brother back." Martha would probably have shouted that in Jesus' face. Mary would just have given him a nasty look and thought it. Maybe we're thinking it too.

Maybe we're thinking: "Lord, how you could think believing in you is worth my brother dying, my spouse dying, my work collapsing, war in my home country? How could you dare allow that, just so I would believe in you?"

This is a good question. An important part of the answer is that believing in Jesus is a way out of a world of death and tragedy.

That's why Jesus says to Martha "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?"

If we believe in Jesus, there will come a time when we won't ever have to grieve again. There will come a time without death, without sorrow, without loss, when things and people will always be there. Jesus wants that for us, so he wants us to believe in him. Suffering and loss can be an invitation to faith and faith will one day open the door to a world without suffering.

I know how callous this can sound. I know how patronising this can feel. It's as if I'm saying in a hollow voice, "It's alright, I know this terrible thing happened, but if you believe in God, God will make it OK."

But that is not the attitude of the Jesus who wept at Lazarus' grave. That is not the attitude of the Jesus who snorted in anger at Lazarus' grave.

Jesus didn't want Mary or Martha or any of us to grieve and suffer. He wants us to live in a world without grief and suffering. He died and rose again to make that possible and in our sufferings now, he invites us to believe, because believing will one day open a door to a world without grief and suffering.

Jesus weeps with a world of death and pain and to that world of death and pain he says:

“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?”