



SEBASTIANO DEL PIOMBO
INCORPORATING DESIGNS
BY MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI
The Raising of Lazarus

Week 3: Comfort in the Resurrection

(John 11.1-44)

The Reverend Dr Jack Dunn is Canon Precentor of Chichester

Bible Reading

John 11.1-44

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."

Contd...

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb 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!" 37 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 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 upward 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."

Reflection

I wonder if there is a verse from the Bible that you keep going back to in times of difficulty and distress? I wonder what it is, and why? Perhaps you might feel comfortable enough sharing this within your church family or even with friends and family outside of church?

The verse that I hold tightly to takes me straight back to my first Monday morning as a newly ordained priest. I was serving my title in West London.

Opposite one of the two churches that I ministered in, was a busy hospital.

As morning prayer ended that Monday morning, a family tentatively shuffled through the door. A father and a sister, to be precise. They were in a bad way.

Their son and their brother, in his early twenties, had just died in the hospital opposite. He had died, I learnt, from a very aggressive form of cancer. They wanted someone to come and to say prayers with them and to anoint his body.

The first thing that struck me as I entered that small, windowless basement hospital room with its artificial light turned down low to convey feelings of warmth and comfort and perhaps timelessness, was a wall of grief. You could feel it as you walked into the room.

The young man, who was tightly bound to his bed by a simple white hospital sheet, was surrounded by his mother and his younger sister. The hospital had done their very best for him, but I could see that he had clearly died in great pain. I will never forget his face and the positioning of his body. A body that was still warm to the touch, though the room already smelt of death. A son had just died. A brother was now dead. And while his father and his mother were numb with grief, his sisters were furious. The white heat of their anger was more than just in their eyes. What on earth could I say to them?

Well, as tears came to my own eyes, where I began, was at John Chapter 11, verse 35: 'Jesus wept.' Over the years, this verse has carried me through so many difficult moments. As a boy, I was taught that men don't cry. Instead, we brush ourselves down and we get on with it. We soldier on. For men, I was taught, are meant to model an invincible kind of strength for the world. But Jesus, the perfect man, cried and, and I have always given thanks to God for that.

Before the consolation of the resurrection with its promise of eternal life, Jesus Christ provides each of us with the comfort of his tears. We know that Jesus himself has both tasted and defeated death. The account of Lazarus' death, that we have before us, reminds us that Jesus has also borne the deep pain and anguish that bereavement can bring. How often, down the years, have I heard these words at the bedside of someone who has just died: 'I just wish it could have been me instead.'

Sisters and brothers, friends, these words of grief and of pain and of loss are so much more common than we all realise. A desire to bear the pain of death because bearing the pain of loss of someone that you love feels so much harder to cope with. The sad fact is that so often we don't realise this because we refuse to talk about death. It's a topic that we cross over the road to avoid.

Jesus didn't. And if Jesus didn't, dear sisters and brothers and friends, nor must we. Indeed, I've often wondered how our church families might serve our wider communities and each other through a ministry of talking about death? Perhaps by coming together and offering bereavement cafes in our communities for example, or by offering regular study days on death, open to anyone to attend. My experience with that family in that claustrophobic tomb-like room, inspired me to offer a study day on death, dying and bereavement in the parish where I served my curacy. We invited a wide range of people to talk to members of the parish, from the pews and from further afield, about different aspects of death, dying and bereavement.

A palliative care nurse spoke about what happens when we die and the sorts of things that we might expect to encounter in the immediate hours and minutes leading up to death. A solicitor specialising in wills talked to us about what we might consider when drawing up a will and what probate really entails.

An undertaker came to speak about planning a funeral; while my wise, inspirational and deeply faithful training incumbent closed the day with a talk offering a beautiful meditation on the Christian theology of death.

Yes, Jesus weeps with us and there is great comfort to be found in those tears, but those tears are not the end, just as Lazarus' death was not the end of the story and nor is Jesus Christ's death the end of the story. For Jesus' words to Martha are Jesus' words to each one of us: 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?' (John 11.25-26)

I wonder, what does that resurrection belief mean to you? I wonder how, having been called by name, as Jesus called Lazarus by name out from the tomb, and as Jesus calls each of us by name, do we seek to share the living consolation of this resurrection belief with others?

Dear sisters, brothers and friends, unless we are prepared to unbind death by talking about it openly together, by naming our fears and confronting our concerns, we cannot hope to understand the meaning of the resurrection.

For no matter how much we might like to, we simply cannot jump from Palm Sunday straight to Easter Sunday and ignore what happens in between.

Hymn

Drop, drop, slow tears,
(*Phineas Fletcher and Orlando Gibbons*)

Drop, drop, slow tears,
and bathe those beauteous feet,
which brought from heav'n
the news and Prince of peace.

Cease not, wet eyes,
his mercies to entreat;
to cry for vengeance
sin doth never cease.

In your deep floods
drown all my faults and fears;
nor let his eye
see sin, but through my tears.

You can hear this Hymn [here](#)

Prayer

Watch, O Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or weep tonight, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.

Tend your sick ones O Lord Christ.

Rest your weary ones.

Bless your dying ones.

Soothe your suffering ones.

Pity your afflicted ones.

Shield your joyous ones.

All for your love's sake.

Amen.

Attributed to St Augustine