

The Gospel Reading for Passion Sunday 29th March 2020

It is a long Bible reading this week. Following on from it, there is a short reflection.

John 11.1–45

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴ 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.' ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸ The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹ After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹² The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' ¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³ Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴ Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵ Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷ She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.' ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴ He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ 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?' ³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹ 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 for four days.' ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² 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.' ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴ 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

Just before the recent suspension of professional football matches, there was controversy about the way Eric Dier, the Tottenham player, after a match made his way into the crowd to confront a spectator who had been abusing his younger brother. Dier had broken through a “wall” not very often broken that of the wall between player and supporters.

In live performances especially in a Pantomime, a cast member might cross through the space that usually separates the actors and the audience. “Oh no they don’t.” “Oh yes they do!”

And at the General Election in December the phrase breaking through the “Red Wall” was used to describe how Conservative Party candidates were being elected in what had been traditional Labour Party seats.

It seems to me that Jesus was always breaking through walls, crossing spaces and placing himself in unknown territory, often entering into contentious situation and making himself vulnerable.

Leaving himself open to criticism and open to being misunderstood about his intentions.

This is none more so than in the passage in John’s Gospel when Jesus is first absent at the death of his close friend Lazarus and then present after all hope appears to have gone.

Both Martha and Mary separately say; “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They both feel passionately that Jesus has been too slow in coming to be with them and that when he does come, he has come too late. They needed him and he had not been there. They like other women we read about in the Gospels are prepared to challenge Jesus about his actions. The Syrophoenician woman did this when asking Jesus to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28), and both Mary and Martha challenge Jesus to cross through boundaries that surprisingly at times he seems unwilling to cross but that he does cross when prompted by the cry of human need.

We also read in the Gospel passage that on hearing of the news that his friend Lazarus had died “Jesus wept” or in some translations “He began to weep”. The reality of the rawness of close loss, the loss of a dear friend, part of the humanity of Jesus.

The biggest barrier within the narrative is that of death. An interpretation of the narrative is that it shows that while we all will die, death does not and should not have the final word. People are not defined by their death, even though following on from a loss it can sometimes feel that this is so. People instead defined by who they were, by their uniqueness, by the love they shared with others and by their acts of service and of sacrifice that they have made for others.

We are in the days ahead expecting many people to die because of the Coronavirus.

There are those who are at the frontline, in hospitals and in the caring professions, who will every day be breaking barriers to try to save lives and it is they who the rest of us at this time can pray for, and remember and give thanks for their service, sacrifice and dedication to the saving of lives.

A Prayer for Passion Sunday

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do also for you: give us the will to be the servant of others as you were the servant of all, and gave up your life and died for us, but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen.

We also pray for all who are anxious, lonely or unwell. And for those who are recently bereaved including the family and friends of Andy Sharpe (Easton on the Hill) and of Mary Beecham.