

Sunday 29th March, 5th Sunday in Lent

The following link will take you to the live service from the Bishops to be live streamed at 10 am on Sunday, see below

<https://www.oxford.anglican.org/coronavirus-covid-19/livestream/>

The next diocesan live-stream will take place at 10am on Sunday, 29 March by the four bishops working together, each from our own homes (God willing). The service will be broadcast on this page, the Bishop of Oxford Facebook page, the Diocese of Oxford Facebook page, and YouTube. Ahead of the broadcast, read [this excellent blog](#) by Canon Dr Grant Bayliss on the practice of spiritual communion.

The vicar's contribution:

Please find a short form of intercession for this week which ties in with the theme of the gospel reading for Sunday. Also below is a short reflection on the gospel reading.

Prayers of Intercession:

We pray for people experiencing grief and bereavement.
May their hearts be open to God.

We pray for those who are feeling worried about their own health and the health of their loved ones.

May the Spirit comfort and reassure them and banish the source of fear.

We pray for those who feel isolated and alone.
May they know the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit.

We pray for those who work in essential jobs.
May they know our gratitude.

We pray for those who are struggling with loss of hope – those who are bereaved, jobless, or disadvantaged in any way.
We ask for comfort and a new way forward.

We pray for ourselves in our places of need, where we wait to see God at work.
We ask for patience and the joy of God's presence.

We thank you, Lord, for hearing our prayers. Help us to trust that your answers come never too early nor too late, but just at the right time.

Homily

There used to be a program on British TV called *Kids Do the Funniest Things* – a collection of video clips of the various mishaps, performances and generally hilarious and scary things that kids can get up to. How about a similar program for Church people, called “Christians Say the Silliest Things”? For a group of people who are supposed to be hyper-sensitive to other people's needs, we can also come out with some grievous clangers. The person who, for instance on hearing that a woman's husband has been made redundant, says: “Never mind, at least you'll be a good witness for others in the same boat”. True, perhaps, but not the most helpful thing to say. I'm sure that we can all add our own examples.

In our reading from John's Gospel today we come across just such a pastorally sensitive scene, and if it's not too controversial to say it, Jesus seems at first to show a rather clumsy attitude to the delicacy of the situation. His knowing-ness and other-worldliness doesn't quite fit the real pain of the people involved. It is true that the picture of Jesus painted by John is in many ways the most super-human of all portraits in the Gospels, deliberately so. Jesus knows things in John's Gospel that no one else knows: he knows all about Nathaniel before he meets him; he knows about the patchy married life of the Samaritan woman at the well; he knows how he's going to solve the problem of no food and five thousand hungry people before the problem is even articulated.

And it's the same with the story of Lazarus that we read today. Jesus knows in advance that all will be well, and even delays going to the home of Mary and Martha in order to strengthen his point. Well that's all very well, but there is very real pain and grief going on in Bethany, and when Jesus does finally arrive, he finds a family reeling from their loss. Martha challenges him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But she adds hopefully: "even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him".

Jesus announces that her brother will rise again, and Martha, bravely trying to match what she believes (that is, that Jesus can do anything) with what she knows (that her brother is dead, and dead people usually stay that way), opts to understand that Lazarus will rise on the last day. But perhaps even in her grief she does honestly believe, because she goes on to make a statement of faith that is rare in John's Gospel – John paints most people as very slow to catch on: "You are the Messiah," she says, and goes to get Mary.

And it is here that it all falls apart. Mary begins as Martha did, "Lord, if you had been here...", and she weeps. It is this that somehow breaks through that divine crust that John has constructed around Jesus, and he weeps too. No theological speeches, no talk about knowing this or that. Jesus weeps. A profound moment that leads to the joy of the family at Bethany, but also – because John nearly always has more than one meaning to the events in his Gospel – sets the scene for Jesus' own death and resurrection to come.

In line with John's aims, the story of Lazarus does indeed show us that Jesus is more than human. But it shows us something else too – it shows us a God who weeps in the face of human pain. John cleverly weaves the high theology of his Gospel with lived experience. We touched earlier on how difficult it is to say the right thing to a hurting person – even to ourselves. As Christians we often tread a tricky line between what we know we should believe and the reality of human life.

But in the story of Lazarus and Jesus' tears we have a glimpse of what is at the heart of it – that connection between the omnipotence of God and our own experience. This doesn't answer all our questions or make it easier to understand why some things happen the way they do, but it does show us something vital: in our ongoing task of understanding how what we believe tallies with what we know, divine love, lofty as it is, can be moved to tears, and God's otherness can meet with our own gritty reality.

And today our gritty reality is one of confusion, isolation, fear of what the future will hold and maybe above all that nagging feeling of when will it all end? The encounter of Jesus and Lazarus, or more to the point Mary and Martha shows us that even if the future seems to be one of uncertainty and even hopelessness, with God in our midst there is always a light of hope, of resurrection and new life.