

If Jesus is not with us, we have no guidance

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Lent 5A – John 11.1-45

In many parts of the world, refrigerators are few and far between, and things can be very smelly. The stench of decomposition is a very common reminder of decay and death. It influences the way you behave and it colours the way you see every living thing. They and we are all too temporary. In developed countries, that's something we work hard to shut out.

But it's there, underneath. I remember an article in *New Scientist* where they interviewed people like us about charity. They found that people valued charity more if they were asked about it within sight of a funeral parlour than if they were interviewed anywhere else. Our behaviour is affected if we have thoughts of death

There're no such options for the people we've read about this morning. All that overcame the limitations of physical existence then were miracles; not predictable things. You couldn't switch miracles on. They came from somewhere else, and for reasons known to God alone. So life included mortality, and there was no way of ignoring it.

So maybe we developed-worlders find it all a bit graphic this morning, the way Lazarus shuffles out still wrapped in his shroud. Not that it wouldn't have been a shock to the people who were there. And then they had to resume living with Lazarus until he died again. How would we deal with that? How does this story affect us who keep ourselves so insulated from death and mortality? What can we developed, sophisticated, deodorised people learn to hear in this story? Let's see.

Martha and Mary send Jesus a message. It's a prayer. It's the most basic prayer of all. They tell the one they call Lord what's going on in their lives: Our brother Lazarus ... "he whom you love is ill."

They don't say what they expect Jesus to do. But very significantly for us, the response they receive is precisely the response that most of us receive when we pray. A long, frustrating silence. *We* are shown that the prayer is heard; they aren't. And we have the privilege of following its hearing and response step by step.

To read John's gospel effectively, we need to know that the Jesus who John presents to us demands a discipleship from us which involves our whole person; body included. Discipleship is learning to grow in the way we understand and follow Jesus – living more and more in his love. That involves change; just as living consciously always will. And change means saying goodbye to things you've grown out of, so that you can put on what fits you now. But new things – think new shoes – take some use before they are comfortable.

John's Jesus makes people change in exactly this uncomfortable way. He seldom ever does exactly what people ask him to. He seldom answers directly the questions they ask him. If he did, with our hindsight, we can see that there'd have been no real opportunity for growth. Everything would have just been confined to what Jesus' disciples could imagine. We wouldn't be opened up to what Jesus can see.

So instead of being straightforward and practical, Jesus turns every prayer and every question people ask him into the starting point of a new, unnerving journey of growth in discipleship. And really often, Jesus starts with our physical experiences.

John's gospel emphasises our physical senses. There's massive eating and drinking (*wedding at Cana; feeding the 5000, woman*

at the well; **bread of life**), lots of touch (cleansing the temple; Jesus' baptism; stop holding on to me; touching people he heals; foot-washing; wounds – Thomas), seeing (**the light of the world** – the man blind from birth), hearing (in the beginning was **the Word**; the sheep know my voice). And of course, as today reminds us, lots of smelling; the most evocative of all the senses. (Mary's Nard, Nicodemus' spices)

What that means is that in Jesus, God comes to us literally as we are – as physical beings with all the gifts and limitations that involves. And Jesus demands that our discipleship is as much a physical one as a spiritual and mental one. If we don't quite get the extent of the physical commitment demanded, Jesus goes on to show just how strong his commitment to physical self-offering is by going to the cross.

So today, we're being reminded of the limits of our physical life if we have no guidance – if Jesus is not with us. We started with Mary and Martha's prayer, and Jesus' delayed response. Jesus did know what was going on for Lazarus (he told his disciples that Lazarus was dead). But he worked to turn Marth and Mary's prayer into an opportunity for their growth. And that's what happened. He took Martha from complaint to confession of him as Messiah. He took Lazarus from irreversible corruption to new life when he called him by name.

He called him by name – Lazarus. So Lazarus was still the same person after death as in life; still able to respond to that call by the giver of life. This means we can believe that people who live in our hearts, but whose ashes are out there in our parish memorial garden, are only as far from new life as their name is from the lips of our Saviour.

Jesus calls to life the one in whom was no life. But he calls his people to do the physical work of setting free – opening the cave, removing the cloths. The physical work of discipleship is every bit as much God's plan as anything else.

All of us are called. All of us *is* called; every bit of us.
Amen