

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

26<sup>th</sup> March 2023 – Fifth Sunday in March

**John 11:1-44**

**LOVE IN ACTION**

Does God care? Does He? It is a question as old as the relationship between God and His people, stretching right back to the very beginning. In the Old Testament the Israelites, God's people, often asked this question when bad things happened to them as the result of their own doing, something we still do today. Does God care? I'm guessing that asking this question of people who are engaging with this Address in some way the answer is most likely, 'well, yes, but sometimes we find it hard to see that'. But let's be honest, if we went out and asked people we came across this question we probably wouldn't have to go too far to find someone who would point to the deaths of young children, to mass deaths caused by natural disaster, and to the suffering we see both further away and also around us, and who would say, 'if there really is a God, how can He care when there is so much death, and suffering, in our world?'

Does God care? Not a new question, and one which is raised in various ways also throughout the Bible, including this account we have here of Jesus raising Lazarus. It's an interesting story. Jesus, not being far away when His good friend Lazarus is sick, is summoned by Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, to come straight away and heal him. Instead, Jesus waits for four days before making that short journey, so that by then Lazarus is well and truly dead. When Jesus finally arrives, sister Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Yet even now I know that God will do anything you ask." (v. 21,22) An accusation, but also a statement of faith that Jesus can and will act. It's the reaction of the other sister, Mary, which is stronger: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Is that said in anger, or confusion, or disappointment? Or, like us in our grief, is it a combination of all of these and much more? At another time Mary had sat at Jesus' feet listening to and absorbing His every word in faith and love. But now, at the death of her brother, she is coming to Jesus to ask, 'why did you allow this to happen?'

Does God care? And, if He does, can He do anything about it? In answer to these two questions we often use this account of Jesus raising Lazarus. In this story we have the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, just two words in Greek which literally translate as; “Jesus wept”. And in response the people said, “See how much he loved Lazarus.” (v. 36) Jesus, as God come to earth as a human being, shows us that God does care, God does act. Lazarus had been dead for four days, there was no doubt he was dead. In Jesus crying over Lazarus’ death, and then calling him out of the tomb, we see both God’s love and compassion, God’s care, and also God’s power to come into our world and to help us where and when we are hurting. Through Jesus, God shows us what it means to have love in action.

The question that seems to be behind what Mary, Martha, the disciples, and others in this story are saying is; why? ‘Why didn’t Jesus come sooner?’ ‘Why did He allow this to happen?’ ‘Why didn’t He stop it happening?’ In the Bible reading we looked at last week in asking the question of why the young man had been born blind, people suggested it was punishment for the sin of either him or his parents. Without saying what the cause was, Jesus made it very clear then that God does not make bad things happen to us, including as punishment. But then, in both that story and this one, we aren’t given the answers to that question, but instead shown how God can and does work through these things.

It’s natural to ask ‘why?’ the bad things happen. Some we can easily explain as the result of bad human actions; the person who does something wrong causing death or injury to others, relationship breakdowns because of betrayal or hurt caused, war. But in response to other tragedies we do ask ‘why?’ because we can’t see any human wrong in causing them, and why doesn’t God stop them; natural disasters, young people dying of cancer, people growing up disadvantaged just because of the situation they were born into. Like all of those people from the Bible and since, we ask, ‘why Lord?’

It’s natural for us to ask, ‘why?’, but we are never going to get an answer that is going to really satisfy us, especially at those times when we are angry, or hurting, or grieving. It is not God’s

punishment, it is not God's lack of care or love, it is not God's lack of power. These bad things happen because of the brokenness of our world, because sin ruined the perfectness of God's Creation. But I fully accept that when people are dealing with the death of someone close to them, or with hardship in their lives or the lives of others, the answer of, 'well the bad stuff is the result of sin in the world, but God can do good things through it', doesn't really cut it in the face of the face of grief, anger, or despair. Because the answer to 'why?' is really beyond our thinking. It's a bit like when I watch a TV or movie with my seven-year-old grandson. His first question is always, 'which ones are the goodies and which ones the baddies?', and he doesn't understand when I say, 'well, this doesn't really have goodies and baddies like that'. And then, in response to his constant questions of why things are happening or people are doing certain things, my answers create more confusion than they give peace and understanding. When it comes to things of the universe, and of God, we can be the same; they are just beyond us.

We often don't know the 'why?'. We know God doesn't cause the bad things to happen, and that here in Jesus' grief we see God grieving with us when they do happen, but the 'why?' is still out there. What we know is that God comes into our world, into our lives, to respond to these things and be with us through them. In this account of the raising of Lazarus, in many other incidents recorded in the Bible, throughout history, and in our lives, we see both God's love and God's action in what we go through. While most people are not miraculously healed or brought back to life, so often I have been amazed at the comfort and strength people find in their faith in God when they are faced with tragedy; that is a miracle of God.

This week I attended the funeral of an uncle who died at the relatively young age of 72. His death was a release from many years of battling cancer, but still sad that someone who lived life so much to the full died at that age. He had a strong faith throughout his life, but as a successful builder, pilot and owner of six airplanes, restorer of vintage cars, and many other interests, his faith was so down to earth that many who knew him well might not have known of his faith. But after attending his funeral, and hearing from various people what his faith meant to him and the comfort and strength

it gave him up till the end, God worked through his life and death to make a witness to God's love many may not have otherwise heard. I've been with a ten year old dying of cancer and his family. As we all asked God, 'why?', and prayed for a miracle of healing, he was experiencing the miracle of peace through his faith that we only saw later. I don't believe it was God's plan or desire that he died, and have no doubt that God cried with the rest of us over his death, but God gave him peace and comfort at that time, and also used it as a witness of God's love and power to others.

Does God care? In response to that question our answer is most often to ask another question; 'why?'. We can't really answer that, so instead God points us to what He is doing at these times, which is to show His love in action. In response to people's doubts and questioning when Lazarus died, Jesus said, "I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die." (v. 25-26)

Does God care? The answer is; so much so that He sent Jesus into the world to not only go through what we go through, but so that He could die and rise again to show God's love in action; to give us the assurance of forgiveness and eternal life whatever we face now. As we go through the ups and downs, the struggles and the highs, which are a part of life, we can know that God is with us in all of these things, and when we look to Him He helps us through them. He is a God who loves, a God who cares, and a God who shows this in His actions in our lives. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Are there things which happen in our world which cause you to question God, express anger at God, and even at times to question His existence or if He cares?
- Are there incidents in your life, or the lives of others around, when you have seen God's love and care in action through these bad times?
- Does God's love and peace give you comfort and peace when you face hard things in life? Are there still times you struggle through?
- Read through the whole of this story again, John 11:1-44. Take note of all the different reactions of people here. In His love and care, God is always at work, even when we can't see it, even when we are angry or questioning. Is there any particular part of this story which gives you comfort and strength?

Pray: thank God for the love in action He has shown in sending Jesus into our world. Pray for comfort and strength, for ourselves and others, in the face of what we go through in our lives each. Praise God for the gift of eternal life which is there for all who believe in Him.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler  
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