

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 - Fifth Sunday in Lent

**JOHN 11:1-45**

**A GOD WHO LOVES AND ACTS**

It's at times like this; times of uncertainty, times of anxiousness, times of not knowing either what the present is or the future will be, times when everything seems very surreal and there seems to be no normal, either old or new, times like this when we need a God who has care and compassion for His people, and who also has the power to act in ways which are beyond our normal world and experience.

It's in Bible readings like this; the account of Jesus and the death of His friend Lazarus, a story in which we see both the human side of Jesus as He weeps at the death of a friend and also His divine side as He calls a man who has been dead for four days to come out of his tomb and be freed from His burial cloths, accounts like this when we see a God who has care and compassion for His people, and who also has the power to act in ways which are beyond our normal world and experience.

Perhaps then we shouldn't be surprised, because He seems to do it a lot, that here God throws another of His 'coincidences' at us and this reading from John's Gospel comes up at a time when we need its message so much.

It is a great account, and there is so much to it. It contains the shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35, which many translations give us in just two words, 'Jesus wept'. In those two words we have such a clear view of both the humanity of Jesus, He really was one of us, and at the same time with Jesus being 'God with us' we have a deep insight into the compassion of God. In Jesus God came down to be with us, and God wept with and for us.

Here also we see that Jesus is truly God, His divine side. John's Gospel is different from the other three Gospels in a number of ways. One of these ways is that John only tells us about seven miracles, often called 'signs'. The first of these is turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. It's an interesting one, because at best its only real effect is to save the bridegroom the embarrassment

of running out of wine. The others include some healings, Jesus feeding the 5,000, and Jesus walking on water. Although in the other Gospels there are other accounts of Jesus bringing the dead back to life, Jesus raising Lazarus here is the only one which John gives us. It also happens to be the last of the 7 signs in John as Jesus now makes His way to the cross. Why is that? Why only include one account about bringing the dead back to life, surely the greatest proof that Jesus is who He says He is, and why does John leave it until this point for Jesus to reveal Himself like this?

Of course over the years, and still today, there have been and are many theories about this question. A lot of them are probably right because as with many parts of the Bible the message and the story is multi-layered and we can learn so many different things from it. What I want to focus on here though, as today is the near the end of Lent and fast approaching Easter, is that as He now makes His way to the cross Jesus shows Himself to His disciples then and to us today as who He really is. And, in doing so, He also reveals the nature of God; a God who loves and a God who acts. A God who comes down to us. A God who cares. A God who can act in compassion for His people.

In Jesus, we see the God who weeps with His people, yet still has the power to raise them to new life.

### **FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION**

I invite you now to go through some parts of this account and what it is saying to us today in more detail. Below are just some of the things which come out here and what we might take away from them. Go through each part and then think and reflect on the questions which are put there. Whether you are doing this alone or with others think about what God is saying to you at this time, and the comfort and assurance we can find here.

#### **Why do bad things happen?**

A question people ask a lot, especially when we are in a situation like we are now when many people suffering in different ways, is; why do bad things happen? And, the follow up; where is God in all of this?

The story about Jesus and Lazarus brings this question up also. John tells us quite plainly that when Jesus was first told Lazarus was sick, he waited 2 days before thinking about going to see him. And then, although Jesus had only been in Jerusalem, which John tells us is just three kilometres from Bethany, when Jesus finally gets there Lazarus had been dead for four days. The first greeting Jesus gets from both sisters, Mary and Martha, is the same, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died’.

Do we sense some rebuke there from Jesus’ friends? If we do, and I get that sense, it’s no surprise, is it? They knew the power over life Jesus had, and yet it seemed He had chosen to ignore the need of their close friend. So, they were probably asking the same questions we ask: Is it that God doesn’t care? Or is it that God is powerless to act?

Jesus’ actions here, weeping over Lazarus’ death and then raising him to life, show that both of these are untrue. What is the answer then? Well, I really don’t think we can pin that down in a way that we will like and will make sense to us all. Nor do I believe that God causes things like COVID 19 to happen to either punish us or teach us a lesson. They are a part of the broken world we live in.

But, God can and does work through these things, and can and does use them to show His glory. Perhaps we should look to the words of Jesus more in verse 40 when we try to answer these questions; “Didn’t I tell you that if you had faith, you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40 CEV).

- What can you see in our current situation which might help us all to see the glory of God at work?
- Do you think what the world is going through now might work to bring people back to God? How could we be a part of that?
- How do you go with the question of ‘where is God in our suffering?’ Do you find it easy to just hand it all over to Him and trust Him? Do you want a more solid and understandable answer? Or does your answer change a lot, even in response to the one situation?

### **A God Who Grieves and Acts**

In this account of Jesus raising Lazarus we see such a strong picture of the nature of God through Jesus; Immanuel, God with us. Not only was Jesus moved emotionally so that we are twice

told He was upset (verses 35 and 38), but compassion for Jesus was not just an emotion, it also became an action in the raising of Lazarus. In doing this, not only did Jesus give Lazarus new life, but He took away the grief of his family and friends also.

- How do we see God acting in our world?
- As the heart and hands of God in this world, how can we have compassion which leads to action at this time?

### **Pray First**

It is significant, and probably is often overlooked with everything else which is going on here, that before Jesus acts to raise Lazarus from the dead He prays to God, which helps Him to act for the right reason and to make sure God receives the glory for what is about to happen.

- Do we always remember to pray before we act for God?
- If we did this more, what might change; in our attitude and how we do it? In the strength we find to do what we intend?

### **BRINGING IT ALL BACK TOGETHER**

In what is both a time of anxiety for us now and this time of Lent, the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead give us so much hope and strength as we see both the compassion and the power of God here. The best way to sum it up is perhaps with Jesus' own words in the middle of this story:

*<sup>25</sup> Jesus then said, "I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die.'*

Amen.

And God's peace, which we know and live in but is so far beyond our understanding, always keep our hearts and minds safe in Jesus our Saviour. Amen.