

Love, Hope, Life

The question is sometimes asked, in relation to bad things happening to us or around us, or if we are in pressure situation; who would you want beside you in that situation? In sporting parlance it's often put as; when everything depends on that one hole being sunk, or basket being dunked, or wicket being taken, or goal being kicked, who would you want to be doing that for you? In real life we can think of it as; when you are in trouble, or under pressure, or finding that everything is getting on top of you, who is the person you trust to be right beside you who lets you know it's all ok and you will get through this? We might say that can vary a bit. If it's a medical situation, we would probably choose someone skilled in that area who we trust to carry out the treatment as best as it can be done. For other emergencies in life we would look for similar experts in those fields. And for personal crisis we would most likely look to people we know and trust very well. But still, the common thread in all of these situations, is that we would want on our side, helping us, someone in whom we both have trust in their abilities and skills, but also who we know will act as best as they can to help us.

Who would you want beside you, acting for you, in that situation? If you lived 2,000 years ago in a village in a land then known as Palestine, at a time when there wasn't really much medical assistance available, except perhaps for the very rich, and your brother was sick and dying, you might feel that you didn't have a lot of answers to that question. But if you had a friend, a close friend, who was not only good and kind and made you feel better just by being with Him, but who was also doing some unexplainably miraculous things in relation to healing sick people, you might then feel fortunate that you had someone to call on to help you out when things were starting to seem pretty hopeless. This is the situation of Mary and Martha when their brother, Lazarus, was sick. So, they sent for Jesus, who was in nearby Jerusalem, to come and help. But even though Jesus was less than an hour away, He waited, for three days. While from a human point of view this delay seems hard to understand, it gives us an account which shows us so much about how God loves us and acts for us in Jesus.

The account of the raising of Lazarus is a key event in Jesus' life and ministry on earth. We get so much from it. It contains the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, just two words in the Greek, translated here as 'Jesus started crying'. It gives us examples we often use to show that Jesus was both divine, i.e. God, and human at the same time. We are told here that Jesus had human relationships with Lazarus, Martha and Mary, so much so it's mentioned several times that He wept over Lazarus' death. At the same time, Jesus, as God, has the power to call out of the tomb one who has been dead for four days. We are also shown here that sickness, death, and other things that can happen to us in life, aren't God's punishment on people, but can even happen when His love for people is so obviously there. And we are shown here that in God, through Jesus, life does come from death. As Jesus now begins the journey to His death on the cross, we see here in a very clear way the love, hope, and life we have in Jesus.

In Jesus' relationships with Mary and Martha, and His sadness over the death of Lazarus, we see His genuine love for His friends. But still, for reasons they find it hard to understand, it is a love that sometimes waits. When a message was sent to Jesus, not that far away, that Lazarus was sick, no doubt Mary and Martha would have expected a quick response, one they were sure would have saved their brother. But, for no apparent practical reason, Jesus waited. Jesus explains the delay to His disciples as now giving Him an opportunity to show His true power. When Mary and Martha see Jesus while they are angry at His delay, they still express faith in His power to heal. God's not always going to act like we expect Him to. He's not the genie in the bottle who gives us three wishes when we call on Him. We don't expect a parent to give everything to a child straight away, but as part of the development of the child's strength, confidence, resilience, and appreciation, the parent will often say 'wait'. Imagine if God did give us everything when and as we wanted. Would that increase our faith, our gratitude, our trust and hope in Him? Or, based on what we know from the Bible and our own lives would it make us more and more demanding of Him and less able to cope in our lives? Love sometimes says, 'wait'.

This can be hard sometimes, can't it? Think about situations in your life when God has perhaps said 'wait' to you. How have you reacted to that? Sometimes you have maybe being able to look back and see why He did this, but in others you may still not understand the delay. We learn here about God's love

in His relationships with us, that even when there seems to be no action He still cares and even gets upset by what we go through. Like Mary and Martha, and many others in the Bible, are we able to still see God's love for us, and trust in Him, even when our faith and trust is allowed to be tested?

To follow on from this, we also see here a hope which looks beyond the present. Mary and Martha wanted a quick healing for their brother, understandably so. The disciples were worried about Jesus going back to an area where people wanted to kill Him. Jesus looked beyond these present concerns to see how God's love, power, and glory could be revealed. We don't normally see what's coming up, so we are asked to trust God. In days gone by when we were planning to travel somewhere we would often pull out a map or road guide to study it and work out the best route. What do we do nowadays? We put our destination into our GPS or Google maps, and off we go. I've had times when I've driven from one side of an unknown city to another without really knowing where I'm going, but I trust Google. At other times when I do know the rough way to go but Google tells me to take slightly different route, I think, 'well, there must be a reason for that', so I blindly take the alternative way. I have a hope, a trust, that the technology looks beyond and sees things that I can't see, so by following that I will get to where I want to go.

But when I think about it like that, I have to wonder; do I always trust God as much as I trust this mapping technology? While I may blindly follow the map, trusting that it sees far beyond what I can, when it comes to trusting God to look beyond the present in how He acts, I can react a bit more like Martha; 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' (21) But even then, Martha followed that with a statement of hope; 'Yet even now I know that God will do anything you ask.' (22) Even when things aren't done the way we expect them to be, and God doesn't act the way we expect Him to, when we are taken along a different route to what we might want to go we can still trust that God is working and acting for us. Hope is not seeing everything, but trusting the One who leads. And, while this can sometimes be hard for us to go through, hope grows best in the places where we cannot save ourselves.

And finally, and most importantly, we see here the life that overcomes death. As Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, He is not simply comforting a grieving family, He is revealing who He is. We see here not that God prevents every sorrow, nor that faith avoids every valley, but that death is never the end for those

who have faith in Jesus. That is where God's love shines through, that is what our hope is based on. Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life is a direct link to the new life Jesus would shortly win for us all by His death and resurrection. We live this new life now, and forever; this is the heart, the basis of our Christian faith. Our faith is not about learning the rules to follow, or a self-help program to live a better life, our faith is based firmly and solely on God's love for us, and the new life He has now won for us in Jesus.

We can remember what happened here, and elsewhere in the Bible, when we have our 'Lazarus moments': those times when our prayers seem to go unanswered. The times in our life when God's actions to our needs seem slow. When we are in situations that look hopeless. When the losses of loved ones, or relationships, or even stages in our life seem to be final. At these times we can look to God's love for us in Jesus to see the life which overcomes the death of all of these things for us.

As we near the end of the Lenten season, the cross is in view. We too are witnesses with those in our Bible reading to the love, the hope, the life we now have in Jesus. We see here that God's love is deeper than any delay we may feel. That God's hope is stronger than any fear we may have. And that God's life is greater than any death or loss we go through in our life. In Jesus, love, hope, and life are not ideas, they are a person. And He is the One we can rely on to always be with us, beside us, carrying us when needed, whatever we go through. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Can you think of people you would like beside you in difficult situations you go through in life?
- Are there times when God, in His love for you, has said, 'wait'? How did you feel when this has happened? Have you been able to later see why He said that, at least sometimes? What effect do you think it would have on us if God said 'yes' straight up to anything we ask of Him?
- How do you go with having hope that God sees beyond the present as He acts for us? Do you find it easier to trust digital mapping technology than to trust God? Are there situations in your life right now which you are finding it hard to hand over to God and trust Him in dealing with them? If so, bring them to Him in prayer.
- Can you think of times when God's promise to bring life over death has comforted you and given you strength? Perhaps the death of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, some other loss in your life? Where would our faith be without this promise and comfort?

Pray: thank God that in Jesus He brings love, hope, and life into our world and our lives. Pray for the faith to continue to believe in Him so we can live in the new life He offers to us all.

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