

Year A Lent 5 - 29.03.20

Sermon by Rev'd Steve McMahon

As we continue to spend time in isolation while doctors look for a means to deal with the Coronavirus, we might ask ourselves why isn't God doing something about it? Why isn't a cure for this deadly disease being presented to us on a plate? It's when we look at the account of Jesus raising Lazarus that we can begin to get a glimpse of a solution to that age-old dilemma.

The most remarkable thing about this event is that Lazarus was already dead when the message reached Jesus. It took two days for the messenger to get to the Jordan, so when Jesus returned to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for at least four days. It is difficult for us to believe that Jesus did not know that this was the case because of the insight that the Spirit of God had given him on numerous occasions. But he sees this as a signal from the Father that something tremendous is going to happen in connection with it. But it's in verses 5 and 6 we get the real shock:

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill... he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."

That is incredible to us. That is the part of the story which is hard to handle. Martha loved Jesus; Mary loved Jesus; Lazarus loved Jesus; and Jesus loved each one of them. From the record of scripture we know that their home was filled with love and that it was one of the most welcome havens for our Lord during his three years of ministry. But when Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, he waits.

It is a tough thing to believe that Jesus deliberately waited. We are so used to critical illness being a signal for immediate action - particularly in the present emergency - that it seems incredible that Jesus, knowing that his friend was ill, or in this case dead, nevertheless stayed right where he was for two more days. You could ask, "If he knew Lazarus was dead why would he hurry? There was nothing he could do."

But remember Mary and Martha's hearts were breaking. This was a dearly beloved brother, and his death would be a terrible loss to them. Jesus' presence with them would have been a tremendous comfort even if he never did a thing about raising Lazarus from the dead. That's why we visit the sick and the bereaved - we may not be able to help, but we can comfort them. And yet, knowing that they needed him there to comfort them; knowing that they longed to have him there to the point that they sent a messenger to let him know the situation, he deliberately remained two days longer at the place where he was.

The anxiety at Lazarus' illness (for how long we don't know); the uplift when their message had been despatched to Jesus and the justifiable depression when no word or sign of him came....

and then Lazarus was dead. As if the funeral (which would have taken place the same day) had not been bad enough, their best friend Jesus let them languish for four more days.

When we go to God for help which we feel we desperately need and nothing happens; when our hearts are breaking over something and we need God to intervene but the heavens are silent, it is tough to understand, tough to accept, tough to get any kind of grip on. But what this passage is telling us is that a delay in an answer like that is not a sign of God's indifference or failure to hear. It is a sign of God's love. The delay will help us. It is for our sake. And it is so that Christ may be glorified through it.

Jesus deliberately delayed going to Mary and Martha because he loved them and knew this would strengthen their faith as they learned the ultimate outcome which God would work through him. That is a hard lesson to accept. When we hope for, pray for, yearn for something that does not occur and then Bam! sometime after we think that everything is lost and that there is no hope, God does something remarkable that totally reverses our view.

There are times when we cry out to God for help and say, "Things are so bad it can't get any worse. Lord, do something. Help us." But no answer comes. That is hard. It is hard to believe. It is hard to wait. But it is never the end of the story, because, as God said so clearly through the prophet Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways."

That is what is so difficult. God is sovereign. God is not a mortal. God does not act like we act. There are dimensions of the problems which God sees that we do not remotely imagine. There are possibilities and opportunities in every situation that we cannot conceive of. Even in the current global crisis, God is there, allowing possibilities and opportunities to present themselves for our betterment.

So we must wait and quietly trust, knowing that God is still working.