

The One You Love Is Dead

That's the most killing sentence a living person hears. It is *not* the message brought to Jesus in today's sublime Gospel of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus is only told *The one you love is ill*; thus his decision to stay where he is takes us by surprise. This is absolutely the intention of the Evangelist.

Why Didn't You Come?

Jesus' answer to that question seems to cost him a huge struggle, an angry tension which racks him as he sees the tears of Mary and the others. All the questioning of the human race is in their pain, and he knows that their question goes beyond his friendship, beyond even his manhood, to the heart of God. This, I believe, is the cause of his extraordinary emotion as he asks these beloved people to lead him to the grave. That in itself is a source of long meditation, which we can turn into a Lenten prayer. John's picture of Jesus is full of confidence and foreknowledge. Jesus stays away from his sick friend because he wants to do for him a greater thing than healing; and when next week we contemplate the Passion story we shall see Jesus *being led to the grave* again - this time, his own. His grief and love for Lazarus are lights by which we shall understand his way on Good Friday.

Mary and Martha and Lazarus

When we hear that *Jesus loved them*, we must bear in our mind what it is to love another family; we don't just love three individuals; we love their love for each other, we watch with reverence their careful affection for each other, enjoying their mutual understanding, sympathy, and often their wise mockery of each other; Martha and Mary are famously at odds in another Gospel, and the affection of Jesus for both of them is evoked by Luke with gentle humour. To see the family crushed and destroyed by death turns all this love to sharpest pain. But Jesus has not come to eke out a doomed life with equally doomed sympathy. His path to the tomb of Lazarus is not like that of other mourners. We must make our journey to the tomb like his way, and not like theirs. Their way is one in which they die a thousand deaths before arriving. Jesus has a purpose in his striding towards the tomb unlike that of any funeral procession we have power to lead. We must never take that path in any other spirit; and the key to it is all in that delay - so humanly puzzling - which keeps Jesus from the scene until he can arrive in his true colours: not *a good friend* who has *come*

to sympathise with Martha and Mary, but as the one who can say "*I am the resurrection!*"

God Stands Before Our Grave

God does not prevent our death. That is the common experience of humanity, and it's pointless to pretend otherwise. Rarely, we can experience the coming of death with a sense that its time has come, that there is a rightness about it, that death comes as a friend. Usually, if we are honest, a glance at a photograph from fifty years before is enough to remind us of the truth: that *God doesn't come* to overturn the forces which bring the ones he loves to the grave. Jesus is near to us as we accept this truth; in Gethsemane it fell on him in all its weight. We cannot think God the Father was absent from that Garden. He was present, and he was silent. Jesus prays in the story much as Mary and Martha speak to him in our Gospel today: *why have you forsaken me?*

Only Resurrection Is Enough

God's plan is not achieved by anything less than Easter. In Jesus he summons all the powers of evil to do their worst; and when Jesus is at last one with Lazarus, with Mary and Martha, and with all the poor, ruined race of humanity, he acts for them with all his power and grace. This is not Easter. Lazarus comes out bound with the grave-cloths, in which he will one day be buried again. Jesus will leave in his own tomb *the winding-sheet, with the cloth that was over his face*, things he will never need again. Until that battle with death is won, God waits with us before the tomb, and in Jesus we *see how much he loved him*; no indifference here, but a compassion whose power goes deeper than grief. The fact that we still have to cope with death is radically changed by this truth: God's mercy and eternal love cannot be limited to the enjoyment of earthly prosperity. When the things we suffer have overwhelmed our power to hope, we enter into the divine dimensions where the power of God sets the parameters, and we fall silent, and wait for him to show us his salvation, beyond our power to hope.
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