

Message for March 29, 2020

John 11:1-35

Quite a few years ago while I was browsing in a religious bookstore, a rather old-fashioned picture captured my attention. The painting depicted a woman lying in a bed who was obviously very ill. On one side of the bed stood a nurse helplessly wringing her hands while on the other side a very concerned-looking doctor was leaning over the patient. Behind him stood yet another figure dressed in a white robe. He too was leaning over and looking very concerned. That person was of course Jesus and the message conveyed by the picture was simple enough. No matter how ill we may be or whatever happens to us, Christ is with us; he is concerned about us and is even suffering along with us. That is the message of that painting and that is also one of the messages of this today's scripture passage.

Jesus was a very good friend of Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus. Not surprisingly then, when Lazarus became gravely ill the sisters sent a message to Jesus asking for help. Jesus however didn't appear to be that concerned and only a couple of days later did he announce to the disciples that they were moving on to Bethany, the town where his friends lived. When his disciples heard this though, they made it clear that they were very much against the idea. Bethany was only two miles away from Jerusalem and Jesus could be captured there so easily! Why recklessly endanger his life? Jesus however insisted that they had to go.

Upon their arrival in Bethany, they were told that Lazarus was not only dead but had been buried four days earlier. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming she rushed to meet him while Mary remained in the house. Martha could have said so many things to Jesus and even got angry at him for not coming earlier but instead she uttered one of the Bible's most wistful yet faith-inspired statements: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died, and even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you".

Even though it looked like Jesus had totally let her down, she still believed that he could and would do something. This inspired Jesus to make one of his most famous statements of all. “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he die yet shall he live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

After saying that she believed that Jesus was the Messiah, Martha went and told Mary that Jesus wanted to see her. Mary promptly rushed to meet him, fell at his feet and repeated the exact same words that her sister had said minutes earlier: “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died”. Jesus’ response to Mary though was totally different from his response to Martha. There wasn’t any great inspiring words of faith. Rather his reaction is summed up by the shortest verse of the entire Bible: “Jesus wept”. Actually this is a bit of a mistranslation because Jesus didn’t just weep; he actually bawled his eyes out.

After he had collected himself, Jesus went to the tomb and performed his greatest miracle of all, the resurrection of Lazarus. Everyone of course was amazed by this and naturally the news spread far and wide. However when the religious authorities in nearby Jerusalem heard what had happened, they decided that they simply had to take action. Jesus had become too much of a threat to be ignored any longer; he had to die. Thus the stage was set for what we remember on Good Friday and Easter.

This is one of the best-known episodes of the New Testament and it has so many elements to it. There is the grief of Martha and Mary, weeping for their dead brother. There is the joy that greeted his resurrection. There is also the hatred of the authorities who viewed the miracle as something evil rather than good. Perhaps the greatest element of all though is that of love; the love of Christ.

Jesus loved Lazarus so much that he risked his life by going to Bethany, a place where he could have easily been captured. Jesus so loved Lazarus that he brought him back to life even though it indirectly sealed his own death warrant. Jesus loved so much that he even stood there and wept, all because of his friend’s death and the sisters’ grief.

There are so many different aspects to this story but I have long found this last one to be the most striking of all; Jesus, the son of God, God himself, stood there and wept.

It is perhaps easy enough for us to pass over this but the fact that Jesus wept was, to most people in the ancient world, the most amazing part of the story. To most people back then there was nothing particularly amazing about the resurrection of Lazarus. Even if they themselves had never actually witnessed a resurrection, they reasoned that any real god could bring a dead person back to life. What really got their attention was the idea that a god would actually care enough about a mere mortal to weep for his death and the sadness of it all. Why gods weren't supposed to cry, care or be emotionally involved! Yet Jesus was and the great promise of the gospel is that just as he was so involved back then, so he still is today.

A number of years ago a man by the name of Sir Oliver Hodge wrote: "The Christian idea of God is not that of a being outside the universe looking on and taking no part. No, it is that of a God who loves, who yearns, who suffers."

This is so true; in fact this belief is one of the things that make Christianity different from many or even most of the other great religions of the world. We believe in a god who loves us and even suffers with us. We believe in a god who is with us at all times, places and circumstances including the challenging, uncertain and perhaps even frightening time that we are living through today. Indeed the classic passage "Footprints in the Sand" sums up our understanding of God very well and I would encourage you to read it.

Factually speaking, "Footprints" is not of course a true story but even so, it does proclaim a great truth. Such is the love of God, our Father who art in heaven, that he is always with us. Such is the love of God that he suffers with us when our hearts are breaking. Such is the love of God that he carries us; he carries us through such as scripture, our prayers and the prayers of others. He carries us too through our families and friends, the

kindness of a stranger. Such is the love of God that we never ever truly walk alone; not now, not ever. That is the great truth and promise of the shortest verse in the entire Bible. That too is the great truth and promise of what happened on a cross and in a garden so long ago.