

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 22 March 2026, the 5th Sunday of Lent

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Readings: Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Today's reflection is by Reader, Cal Bailey.

I wonder if you like watching videos of the 10 greatest tries in rugby, or the 10 best goals in football or the top sixes in cricket? I think the video of this event in chapter 11 of John's gospel, the illness, death and raising of Lazarus, will be in the top 10 in heaven, because it has everything in it. It speaks loudly to our world of illness, pain, and violence.

The gospel of John is located at the centre of time. It starts with the prologue, which harks back to creation itself with the words "In the beginning." Jesus' incarnation, as the Word of creation made flesh in a human person, is the fulfilment of creation, in which the Word made the world we know. It ends with Jesus' resurrection, and so anticipates the end of time, the final moment of resurrection for all that God transforms to be in the presence of God forever. In the 21 chapters in between, John's gospel gives us a short version of everything from the beginning of time to the end.

The raising of Lazarus comes in chapter 11, the middle chapter of the 21. This story is right at the centre of time.

Time is important in this story, and so is place. I wonder if you noticed in the reading, how carefully John describes exactly where Jesus is. It tells us how Jesus crosses 3 thresholds to bring about resurrection.

At the beginning of the story, verse 7 tells us, Jesus is outside Judea. After he hears the news of Lazarus' illness, Jesus takes a long time to come to visit his sick friend. Think what this might mean in the context of the whole gospel, of the history of our world. Jesus crossing into Judea is like God coming to earth and becoming incarnate. In both cases, there is a strange delay. Why didn't God come among us the first time anything went wrong, the first time we asked for him? Listen to these words from verse 4, as we contemplate the many situations of suffering and sadness in our world today: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory." Eventually, Jesus crosses the threshold

into Judea, he comes into the life of the world. But, as his disciples point out in verse 8, the Jerusalem authorities are out to get him.

The second threshold Jesus crosses, in verse 17, is that he comes to Bethany. There is a close correspondence between the role of Bethany in this story and the role of Israel in the whole story of the gospel. Why doesn't Jesus come to the whole world? Because he's a real human being, who can only be in one place at one time.

Why does he come to Israel, why does he come to Mary and Martha, rather than any other nation or people? Because God loves Israel, just as we're told in verse 5 that Jesus loves Martha and Mary and Lazarus. What does Jesus do in Bethany? In other words, what does Jesus do in Israel? He meets people's needs, and he speaks the truth.

In this story, and in most of all the stories we have about Jesus, he spends his time on the outskirts of the village, and in the outskirts of Israel. Time at the centre is scarce, and it is dangerous. But He had disclosed his purpose before he came to the centre as being about meeting our needs and telling us the truth in his proclamation in the Old Testament and in his ministry in Galilee, well before the central moments had begun.

The third threshold Jesus crosses is in verse 38 when he comes to the tomb. Here we see the correspondence between the place of the tomb in this story and the place of Jerusalem in the wider gospel story. It's the place of horror and the place of transformation. It's the place of impurity and also the place where, Jesus says in verse 4 and 40, we shall see the glory of God.

Jesus has performed 6 miracles prior to this central moment in John's gospel. He turned water into wine; he healed the official's son in Cana, he healed the man at the pool of Bethesda, he fed the five thousand, he walked on water, and he healed the man born blind. We about to witness number 7, the Jewish perfect number.

So this story tells us everything about the gospel of John, and everything about how the gospel of John fits into the whole story of God. It also tells us everything about Jesus. Firstly, it tells us he's fully human. He loves Lazarus, Mary and Martha. He loves them so much, and he finds the grief and misunderstanding and opposition so overwhelming, that in verse 33 his whole body is convulsed with passion. This was more than a few tears.

It was a whole body experience in which there was no part of him, mind, body or spirit, that was not overcome and overwhelmed by the intensity of his grief, his sadness, his anger. If you've known deep emotion, you're in good company. Notice where it happens: Jesus is on his way to the tomb. Discipleship leads us, by one route or another, to a place which seems to us to be a place of death.

But this story also shows us that Jesus is fully divine. No one has ever, in the whole history of creation, seen anything like this: a man who has been in a tomb for four days, whose body has begun to disintegrate, smelling with the stench of death, bound in the clothes of death, walking out of a tomb alive. Only God can do this.

This is the central story John wants to tell us about our world, about our lives, about our God. This is the glory of God.

This story anticipates the cross, where Jesus would die, not of an illness, but at the hands of human vindictiveness, human jealousy, human greed. In a few days, Jesus will be laid in a tomb like this. And in a few more days, we will again see the glory of God in Jesus' resurrection.

This story tells us everything about John's gospel and everything about Jesus. It also tells us everything about life and death. If John 11 is the centre of the gospel, Jesus' conversation with Martha in verses 21 to 27 is the centre of the centre.

Martha says to Jesus, "I know that Lazarus will rise again on the last day." And Jesus says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me, will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha responds, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

The resurrection and the life. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection", he is saying "I am the power of God, overcoming evil and death". When he says, "I am the life", he is saying, "I am the love of God making possible new relationships, new communities, new possibilities for human flourishing and worship and joy."

Our church is divided between those who think it's all about power and those who think it's all about love. Some want to read only "I am the resurrection" and concentrate on eternal salvation, and believing the right things. Others want to read only "I am the life" and focus on creating a just society and this present world. But Jesus says "I am the resurrection **and** the life." I am about doctrine and justice, about this world **and** the next, about the individual **and** community, about power **and** love.

Finally, this story tells us everything about discipleship. It's a training manual in living faithfully. The disciple prays to God in an attitude of need and expectation. Is this the way you pray? Need and expectation? Mary and Martha express need in the words of verse 22, "But even now, I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

As disciples of Jesus today, we stand before him in need and expectation. We don't expect that we and those we love will never suffer, will never be bewildered or disappointed. But we do expect that, if we believe, we will see the glory of God. We must empty our hearts of the self-deception that prevents us from expressing our needs; we must empty our lives of the inhibition that prevents us from articulating our expectation. The more we are around Jesus, the more we become aware of our need of him, and the more reason we have to expect that he will transform us and the whole of life.

We discover too that discipleship involves danger. If we follow Jesus, we will cross the same thresholds. Thomas faces this reality more than the others in verse 16: "Let us go also, that we may die with him."

And we discover that discipleship means being with Jesus in the face of stench and fear. When Jesus says, "Take away the stone", Martha protests. She risks missing the glory of God. Disciples know that God's work is often where the stench is worst.

Notice what disciples discover about faith in this story. Those who don't believe, don't get to see the glory. They may see the drama, but they miss God who is right at the heart. This story tells us everything about the gospel, about Jesus, about life and death, about God, and about discipleship, but there's one question it doesn't answer for us. It gives us the gospel, it shows us Jesus, it offers us resurrection and life and it describes what it means to respond. It leaves us with one remaining question: "Do you believe this?"

Amen.

