

## A Reflection on Mary and Martha and Lazarus



The Gospel on the Fifth Sunday of Lent – traditionally known as ‘Passion Sunday’ – gives an account of the illness and death of Lazarus, the grief of his sisters Mary and Martha and their friends, and the response of Jesus, which contains a mix of deep empathy, but also a pledge to disclose the ‘Glory of God’. It is this which becomes manifest in the miracle by which Jesus resurrects Lazarus, foreshadowing his own resurrection (which is why we read this Gospel now, at the threshold of our commemoration of the Passion of the Lord):

*A certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’ But when Jesus heard it, he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

John 11.1-6

There are several details here which are puzzling. Jesus seems confident that the illness is not one which will lead to death, but rather a pretext for the *God’s Glory* to be revealed. Perhaps this is a prompt to interpret Jesus’ own resurrection primarily as a disclosure of God’s Glory, of the same (or similar) kind as that at the Baptism of Jesus or the Transfiguration, or like the manifestations of God’s Presence to Moses in the Burning Bush or on Mount Sinai. It is the *same* phenomenon by which we are encountered in all of these events – the breaking into our perception and understanding of the knowledge of the proximity and the power of the Living God. That is what really *matters*. Perhaps this is why Jesus seems so unconcerned about his friend’s illness – and stays where he is for another two days instead of dropping everything and rushing to the scene, which is surely what Mary and Martha (and some of the disciples too) really *want* him to do. But imagine: if they had got what they wanted, and Lazarus had been

*healed*, the entire purpose of this moment – for the disclosure of the Glory of God – would have been missed. Part of the meaning of the story must be about our looking beyond the immediate pressures of the here and now, and seeing things in a much wider perspective – a perspective defined not by how we see, but by how God sees; not by the *present*, but by the whole context *from the beginning to the end*.

*He told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' The disciples said, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'*

John 11.11-16

This is one of the few occasions where Thomas the Apostle comes to the fore – way before the scene in the resurrection where he seems to doubt Jesus: but even here he has a dogged loyalty to Jesus, even though he can't see the possibility of things working out very well for them all. (We might contrast this with the Apostle Peter, who is full of bravado, but lets Jesus down at the last minute: Thomas is the *opposite*, and I rather think that, of the two of them, I would prefer to be as he is, not like Peter.)

*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said 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?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'*

John 11.20-27

The moment when Jesus meets Mary and Martha is extremely telling. Perhaps we tend to think better of Mary than of Martha because of how they appear in another place (Luke 10.38-42), where Jesus seems to favour Mary's sense of stillness in his presence while Martha continues to fuss around in anxious busyness. But in *this* moment – albeit a moment of

extreme intensity and grief – they both respond in *precisely the same way*. Is there a slight *reproach* in the way they ask why Jesus hadn't come to them *at once*? Like Thomas, they can't see beyond the here and now:

*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said, 'Lord, come and see.'* John 11.32-34

Famously, Teresa of Avila, in her reflections on these two sisters in her autobiography, exhorts us not to favour one over the other, but to befriend them *both*. She invites us to recognise that we each contain an inner Mary and an inner Martha – that part of ourself which is capable of stillness and reflection and restfulness, and that part which tends to be preoccupied and fretful and stressed. Teresa urges us to accept both capacities within ourselves, to be *kind* to them, for them to be *in harmony with each other*. It reflects real psychological astuteness, about our self-recognition and self-acceptance before God, as a single integrated person.

*Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'* John 11.35-44

In this Gospel text, however, we are invited also to recognise the inner *Lazarus* – that part of ourself which is capable of beloved friendship with Jesus, but which has now become fragile and moribund, even to the point of death. Only then may we, too, hear the words of the Lord – here, just before Easter – saying, 'Come out of the tomb; be unbound, and go free.'