

John 11 – Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

The gospel of John is the same as the other three gospels. It is about Jesus. But it is distinctly different in how it has been put together. If you were expecting to read an historical account of the life of Jesus, then you had best go to the other gospels. If you are searching for the authentic Jesus, in my view you will find no better place than in the words of the gospel of John.

I have more books in my personal library on John's gospel than anything else. But even so, the best book on the subject is the gospel itself. If you want to find out about Jesus and even get to know him a bit for yourself – then this is the book for you. For John is more concerned about what it all meant rather than why it happened how it did.

One of the big themes in John's gospel is the miracles. John calls them signs. Because for him although they ARE miracles in themselves, more importantly they point towards other things. So John lists 7 of them. Starting with Turning Water into Wine at the Wedding feast and ending with our reading for today about raising Lazarus from the dead.

Near the end of his gospel account, John writes the motivation behind how and why he writes the way he did. In Chapter 20 starting at verse 30 he says,

“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name”

John especially selected the miracles to be included. He chose their sequence. Putting the most important ones at the start and at the end.

I will come to the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead in a moment.

But first I want start with the wedding feast. One of the signs here is that Jesus is taking six huge jars of water used in Jewish ceremonial washing – the laws in the Old Testament. He turns them into the best wine – a symbol which points to the blood he himself later sheds on the cross in creating the new relationship between God and His people. Its not a question of trying to fix a broken religion, but it changes everything because it supersedes the old with the new.

Faith no longer becomes a question of us being able to keep and fulfil all the religious laws and rules but it becomes ONLY one thing – believing that Jesus is the Christ, You don't need faith anymore in yourself being good enough. No that never was going to work because none of us are good enough. Only Jesus is good enough and all you need is faith in him.

The other significant thing of course is that Jesus performs this miracle at a wedding. The sign here is that Jesus is marrying or reconciling together heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical, God and Humanity. He is sorting it out in a new way.

The most climactic and powerful of the miracles in the gospel of John is the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Our reading for today. Here the sign is obvious for all of us who have the benefit of knowing what John later writes concerning Christ's own death, burial and resurrection. This miracle is a sign of what is to come in Christ's own personal imminent future.

Rather than rushing off when the message of Lazarus first arrives, Jesus waits and he waits and he waits. But is he just waiting?

Or is he also praying to His Father and coming to the realisation that what Lazarus is going through, he himself will go through a few days later.

When he eventually turns up at Lazarus's home in Bethany he finds that his friend has indeed died and had been buried in a tomb some days before. Lazarus was well and truly dead. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Jesus had waited, to be certain that he would die. There could be no question that Lazarus was dead, his two sisters knew it and all the mourners knew it. Those present would have also confirmed it from the smell when the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb.

I don't know about you, but I can be drawn into often seeing Jesus serenely and silently going about his business in the gospels. Almost floating over the ground as he effortlessly balances meeting the needs of those around him. Healing this person, teaching his disciples, performing miracles, telling parables and debating with the authorities.

But here we have Jesus revealing his raw emotions as he discovers that his friend has been lost to death. Jesus weeps, but perhaps that is to gentle a word to describe what Jesus feels. One bible commentator describes it as groaning, agitated, anguished and troubled, and he gives out a cry of pain while he sobs.

Death can stalk and confront each one of us at some time in our lives. It is evident during the dying process and the slipping away of a loved one, but especially so at a funeral where real raw emotions can so easily be surfaced.

Jesus commanded the dead Lazarus to get up and he did.

Wow to be present at that event.

Right back at you for all those who insist that faith is a pre-requisite for healing. Absolutely NOT. Lazarus had no faith, he was dead to faith along with everything else. It was the power of Jesus and that alone that raised him from the dead. There are no boundaries to the power and love of Christ. That's good news.

That's especially good news for those of us who look to the past with regrets. What's done is done. We can't change what's gone before. However much our minds can filter the past and paint it in a rose coloured tint. We know that we are only kidding ourselves and its understandable that we can remain with a lingering guilt that won't go away.

But we CAN influence the future and the best way that many have found for doing that is to believe that Jesus indeed is the Christ,

The bible says this in Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.

But for those who confess and believe in Jesus Christ, death is not the end. Knowing that doesn't stop the pain. It doesn't stem the feeling of loss. Honest doubts can still remain because we don't know the details of how we will enter eternal life. But we do know that Jesus had the power to not only lay down his own life, but to pick it up again, no one could take it from him. Jesus had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead and he also promises to do that to the believer.

Don't trust in yourself, trust in Jesus.

But step back for a moment with me and look at these two scenes – the wedding and the funeral. What do they have in common? They are both gatherings of families and friends. Friends and relatives come together to mark these special rites of passage. To celebrate, to mourn together and to recollect with each other times past. They are both highly focussed and clearly centred and for many are times of heightened emotions. The people who attend are primarily motivated to be there to show their love care and compassion for each other.

In both situations Jesus involves the people who are present. He enlists them in the process of what he is about to do. They fill the jars with water at the wedding and they roll away the stone from the tomb. There was no mention of a special selection process based on being religious or holy. That's because there was and is no special selection process. No – it was ordinary women and ordinary men doing what Jesus asked them to do. You don't need faith in yourself to be a part of the Jesus movement – all you need is faith in Jesus.

So what does this tell us about God?

- God can and always wants to be present in every aspect of our lives. The good times as well as the bad.
- God calls us to be a part of his miracle working process. We do what we can do, but He does what He only can do. Both are important.
- You can't put God in a box. We can know him, but he always remains beyond our ability to fully know him. In Jesus he regularly surprises us beyond our expectations.

What does this tell me about me and how I understand my own faith?

- My value in the Kingdom of God is not about who I am as an individual, but who I know in relationship – Jesus.
- We can't turn the clock back. So don't live in the past with regrets, but live in the present with trust, hope and belief in Jesus that the future has already burst in to the now.

How has this talk caused me to change what I do?

- I need to spend more time in prayer. Jesus didn't just wait before he went to Bethany. I am sure that he prayed and that the miracle came out of that time of prayer.

I don't know what this talk has meant to you. But I pray that God will use this message to get His message to you.

At this time of great pain and loss across the world due to the coronavirus please join with me in prayer:

- For all those hospitalised due to the disease. That you, Lord Jesus, would come close to them in their time of pain and distress. That in their desperation they would find peace in you and your promise to always be with them. To never leave them and to be with them at the end of their life on this earth. Bring them safely to an everlasting life in your Kingdom.
- We pray for all those who mourn and grieve the loss of loved ones. That they may find your love in their suffering and your hope in their despair.
- God of all consolation, your son Jesus Christ was moved to tears at the grave of Lazarus his friend. Look with compassion on your children, in their loss. Give to troubled hearts the light of hope. Overcome the worst in us we pray through the best of you. Strengthen in us the gift of faith. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen