

Sunday 3rd April 2022
John 11:1-45
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Jesus is moved by our sorrows
- Jesus is able to overcome death
- Jesus invites us to trust Him

Please do be seated.

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and deepen our trust as we hear the voice of our Father through His word

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

I don't know if you've been paying attention to the news in the past week but in the past week we've had the Oscars and it got a little bit more attention than normal because Will Smith slapped Chris Rock on stage, live to the world, and he did so, Will Smith did so because Chris Rock had made a joke at his wife's expense. His wife has alopecia and she has chosen to shave her head which is quite a big thing for a black woman, probably for really anyone and there's been lots of reaction. There's been the negative side of saying he should never have resorted to violence to respond to this issue, and there are those on the positive side who say 'Well, good for him, he stood up for his wife and did so very publicly.' Whatever our reaction might be to it, clearly Will Smith was moved into action. I wonder what his motives were. It's clearly he was deeply troubled. Was it love? Was it anger? Was it anger and injustice he felt? His wife experienced that here as she and she is suffering in some form and for whatever reason she's made the end of a joke, he might feel that there's gender inequality here, maybe there was an injustice he was standing up against. I wonder also though, if there's an unspoken motivation, that fear may have motivated him. I don't even know if Will Smith would be aware of it, because there's part of me wonders whether he responded to human vulnerability, his wife's vulnerability at her illness. It's not life-threatening maybe, but still it speaks of her vulnerability, he speaks of all our vulnerabilities and often, when we feel vulnerable, we react and we can react in fear. And the greatest fear that we all share is the fear of death and that can move us to action, sometimes unhealthy actions. And so, as we turn our passage, to turn to our passage today, is it this that moves Jesus in the face of death, in the face of human vulnerability? Is it fear that moves Jesus?

We're journeying, just now, towards Easter, two weeks away, and we've been journeying through the gospel of John, looking at different passages where John helps us to see some of the purpose of the passion. And so, we looked in John chapter 3 where God so loved the world that he gave his son to save us, to bring us into God's family, through new birth. And in chapter 4 we saw that God is seeking true worshipers, worshipers who will worship in the Spirit and in truth. And in last week, in John 9 and 10 that Jesus came to give life in all its fullness. And for all these reasons, Jesus went through His passion, He went through suffering for us.

Today's passage gives us another facet and, in view of how John structures his writing, I think he wants to help us see that this is the greatest part, the greatest insight into the purpose of Jesus, and I can say that with some degree of confidence because, along the way, John will highlight for us the word sign that there are signs that are pointing towards Jesus, but he'll also use 'I am' statements having Jesus says 'I am' and he'll complete that sentence pointing to His divinity. And so, this passage is spoken of as the seventh and final sign before the cross and Jesus uses an 'I am' statement in it.

Seven is a very special number in the Bible it speaks of completeness and so it points to this sign being of the greatest importance to all the others and revealing who Jesus is and what He came to achieve. So, what does this event reveal of the purpose of the passion? In the face of death, what moves Jesus?

Well, we read earlier 'When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come along with her, also weeping, he was deeply moved in Spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept.' What moves Jesus? Our sorrow, our sorrow at death, our inability, our vulnerability against this greatest of foes. In reaction to Mary's weeping, He weeps, He feels our pain, He shares our sorrow, he has lived our experience and shared in this human experience. Across all of history, in every human life, He is moved by our sorrow. But notice also that He's troubled and, in fact, the phrase 'deeply moved' is repeated again in verse 38 and in some ways it's an unfortunate translation, 'deeply moved.' Because the Greek phrase that lies behind that, when you look at it in every other usage, speaks of human anger, even outrage and fury. So, Jesus is moved here to anger, not against Mary, but rather towards death. Jesus is moved by our sorrow and His reaction is to weep and to be angry.

Pastor and writer John Stott had this to say about this '[What he saw] enraged Jesus because it brought home the evil of death, its unnaturalness, it's 'violent tyranny'. In Mary's grief He sees and feels the misery of the whole race and burns with rage against the oppressor of humanity. It is death that is the subject of His wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom He had come into the world to destroy.

Friends, in our passage today we see the compassion of Jesus, a compassion that is more than mere pity, and His empathy is more than just there to console us, and surely He does consume us, surely we read of our God as one who draws near to the brokenhearted and weeps with those who weep. But His compassion is a true compassion, it moves Him to action here, and in His passion, it moves Him to confront death on our behalf.

So friends, do you see the heart of Jesus for you, for us? Our God is not uncaring. Our God is not unmoving. He is not akin to any false notion that would say God feels nothing towards us, nor is He willing to be involved in the brokenness of our world. That is not a true picture of our God because God enters in through Jesus to the human experience and to the heartbreaking realities of life. He's there in our sorrow. He knows the pain

that tears our soul and, what is more, He's moved to intervene. He steps into history as a human being to experience it with us, to confront it with us, and for us, to defeat death itself. This is part of His purpose, part of the purpose of His passion.

Yet, some of us, as we reread that passage today, the question will come to mind of 'Well, why did He delay?' He knows God. If God is so caring, if He's so loving, why did He delay there? Why does He delay in other ways? And I don't have answers to all the other questions, and maybe the situations in your life, but for here at least there's something to be said. We read earlier 'Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, so, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days and then he said to his disciples 'Let us go back to Judea.'" Why, if He loves them, why delay? Why wait?

Well, there's three things that we need to understand here. Firstly, at this time in history, in this particular location, people were buried on the day they died. People were buried on the day they died. Secondly, as regards timing, we know from verse 17 that Jesus, when He arrives, finds Lazarus to have been in the tomb for four days, so, Jesus isn't very far away, probably takes Him about a day to travel there and, assuming it takes the messengers a day to find Jesus and reach Him, then this means Lazarus died as soon as the messengers leave or very soon after, so it wouldn't have mattered when Jesus left, Lazarus would have been dead and buried in the tomb. Day to travel, day to travel back, two days from the point of Lazarus death but still we might wonder 'Why delay?' And here's the third thing you need to know, there was a Jewish belief, at the time, not held by Jews any longer, not held by Christians, but a Jewish belief at the time that held the soul of a dead person remained in the vicinity of the body for three days, hoping to re-enter it, but once decomposition set in, the soul departed. As I say not something that we subscribe to, not something that Jews subscribe to nowadays, but held at the time. And so, Jesus delays for our reason, He delays to prove beyond doubt something about who He is, that this wasn't just an accidental resuscitation or something, that Jesus didn't arrive just at the right time and 'Well, you know these things happen.' No, he leaves it four days to prove beyond doubt that who He is and what His power can do so as to strengthen the trust His disciples have in Him. And so, when He arrives he says to Martha 'Your brother will rise again.' Now Martha has been taught well, she's been taught from the scriptures that there will be a resurrection at the last end and she knows this, she believes that, she trusts this and so she believes she will see her brother one day. But Jesus has a more immediate plan in mind and He wants to deepen her understanding of Him and of what He can do and so, he says 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.'

'Do you believe this?' Now, let's note that Jesus doesn't simply say that he can provide resurrection and life, that would be impressive in itself, no, he says that life eternal life is in Him, that the escape from the finality of death is available from Him by being in relationship with Him. That's how we share in this life and then this hope and He says very similarly later on in John 17 saying 'Now this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' Eternal life is not a ticket, it's not

a little thing you just put in your back pocket for when the day arrives, it's not even a force or some kind of power or gift, eternal life is all tied up in relationship with Jesus and knowing Him and sharing in Him by believing in Him.

And, to prove His claim, to prove His identity and power, Jesus raises Lazarus. He calls to Lazarus in a loud voice, we hear a voice of true and raw authority, the voice we might say that at the beginning of time said 'Let there be light' for He is the light of the world and in His light there is life.

Friends, Jesus comes into our day, into your brokenness, to stand with us and for us against death, and offer us life. As one commentator said he offers us the 'indestructible life of the resurrection the very life of the deathless God Himself. This is our God, this is our Jesus, and to know Him, to share in Him, to believe in Him is to have this hope. Not that we don't grieve. Jesus doesn't tell Martha and Mary not to grieve but that we grieve with hope and for this Jesus came, for this Jesus went through His passion, for this He has moved to action that we might share in His life and have hope. He makes this move towards us and our world. So, how will we respond to Him? How will we move in response to His movement to us? Because, in the passage He asks of Martha 'Do you believe this?' Do you believe this. Now, belief here in the Greek is not, I know this in my head or yeah, you know, fake idea and then you just get on with life, to believe in a biblical sense is to believe in such a way that it makes a difference to your life, that your actions change, that your outlook changes, it's not just mental agreement to an idea.

So, what about us, what about you, do you believe this?

Maybe you're unsure or maybe you're not even ready to say that you believe it, and so, I wonder whether you should consider signing up for Alpha. We have an Alpha Course starting in just a couple of weeks' time and Alpha is a great way of either refreshing your knowledge of the Christian faith, if you've maybe been coming to church for a long time, it's a great way to be refreshed in the fundamentals of the Christian faith, or, if you're not a Christian at all, to explore the Christian faith, to ask difficult questions, the team are ready for them, they might not have the answers but they're ready for them. Come along, sign up to Alpha, explore and seek Jesus, make a move towards Him and He will make a move towards you, and details are in the news sheet of how you can sign up for that.

But what about those of us who are sure of this? We say we believe this or we're at least a little more sure of this we might say? I wonder, do we believe this enough to share it this Easter, or will we let fear divert us? Earlier in the passage we read that little middle portion between verses 8 to 16 where Jesus talks about light and darkness and about stumbling and not stumbling and it seems quite an odd little bit, but Jesus is responding to the disciples' fear. They're scared that what's going to happen. People are already trying to stone Jesus. 'If we do this Jesus. are they going to stone you? Are they going to stone us?' And so, they get fearful and they're going to be diverted from what Jesus says. They should do but Jesus will not let them divert Him. He warns them against overestimating the danger because He is with them, the light of the world

is with them, and so He will not let them stumble, He will guard them and so they must obey the Father, they must go to Lazarus so that God will be glorified, and faith might be strengthened,

So, what about us, friends? Will we allow fear to divert us this Easter time? Or will we put our belief into practice? Will we share the good news, knowing who it is that stands with us, as we make that invitation? Knowing who it is that's in us by His Spirit? We have the light of the world, the God of all life, with us. And so, maybe take the Easter cards, this is last year's one, take the Easter cards that were sent to you and hand them out, they were posted to every member this past week, you got one for yourself you got one to give away. Give it away. Invite someone along. Or the Easter Fun Day and if you've misplaced it or given it away already, there's more at the front and rear door. Take one away, invite someone along, come with them so as to encourage them there and build that relationship and share something of the good news of Easter this year. Or if you're on social media, don't just like the church posts, share the church posts because that's how it gets out towards your friends and your contacts on social media. Help us get the word out that there's something good to believe in our God who's come into this world to stand with us in our sorrow and to defeat death on our behalf.

So, do you believe this? Maybe you need to investigate it a bit more. Maybe you need to share it a bit more. But, may we all see in the passion, this God who stands with us, this God who defeated death for us, this God who bids us come, trust Him afresh. I pray it may be so. Amen.