

What we need when the Lord delays

How are you feeling? It's a crazy time isn't it!

I'm sure that there are a whole range of emotions that we are all feeling. Not only from person to person but within ourselves as well.

We've just read John 11. And I think it's a great passage to read in the swirling emotions of a time like this. You might have noticed how the passage progresses through a series of conversations that different people have with Jesus.

Perhaps you are confused like the disciples.

Maybe you are a mix of indignant and hopeful like Martha.

You could even feel like Mary, completely overwhelmed.

Like us in our present moment, all these people are wrestling with the question of why did the Lord delay. We have been praying haven't we over the last few weeks for God to stop the spread of this virus. We really believe he can. But still the graph of cases climbs upwards. Where is the Lord? Why hasn't he come?

But that's not the only question that is raised in this passage. And it doesn't seem like the question Jesus is most interested. For apart from *why?* the big question is *what do we really need to get through this?* What do need to go on when the world is in turmoil around us, and our hearts are uneasy within us?

Now all week I've been receiving emails from every company I've ever interacted with telling me about how they are responding to the Coronavirus. And interestingly, a lot of them have answers to what I really need at this time! The cooking website I subscribe to tells me that cooking is the best way to make it through. UberEats and Deliveroo will deliver me food: that's what I need. Even a stationery company I ordered from once has emailed me to tell me that a new journal will get me through.

But we need more than that don't we? Sure, they will give me some distraction, but they're not going to fix the problem are they? But at the same time, dispassionate information about how to "flatten the curve" is not going to help with the anxiety I feel for the vulnerable people I know. Or with my worry about being disconnected about from community. Or the stress over my job or financial situation.

We don't just need understanding and a shoulder to cry on. And we don't just need someone to ride in and save the day. We need someone to both enter into our pain **and** deal with its source. We need someone to stand with us in our sorrow, but also one who can **defeat** our sorrow.

We need both. We need someone who cares and one who overcomes. We need comfort *and* a conqueror. And as we see in John 11, we find both in Jesus.

Comfort

First consider the care and comfort of Jesus that we see in this chapter. The scene is heart-breaking isn't it? A family and community grieving the death of a brother, and a friend. Jesus arrives and it is raw. The sisters are mourning. The crowds are mourning, and...the *Son of God* is mourning. Jesus is deeply moved. He weeps. He enters into the fullness of grief, overcome by the impact of death on all those who are present.

Whatever else we might say about our suffering, we simply cannot say "God shrugs." For Jesus sees the havoc that death produces among us and he weeps. He sees our helplessness and our lack of control and he weeps. He sees our fears and our anxieties and he weeps. Jesus sees the empty shelves and he weeps.

And so he doesn't arrive on the scene with cold indifference, or a condescending pat on the back. He doesn't come with tips to distract ourselves. **No**, he comes to comfort us in our griefs with his *own* tears, his own deeply moved spirit, his own trouble at the reality of our own mortality. Jesus hates death, and he hates the fear that it produces us in our lives. That's because he loves *us*. That's what the crowd recognises isn't it: "see how he *loved* him."

And he loves us, too. Of this we can be certain. We read in John 15:13 those famous words: *Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*. We are just as much close friends of Jesus as Mary Martha and Lazarus. And Jesus is with us in this trial. He may not be keeping to our schedule, but he knows the fear of death. He even knows death itself. He is not indifferent to our suffering or distant from them. He draws near and he comforts us.

Conquerer

But of course, comfort can only take you so far. We don't just need someone who is sad about our suffering. We need someone who can **do something** about it. And at this point I'm not just talking about someone who can find a cure to a virus.

I'm talking about the reality of death that the virus has brought home to our society that normally is able to keep it at arm's length. And I'm talking about the anxiety and fear that it brings into our lives. And I'm talking about the selfishness that rises up in us, that leads us to look after ourselves at the expense of others.

I heard our Prime-Minister say the other day that hoarding and stockpiling is "ridiculous" and "un-Australian"...but it turns out that it is very Australian! It's very *human*. The supermarket shelves are not empty because a dozen or so wicked people have bought everything. It's because all of us are buying that little bit more than we need. I spoke to a friend the other day who just went to the shops to get some biscuits and he almost came away with a bulk bag of rice. Not because he needed rice, but there were only *three left*. And even if we haven't gone on a stockpiling spree, can we honestly say that we haven't judged those who have? That our selfishness hasn't come out as a blaming self-righteousness?

We need a saviour from sickness, and from sin. We need someone to conquer the enemy out there and the enemy in here too. And wonderfully, Jesus this is who Jesus claims to be.

For as Jesus is confronted by Martha in her desperate grief, he declares: "*I AM the resurrection and the life.*" And he continues:

*The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;
and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.*

Did you notice the strange repetition of in those two verses?

On the one hand, Jesus says, those who believe in him will be raised to new life even after they die.

On the other hand, those who believe in him have *life now* that can never be taken away from them.

Jesus says, in effect, "I am the answer to the the problem of physical death." But he also says, "I am the answer to your spiritual death too."

Do not fear the future, because I am the resurrection.

Do not live out of your fear now, because I am the life.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the key that unlocks the grave. He is the death of death. All who trust in Jesus, even if they go to their graves, they will be raised again to everlasting life. And all who trust in Jesus have his life at work in them now, so that in a world under the shadow of death they may not give into fear, but live with faith, hope, and love.

Jesus proclaims Himself to be *the Answer to the* problem of the world. The claim would be ridiculous, if it weren't backed up by the miracle.

And so Jesus stands at the tomb of Lazarus and he roars in the face of death. "*Lazarus! Come out!*" And he does. And in only a matter of weeks he walks out of his own tomb. And the world has never been the same.

We read in 1 Corinthians 15

*“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. **But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Christ is our conqueror, and he conquers for us!

Christ

The sociologist Charles Taylor has written a lot about the nature of Secularism and its rise in the West. And one of the things he talks about is that people’s lives today are governed by an *immanent frame*. This camera shot is a perfect example actually: he says that in the past and still in other parts of the world the whole of life was shot through with the transcendent, constant reminders of spiritual realities and of their own mortality.

But in the West, our whole lives are bound up in the physical things right before us. Our vision is consumed with what is right in front of us. We don’t often look up, or down, or around at the transcendent realities of our everyday lives.

But, he says, there are moments where the transcendent breaks in and we are confronted by reality so much bigger than ourselves. There are positive examples of these *cross-pressures* as he calls them: the birth of a child for example is so much more than a physical process. There’s this profound *spirituality* about moments like that. That’s new life!

And isn't the coronavirus proving to be a *cross-pressure*? Hasn't it brought home to us transcendent realities far beyond our control. Now, I have heard some dismissing the crisis as the work of Mother Nature or others have even minimised the death toll as it is mostly the elderly who have been suffered so seriously. But for most of the world, as the reality of death confronts us, the instinctive and *totally right* reaction is that death sucks, it's an enemy. It's so much more than simply "nature taking its course." And we have to reckon with our own weakness in the face of it, and how so many of the things we normally depend on are totally useless in the face of it. And it's overwhelming!

No doubt Mary and Martha felt something similar. Perhaps they thought that their friendship with Jesus would see their brother spared from death. And they both cry out in desperation to Jesus: "*Lord! if you had been here, my brother would not have died!*" But Jesus delayed and they felt the cross-pressure of their brother's loss for days.

And shockingly, Jesus himself exposed these two sisters to this pain. He could have healed Lazarus with a word, and not travelled a step. And it's here that we must return again to the question of *why*. Although in fact, maybe the why question and the what question are not so different after all. For it's here that the *why* and the *what* question converge.

Question: Why does Jesus delay?

Answer: To show us that what we really need is him.

In many ways, the climax of the passage is *not* Lazarus walking out of the tomb! The text even teaches that: Lazarus is raised and we don't hear anything more about him! We just move on!

The climax is what Jesus says about himself!

(CONFRONTING CHRISTIANITY PLUG)

As Martha stands before Jesus with all her pain for what is past and her fears for her future, she longs to have her brother back:

But Jesus looks her in the eye and says, "I am the resurrection and the life." As you stand here is your desperate grief, your greatest need is not to have your brother back again. It's to have me.

*And this statement is yet more shocking than Jesus' failure to come back in the first place. Far from being the "the good moral teacher who never claimed to be God" of modern mythology, Jesus here claims not that he is offering good guidelines for life but that he himself **is** life: life in the face of suffering, life in the face of death.*

Jesus doesn't offer platitudes, nor does he offer us the simple power to live a life free of pain. He offers *himself*. And it's in him that we find life. And that's not a metaphor. He literally offers himself for us on the cross. He dies so that we might live. That's why we kept reading after Lazarus was raised. As Caiaphas unwittingly prophesies in verse 51:

Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

This is the blessing of the cross-pressure. It leads us to Christ and his cross. That like Martha, we would trust in *him* and so receive life in his name.

What kindness that Jesus would reveal himself in this way to this family? That's what we read all the way back in verse 5: *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*

It turns out the Lord's delay is a demonstration of his love! That Martha, and Mary, and his disciples, and all the watching crowds might *believe in him*. For that, Jesus says, is what we need more than anything else.

So, brothers and sisters, what do we need in this present moment?

We need Christ.

In our grief we need his tender comfort. That he is with us, weeping for us.

In our anxiety we need to know his conquering power. That we has gone before us through death into life.

We really can trust him with everything we have. And he really gives us the strength to live a transformed life *now* whatever trials we may face. We need the crucified and risen Jesus. Strong and Kind. The comforting conquerer.

*Jesus said to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. **Do you believe this?"***