

“If You Had Been Here ...”

In the name of him who is the Resurrection and the life, dear friends in Christ: A dark cloud of sadness overshadows the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Their brother Lazarus has died. What are they feeling? Unspeakable sorrow. Deep hurt. Bitter disappointment. A sense of having been betrayed. Resentment. And yes, anger. And together they provoke the accusation against Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.” We hear it from the ever practical Martha, whom I suspect to be more angry than anything else. We hear it from the more sensitive and spiritually attuned Mary, who is perhaps not as angry as she is crushed in heart and soul. And we hear it from some of the confused mourners, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

They are all thinking pretty much the same thing when our Lord arrives in Bethany. “Oh, Jesus, *now* you show up. We’re glad to see you, as always; but *where were you when we needed you?* We sent for you. Our appeal was *urgent*. We thought you’d come at once. But you didn’t. We waited with such expectation ... and now it’s too late. *How could you do this to us? How could you have allowed this to happen? Why did you let us down?* Is it that you don’t *care?* Is that it? Or what? Is it because you were afraid for *yourself* – that your enemies might get another chance at you?” Oh yes, there’s much confusion and frustration here.

So also, from perspective of the disciples who are with Jesus. They’d all been keeping a low profile during the winter months. Back in December when Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem, he got in this big argument with the Pharisees and religious leaders. In the course of the discussion Jesus claimed to be God. His enemies were so angry that they picked up stones to throw at him in order to execute him on the spot. Somehow, the disciples don’t understand exactly how, Jesus simply walked away from them. He left the city, and since then they’ve been staying down by the Jordan River near where John the Baptizer had done his ministry. More recently, around the middle of March, word came that Lazarus was sick. Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about it. “This sickness is not unto death”, he said. Then a couple of days later, Jesus says it’s time to go wake up Lazarus, he’s fallen asleep. They think, okay, if he’s sleeping it’s because his fever has broken. He’s recovering. He’ll be fine. Then Jesus says, no, you don’t understand. He’s dead. But wait, you said his sickness wasn’t going to be fatal. Did you get this one wrong, Jesus? Did you make a mistake? Or did you lie to us? Either way, it doesn’t make a lot of difference. All your enemies are back there. Remember? They tried to stone you a couple of months ago. So, Jesus, what are you thinking? Lazarus is dead! Nothing you can do for him now. Are you going to risk your life – and ours – just to attend a funeral? Jesus, you’re in charge of course; but you’re not making any sense.

And that’s the problem, isn’t it? Everybody in this account is playing armchair quarterback. They are sad, angry, and confused because they think they know what’s going on. They think they know what Jesus ought to do about it at each and every step. And now they think they know the limits of his power. But they are wrong on every score. The truth is that Jesus is the only one who does know what’s going on. He knows exactly what he’s going to do. And he has no doubt about his unlimited power to fix things. He’s entirely in control of the whole situation. And if people simply trusted him, they’d be fine: no sadness, upset, or worry. But they don’t; and that’s why they are in such turmoil.

To be sure, they do have some faith in Jesus. That’s why Martha and Mary sent word asking him to come. Certainly, the disciples have some faith in Jesus. They’ve been with him

for three years and on occasions too numerous to name have seen him do remarkable things. They call him “Lord” and rightly so; but amazingly they still think they know better than he does what he ought to be doing. They trust their own judgment more than his, which means they really have more faith in themselves than in Jesus. So, what we’re looking at here is a case of self-idolatry: more faith in themselves than in Jesus.

That’s why when Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus has died he adds, “and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, *so that you may believe.*” Yes, all this sadness, confusion, and hostility could have been avoided. Jesus could have gone at once and healed Lazarus. Or he could have simply spoken a word from where he was; he didn’t need to be physically present to cure anyone. But then what? Everyone’s faith would be exactly where it was: a weak faith. An immature faith. A faith really more in me and my judgment rather than in Jesus and his.

The goal of Jesus is to increase the faith of his followers so that they trust him despite any outward circumstances, no matter what they see, experience, or suffer. *Whatever* happens, “No problem here. Jesus has got this. He’ll make it right in the end. We can trust him.” They *confess* that. They say it with their mouths. Martha tells Jesus, “Even now I know that *whatever* you ask of God, God will give you.” It sounds so good. But when Jesus orders the stone taken away from the tomb, her lack of faith is revealed. “What? Are you crazy? He stinks by now.”

No, what stinks is her faith in Jesus. What stinks is *our* faith in Jesus. Because we’ve all been there. We’ve all done this. And when the next tragedy or upset comes along, we’ll do it again. We’ll act like this one got away from the Lord. Where was he when we needed him? Where is God in all of this? Oh, I prayed, Lord; and how I prayed. And if you had been here, if you had answered my prayer, why, all this could have been avoided.

To which the Lord responds, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age. I heard your prayer. And I said, “No” so that you may believe. So that through this trial or loss your faith will grow. So that you will learn to trust in me and not in yourself. So that you will know for certain that I am the resurrection and the life. So that you will know how much I love you.”

Martha, Mary, and the disciples did find out how much Jesus loves them, not so much in the raising of Lazarus from the dead, but in its aftermath. For it was the resurrection of Lazarus more than anything that hardened the resolve of Jesus’ enemies to have him arrested and killed. It was the sign he performed that they feared the most. They feared that this miracle more than all the rest would cause people to trust in Jesus. And that they could not allow. And Jesus knew it. He knew very well that in going to give life to Lazarus, it was going to cost him his own.

And that’s true for all of us. The only way for Jesus to be for any of us the resurrection and the life was for him to go to the cross, to suffer for our sins, and to die. That’s where we see the Father’s love for us: in offering up his Son. That’s where we see the extent to which Jesus is willing to go to save us: where he cried out in agony and wept bitter tears – to save us from our sin, to save us from our self-idolatry, to save us from thinking that we know better than the Lord himself how things ought to be and what’s best for us, to save us from making the angry accusation, “Lord, if you had been here ...” “Hush. I was there. Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? Behold my hands and side! Stop doubting. Believe. Trust in me. And you will live in time and eternity.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!