

**March 22 2026 St Luke's 10am****John 11:1-46**

It's always the religious people you have to be careful of! They were the dangerous ones for Jesus too. He'd just escaped an angry mob in Jerusalem, who were threatening to stone him for blasphemy. So Jesus with the twelve made a tactical withdrawal to the province across the Jordan. That was familiar territory where John had once baptised some of them, including Jesus himself.

The disciples hoped for a breathing space, a calm between storms. But just a day or two after they've set up camp, a messenger arrives with the news that their old friend Lazarus from Bethany is sick there. You don't send a message like that if someone's just got a cold. The implied request is clear; Jesus will drop everything to be at his friend's bedside. Those two seem to go back a long way, possibly through a family connection. The disciples as a group are called Jesus's friends, but Lazarus is the only individual in the Bible he describes as a friend.

The message leaves them in a quandary, because Bethany is only about three kilometres from Jerusalem, where they've just fled from.-Alarmingly, a stone's throw away, you might say. You can imagine the disciples mulling it over by the campfire. 'Mary and Martha probably haven't heard the stoning threat.' 'Or maybe someone is setting a trap?' When Jesus just stays put for two days, it seemed that caution was winning. But there's a bigger reason.

Sometimes in life, we're not just solving the presenting problem; we're teaching a principle. If you've brought up children, you'll know there are times you could have come in quickly to prevent a child experiencing pain. But sometimes it's too important for that, and there's learning to be had from it.

Mary and Martha also didn't understand why Jesus hadn't come sooner. 'If only you had been here, our brother would not have died,' they said.

Maybe they were surprised by Jesus's visible emotion. God was generally thought to be dispassionate, above all human emotion, and certainly not influenced by it. But that famous verse, 'Jesus wept,' carries a shocking observation that when believers hurt, Jesus hurts. Jesus wept that day in the presence of death, even though he knew what he was about to do. They were all about to find out that sometimes God answers prayer in unexpected ways.

When Jesus heads for the Lazarus family tomb, and asks for the entrance stone to be rolled back, the people watching probably don't immediately grasp what he's doing – maybe they think he wants to go in and personally say a last goodbye to Lazarus. These vault-like caves had spaces for up to eight people to be buried, which perhaps explains why Jesus calls Lazarus out by name. There must have been polarised reactions among

the onlookers when Lazarus emerged. (Belief, disbelief, worship of Jesus, mis-directed worship of Lazarus...)

A raising from death might not have seemed so out of the question to that first generation as it would to us. The Ezekiel valley of bones vision we read this morning was more of a renewal picture meant to encourage the Israelites in exile, but they did have a couple of Old Testament examples of actual raisings from death. The onlookers in Bethany that day would remember that Elijah and Elisha had each raised the son of a widow.<sup>1</sup> And some of them would have heard that Jesus had already raised Jairus's daughter and a widow's son, in two separate incidents.<sup>2</sup> But they had all been quite recently dead, and this is where the reason for the delay comes in. The general cultural belief at the time was that when someone died, their spirit stayed near their body for three days, hoping for the chance to return to it. After three days their spirit gave up, and departed. Jesus arrived in Bethany when Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. There will be no room for doubt. Funerals were large community events lasting several days, and many people had gathered. Some would have stayed for only 3 days, but others would be at hand for the longer 7 day Shiva, the mourning period. So there were lots of witnesses who would be returning home to Jerusalem. It wouldn't take long for the powers-that-be there to hear all about it. Indeed, a bit later we find out that this incident triggers Jesus's arrest leading to his crucifixion. In more than one sense, Jesus died for Lazarus. His raising prefigures Jesus's own resurrection. But there's an important difference between the two. Lazarus enjoys an unexpected return to this life. No doubt that was a great joy to his family and friends. But one day, Lazarus would die again. Jesus on the other hand was not just restored to this life. He passed through death, defeated it, and entered a new kind of life. And it's better than that! -Jesus says we get to share his resurrection life. That's something for us to hang on to if we've reached the life-stage when our Saturday routine includes checking the newspaper for the death notices. Christians needn't react to death as one who has no hope, but grief is still normal. And every now and then, as the queue bumps along just a little faster than we would like, we might have moments of wondering what lies ahead, and how we will get there. It was Jesus's voice that brought on Lazarus's raising, and back in chapter 5, he said 'Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.' I reckon it's reasonable to practise hearing God's voice in the smaller ways. Every time we turn on the TV or walk down the mall diverse voices claim our attention; everything from self-help gurus to the recognised niche experts of this world. Our choices of what we give our efforts to, both individually, and as a church, will depend on whose

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<sup>1</sup> Widow of Zarephath's son raised by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24), and the Shunammite widow's son's raising by Elisha (2 Kings 4:32-34)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:21-43, Luke 7:11-17

voice we listen to. I'm reminded of a friend who took a shopping centre survey, the sort where you 'win' something they hope you'll buy more of. In this case, the incentive was a free consultation session with a 'life planner' who would guide you towards achieving your goals. My friend went along out of interest. He didn't know what to expect as he'd never done anything like that. He smiled afterwards at his own naivety.

The life planner simply had no response to his goals list. It included being a good father to his children, contributing in a hands-on way to a worthwhile community cause, and providing a stable home life for his family, which he was already doing...

'Don't you want to upgrade to a better neighbourhood?' the planner prompted.

'Not really. I'm happy here.'

'We can help you launch your investment portfolio!'

That didn't appeal either.

And so it went on. The planner's whole framework took for granted that every goal could be achieved by accumulating dollars. It barely considered other possibilities. -What else could there be? And he isn't interested in money. But he's more tuned in than he'd say to hearing God's voice and following it.

John's gospel reading today records Jesus's authority over death as a sign of his identity as God the Son. It's an audacious claim, then as now. From their standpoint the people who wanted to stone him were right- it would indeed be a blasphemous claim, unless it's true. Both Jesus's opponents and his followers thus far had to decide whether they believed him.

To live on the basis of the gospel being true involves tuning in to God's voice against other persuasive voices. It's an ongoing process, isn't it? - both individually, and as a church. Our spiritual regeneration begins in this life. As we find our path, may we keep growing more confident in the One we are following. Amen