

Today is Passion Sunday, when we begin to focus on all the events of Holy Week ending in Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection three days later. And so it seems appropriate that today's gospel story is also about death and resurrection and can be seen in to prefigure those stories that we will hear and in some way experience as we walk alongside Jesus in Holy Week.

The moving story of the death and raising of Lazarus is found only in John's gospel and represents a turning point in John's story of Jesus, in more than one way, as John makes some important statements about who Jesus is and what he is like.

Firstly, until now, Jesus has seemed almost aloof in his relationships with people and in the six miraculous signs that John has related so far. He has shown compassion and care, but not perhaps, deep emotion,

But in this, the seventh and final one of those signs, Jesus seems to change. It is a story that is full of powerful emotions and speaks about relationships built on love, speaking of consolation and disturbance of spirit.

Jesus' love for Lazarus and his two sisters is made abundantly clear. Even the bystanders at the tomb, remarked on this, 'See how he loved him.' Many had come to the house in Bethany, we are told, to offer consolation to Martha and Mary. Jesus was, John says, deeply moved and greatly disturbed in spirit by what he saw and when he saw Mary weeping, he wept with her.

We are reminded too, of the deep love the disciples have for Jesus. When Jesus announces his intention to return to Judea, despite knowing that he might well be walking to his death, Thomas declares fervently 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

And so they travel to Bethany. And as the dangers do gather round Jesus and the events of Holy Week unfold, we continue to see this more emotional side of Jesus, in particular with the footwashing and those most moving farewell addresses.

This is a Jesus who loves and cares for individuals, for me and for you, not just humanity in general. And so, I know that I can have a relationship with Jesus too, and that he suffered and died for the unique person that is each and every one of us.

Next, this story includes Jesus most powerful statement about himself, the fifth of the famous I AM statements, the one that in many ways forms the climax of what he reveals about himself.

Jesus has delayed his journey, in order, he says, to show the glory of God more fully, And in that time, Lazarus dies. Thus there will be no doubt in the minds of John's readers that this is indeed the raising of one that was dead. When she hears that Jesus is near, Martha runs to meet him. She was the one bustling about, you will remember,

when Jesus came to see them. 'If you'd been here, he wouldn't have died,' she reproaches him. And Jesus says. 'I AM the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?' Martha responds with her own great acclamation of faith, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who is coming into the world.'

Even before the raising of Lazarus, Martha's confidence in who Jesus is and what he can do, shows itself in a powerful statement of faith. We too, pray for the confidence and trust to make such statements of faith that will move and inspire those around us.

And so we come to the raising of Lazarus itself. Mary too, went to find Jesus and when she did, she knelt at his feet and wept. 'If you'd been here, he would not have died,' she lamented, using the same words her sister had used. And Jesus was greatly disturbed and wept with her. Then finally they came to the tomb. Jesus commanded them to move the stone and called Lazarus out.

This sign inspired Mary, not to proclamation like her sister, but to action, when shortly afterwards, she demonstrated her love for Jesus by publicly anointing his feet with costly ointment. Like Mary, we are called to show our response to Jesus love for us, in actions that may be costly, in the way we see Jesus in other people and treat those around us.

But perhaps the biggest and most transformative turning point in this story, is, of course, or Lazarus. Jesus calls him from the sleep of death, back to life. Lazarus answers the call and emerges from the darkness of the tomb, to life and light. One imagines he would stagger a bit, constrained and blinded as he was by the cloths that bound him. But Jesus tells the people to untie the cloths and free him. And Lazarus is raised to life.

As we walk with Jesus this Holy Week, let us remember that he calls us too. Like Martha, we are called to tell others what we believe and like Mary we are called to show that belief in what we do. And like Lazars, we are thus called from darkness into light and from death to new life. Amen

