

Processing Death

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[0 : 00] Well folks, great to see you this morning and happy Easter. It's lovely to have you with us. Great to have those who are joining us online with us as well. Let me invite you to grab a Bible and come back with me to John chapter 11 and to one of the most magnificent chapters in the Bible.

As you're turning there, let me tell you about one of the most famous Americans in all of history. You might have heard of him. A man by the name of Benjamin Franklin. A man famous for a number of things. I guess famous for being one of the founding fathers of the United States. He's one of the team that did the Declaration of Independence. Huge moment. Birth of a nation.

Famous for his work as a pioneer and as an inventor. Famous for being the face that's on a \$100 bill. If you're ever privileged enough to have one of them in your possession, that's the face that you'll see.

Also famous for an observation that he once made about life. Put it on the screen. This is what he said about life. He said, there are only two certainties in life. Death and taxes.

[1 : 13] Right? A cheery note to strike. I think you'll agree on this Easter Sunday, but bear with me. Only two certainties in life. Death and taxes. Let me ask you, how does his observation strike you?

Tell you what, let's put his comments on taxes to the side for just a moment. Okay, we'll leave that with Rishi Sunak and Kate Forbes. And you can have your say on that as you go to the polls in Sixth of Me. Agreed?

To the side, the taxes. What do you make about his comments on death? Heard it described recently as the taboo subject of our day.

Okay, generation previous, no one wants to talk about sex. Everyone wants to talk about death. Our generation, no one wants to talk about death. Everyone wants to talk about sex.

Isn't it interesting? The taboo subject of our day. What is it that we've been hit with in these daily coronavirus briefings every day? What have we been hit with? Numbers.

[2 : 12] Numbers. Numbers. This is the amount of positive cases. This is the amount of positive cases that have led to people being in hospital. This is the amount of people who have died. And fair play to her, Nicola Sturgeon.

She reads out those numbers every day. She says that she does it because she wants to honour the fact that these are real people with real friends and with real family who are all shedding real tears.

And let me ask you, as you maybe watch this today or maybe as you're here, how have you processed all of this stuff? Maybe some of you read, I don't know if you're a Guardian reader, I'm not sure.

John Harris, last week in The Guardian, who himself, a self-confessed atheist, who ticked the no religion box in the recent census. He said this, Like millions of other faithless people, I have not even the flimsiest of narratives to project onto what has happened, nor any real vocabulary with which to talk about the profundities of life and death.

Now, do you hear what he's saying? And do you feel maybe what he's saying? What is he saying? He's saying that he doesn't have a story. What is his phrase? He calls it the flimsiest of narratives.

[3 : 33] He doesn't have a framework for understanding this. He has no way of understanding the world that can make sense of life and death, let alone hold the enormous weight of it.

So let me ask you on this Easter Sunday, do you have a story? Do you have a story? Come with me to John 11 and let Jesus give us a story.

And not just our story, the story. Okay, so we pick up the narrative, if you have it there, at verse 1. And we learn that one of Jesus' friends is badly sick, this man called Lazarus.

And Lazarus has two sisters called Mary and Martha. And this family lived together in this little place just outside of Jerusalem called Bethany. And this is a family, as you read the Gospels through, that is full of individuals who are clearly close to Jesus' heart.

He loves this family. He loves these people. Now, let me just pause there for a minute because we so often just pass over that observation. Isn't it striking that the Son of God, isn't it striking that God in the flesh gave himself to people?

[4 : 50] You know, he's not strutting around like Lord Grantham from Downton Abbey, is he? He's kind of seated in his high horse and carriage. Although Lord Grantham did this, but you know what I mean. He's looking down on the poor people saying, can you just keep the riffraff away from me?

That's not Jesus. Sharing his heart with people. Loves people. Love that about Jesus. But one day, while he and his disciples are somewhere else, news reaches Jesus of Lazarus' predicament back in Bethany.

Did you see that in the text? And it's not looking good. But incredibly, Jesus, when he hears the news, he doesn't drop everything and run.

Does he? Verse 5, he's staying put with his disciples, and he's staying put two more days. Now, does that not strike you?

At verse 5, does it not strike you as being a bit odd? We would expect Jesus to drop everything and go, would we not? But according to him, the reason, the reason is that his glory might be displayed.

[6 : 00] The reason is, according to Jesus, that his disciples and those watching might look at this episode and learn something utterly life-transforming about who this man is.

two days he's staying, another 48 hours pass. And by this time, by the time that Jesus and his disciples eventually get to Bethany, four days have come and gone.

Now, you know what it's like when you're in one of those heartbreaking moments. How long do the days feel? How long does every hour feel? Four days.

Four days, Lazarus is dead and Jesus knows this. He knows this. Verse 14, he knows Lazarus is dead. And when Jesus and his disciples eventually get to Bethany, they encounter a sorrowful scene.

What do they see? People are weeping. People have come from Jerusalem to Bethany to console this family, mourning the loss of Lazarus. And Jesus encounters two sisters who are utterly shell-shocked as they come to terms with the painful reality that their brother is dead.

[7 : 16] And both sisters, you see it, when they eventually meet Jesus, they both say exactly the same thing. This was clearly what was going on back in the house, what they're discussing.

Do you see it? Martha says it at verse 21 and Mary says exactly the same thing at verse 32. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Now enter into the pain of their question. What are they asking? Where were you, Jesus? What is going on?

Who are you, Jesus? Have we got it right? Do you really love us? Where are you, Jesus? Maybe that's a question that's in your mind today. Maybe as you're here, maybe as you're watching this. Who is this Jesus? You know, it might be Easter Sunday, but let's not pretend, given the last season of life that we've been through that has been so hard for so many of us in so many different ways, let us not pretend that we've come in here this morning, all of us, dancing in like Easter bunnies.

[8 : 25] life's been so hard. And if you're sitting there this morning, you're watching this, you're feeling the weight of that. Let me just say, that is why all of us need to take a deep breath of Jesus and inhale what is going on in the text here and allow our souls to be strengthened by the victorious Christ.

Not about who we are, all about who he is. Let me just give you, in the 10 minutes that we have remaining, five words from John 11.

Five words, it's a two and a three. It's a bit of maths for you this morning as well. Five words that help us understand who Jesus is from this text. Okay, come and see, first of all, two words that reveal his heart.

Verse 35, if you've got it there, for the eggheads in the room watching, here is the shortest verse in the Bible. Okay, you can play that one whenever you want in conversation. Shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, and yet, make no mistake, it is one of the most profound.

In response to seeing the utter devastation which Lazarus' death has brought to those he loves, here are our two words and get these, Jesus wept.

[9 : 50] Jesus wept. Is that not incredible? When you think about it, is that not incredible? God cried. Now, why is he crying? That's the question. Why is he crying?

Is it because he is deeply moved by what he saw? Absolutely. Does Jesus know the sorrows and the pains of his people?

Definitely. But let me just say, if the only reason that Jesus cried was because he was missing his friend, then he knows he's only got five more minutes to go, I imagine, and then he's reunited with his friend Lazarus.

And if that was the case, if that was the only reason he was crying, does that not strike you as a bit of a case of crocodile tears from Jesus? Got to see that there's more going on here. More going on. You see, as Jesus watched death get its teeth into, another person, death, yield, its power, the death that's in the world because of our sin, our rebellion against our creator, causing chaos in people's lives.

[11 : 00] Jesus looks on death and he is incensed. These are tears of anger and outrage that this is not how it's supposed to be.

Now let me just pause at that moment and just ask you, are you not grateful that Jesus is like that? That he's not stone cold at this moment?

Okay, he's not some kind of James Bond type figure from above who's got orders from M not to get too emotionally involved in the situation because emotion is a weakness better to be detached from the situation.

Jesus isn't like that. Friends, would you want to worship him if he was? If the truth was that God didn't give two hoots about the pain in this world?

Jesus wept. Jesus wept. His tears are proof of the truth that this is not the way that it is supposed to be.

[12 : 08] And I guess the problem for us today is that we have got so used to it being the truth pretending that it is.

You know there are many stereotypes of British people. One of them is that they're really, really good at the stiff upper lip. You heard that phrase before? The stiff upper lip. Some of you may be of a generation the 80s you might remember the singing sensation jewel Chaz and Dave.

Right? What did they have? What was their song? The lyrics to it? Mustn't grumble mustn't grumble. Yeah? Not looking at anyone in the room here at all. Mustn't grumble. Mustn't grumble. It's about their song, right?

Another fact only if you want quoted by Wallace from Wallace and Gromit and Gromit another British sensation who, what was his famous line? All's well that ends well that's what I say. That was Wallace wasn't it?

From Wallace and Gromit. It's what we Brits do. We're good at this. We just pretend it's okay and we just get on with it. And yet here is Jesus giving us permission to know that it's not.

[13 : 16] What we instinctively know to be true at every funeral we attend, what we instinctively know to be the case when we watch people that we love go through the most horrendous moments of suffering and it's what we know to be true as we try and process every tragedy that we've been through that this isn't right.

It's almost like you know when you're in the car and a little warning light comes on your dashboard just there as if they say the car trying to tell you is how I think of it the car trying to tell you something's not right here something's not right.

It's like that in our consciences isn't it? And the thing is at this point the car conscience lines up with the Bible. This is not right. Death according to the Bible is an unwelcome intruder in God's good creation.

It is what Paul would describe as the great and last enemy. And Jesus' tears tell us that Jesus has in his heart to do something about it.

And so from two words that reveal his heart let me just give you three words that show his power. Verse 43 So Jesus in a spirit of defiance he calls for the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb to be rolled away.

[14 : 36] and I love Martha's instinctive response at this point particularly as you read it in some of the older translations of the English Bible the good old KGV reports Martha saying Jesus surely by

this time he stinketh.

And she's right isn't it? But four days have gone past this body will be decomposing. And you have to say this is a hugely strange request from Jesus as it not roll the stone away but it's more than a strange request.

Surely it's an insensitive one. And we talk about things that you do not say at a funeral. This line has got to be right at the top has it not?

Imagine calling for proceedings to be stopped. How about we pop the coffin lid and we'll see if it is actually the case and if we can do something about it. We do not say that.

And yet Jesus is deadly serious. Friends none of us would want a God who didn't care. Can I suggest isn't it wonderful news that Jesus is also one who can do something about it?

[15:52] You know what would be the case if he couldn't? You know as if he was some kind of lucky mascot. Do you remember those days when you used to take stuff into your exams thinking that would help you? What use was that looking back at it?

Very much in keeping with how it started at the beginning of the Bible story. In Genesis 1 the one through whom all things were made here he is speaking once again into the darkness into the chaos into the abyss and life comes.

Here's the three words. Ready for them? Really simply Lazarus come out. And the man who after four days was verifiably dead and I take it that's the reason Jesus waited those four days to help the people understand that this wasn't a case of Lazarus needing resuscitation.

This was a case of Lazarus needing resurrection. Lazarus his hands and feet you see in the text still bound with cloths because this is an eyewitness account hobbles out.

And so here is the top story in the Bethany news at six. Lazarus lives. He lives. Death has given way to life.

[17:17] The man who was dead is walking and he's talking. And this is why people if you read on the Jews want to kill him because of his witness that people are coming to know Jesus for themselves.

And I love the point in the story where he finds out that the Jews are after him to kill him. Can you imagine that one? They're going to what? They're going to kill me? Because I know somebody who's got the power to bring me back to life.

But you've got to see in the context of John's gospel what was wonderfully foreshadowed here in this incident with Lazarus is Jesus' own resurrection.

This is what's coming. Jesus himself verifiably dead crucified on the cross hands nailed side pierced.

We have to understand in terms of history that Roman soldiers didn't miss they didn't miss but we've got to understand in terms of theology that neither did God's wrath.

[18:21] As Jesus took our sin on himself the very sin that brought death into the world in the first place and meant that we were deserving rightly of eternal death and separation from God Jesus took the full weight of that and we just cannot comprehend that.

he took the full weight of that on himself and three days later he verifiably rises bodily and physically not a mere hallucinatory experience here from those who saw it.

The risen Jesus was seen touched talked to and ate with multiple people on multiple occasions over a lengthy period of time 40 days. In other words there are witnesses to back this up and where we stand 2000 years later we have thus written down in our language and we can trace it all the way back to the original witnesses.

In other words Christianity rests on a bedrock of evidence as God sends a message to the world publicly that my son has done it.

He's done it. My king who I've installed Psalm 2 this is where it connects Psalm 2 the king who's seated I have seated on his holy hill I've done it because he has completed the mission for which he came to save his people from their sin those who would look to him in faith could have their sins forgiven and could be right with God.

[19:54] And this same Jesus the king will one day return in the same way that he came to put all wrongs to right to judge the living and the dead according to how they have responded to him.

He will put all wrongs to right friends understand that no more pain no more tears no more sickness no more caught deaths no more workers exploitation no more slavery no more abuse no more sin banished distant memory because the king has dealt with it.

So Aslan said of himself wasn't it? Because of his work death itself was beginning to work backwards. The old tale that's going around Narnia about Aslan wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight at the sound of his roar sorrows will be no more when he bares his teeth winter meets its death and when he shakes his mane we will have spring again.

Jesus Christ our only hope in life and death. There is no bigger news there is no greater news than Jesus Christ crucified and Jesus Christ risen.

And friends today let it strengthen our souls and may it just kindle our affection for Jesus once again and maybe if you've wandered maybe you're watching us you don't know him would today be the day when you come to love him and know him and trust him as your saviour.

[21 : 33] You know let me ask you just as we close do you have a story? Do you have a story?

Well on this Easter Sunday let Jesus give us all a story not just a story but the story and in the words of C.S. Lewis I realise I've quoted him three times there in a minute but go with me okay you guys got things to say come and believe the myth that's true.

Benjamin Franklin said there are only two certainties in life death and taxes Jesus thunders 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.

Here is Christ risen from the grave let's pray together. And let me just read these words from John chapter 20 and let's make this our prayer.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book but these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God and that through believing you might have life in his name.

And so Father our prayer today is that you would lift our souls to the glorious Christ. Father thank you that you love us and thank you that our King lives and so we make our prayers in his wonderful name.

[23 : 18] Amen. Father Father Father Father Father Father Father See you through and Father God And so we placed in water for a to save