

2 April 2017

Some thoughts on prayers of intercession

John 11.1-45

Sometimes difficult to know what we should pray for ... how we should pray ...

Some hints and pointers from this story.

This is a healing with a difference ... partly because this is not strictly a healing but a raising of the dead ... but also because this is Jesus helping friends.

v5 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.'

This is a miracle within Jesus' circle of friendship ...

So what goes on here might just give us a clue as to how we relate to Jesus within the church – the friendship circle of Jesus ...

1. Mary and Martha simply sent news to Jesus that Lazarus was sick and left the rest to Jesus ...

v.3 'Lord the one you love is sick.'

They make no specific requests of Jesus ...

They simply trust that Jesus will respond in an appropriate way ...

2. When Jesus appears not to respond ...

Jesus hears the news, but stays where he is (on the other side of the Jordan) for two more days ...

Often prayer is about struggling with the apparent absence of God ...

If you read this story in the wrong way, it can read as if Jesus deliberately delays his journey to Bethany so that he can perform an even greater miracle ... but this just seems somewhat cruel to put his friends through the pain of such tragedy just so that he can show off his power.

But if you look at the story and the timeline just a bit more carefully, I think that the only conclusion that can be reached is that Lazarus has probably already died by the time Jesus hears the news.

He delays 2 days setting off. He is probably 1 day's journey away. By the time he gets there Lazarus has been dead 4 days. That almost certainly means that by the time the messengers had got to him – 1 day away – Lazarus had already died.

We are confronted as often with the mystery of God's ways ...

Jesus expresses that mystery with the phrase – 'it is for God's glory'

...

... what we learn in part through the death and raising of Lazarus, but so much more fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus himself ... is that God can use all for his glory in the world ...

... suffering and tragedy, as well as triumph and healing.

3. It's OK to lament when confronted with tragedy

Both Martha and Mary begin their conversation with Jesus with what feels like a complaint or a moan – ‘If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.’

Life with Jesus does not give us any easy answers to life ... if anything it makes life so much more complicated.

We learn from Jesus that God is able to make life open-ended ... full of possibilities ...

We don't live in a closed world where everything is determined by fate.

Nor do we live in a world where nature will always take its course.

But that just makes life so much more complicated ... it's fine when the miracle occurs and things turn out well ... but what about when tragedy strikes?

And neither Martha nor Mary are criticized.

Their lament is a sign of their faith ...

4. Faith is all about faith in who Jesus is and not in what Jesus does

Jesus asks Martha a direct question about her faith –

v25 ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

Martha's reply, I think is quite profound. She cannot answer a simple yes or no, but she has come to know and trust who Jesus is ... and that is enough for her

“I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

Faith in prayer is not about having a firm belief in what God can and will do ... it is about an expression of our faith in the kind of God that he is ... the God that we discover him to be in Jesus ...

“I *am* the resurrection and the life.”

It is not so much about what Jesus offers as it is about who Jesus is ...

5. We trust Jesus because he shares the pain of our tragedy
v35 Jesus wept.

What we learn from Jesus is that the hope of resurrection and new life is only granted through the suffering of the pain of this world.

This story becomes a foretaste of what is to come ...

Any transformation that Jesus brings is borne out of his suffering our pain and loss.

6. We can entrust the very worst to God in the faith that with Jesus death does not have the last word.

v4 ‘This sickness will not end in death.’ Death will not have the last word on Lazarus’ life.

Now Lazarus was raised ... but he would die eventually ...