

Sermon for 22nd March 2026, Year A, Lent 5

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

John 11:1-45

Sermon

Some years ago, I was leading a Lent course about different forms of prayer, and having discussed the various kinds of contemplative and intercessory prayer, we eventually began to think about unanswered prayers, reflecting on why some prayers may be answered while others are not. The line from the Lord's Prayer we were given to go along with this is "Your will be done", echoing not only the prayer that Jesus taught us, but also Jesus's own unanswered prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he cried out to God saying "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me," before continuing "yet, not my will but yours be done."

This prayer, like many of our own, was not answered. Jesus *did* have to endure the Cross, even though he desperately wanted to avoid it, like any sane person. But in praying this prayer he showed us one way to understand prayers which are not answered – it simply was not God's will. And we often can't even know why.

All of us have experienced the trauma of unanswered prayer and all of us have prayed for someone to be healed and then felt the anguish when they were not. Five years ago, an old university friend of mine called Richard died after a long and painful experience of bowel cancer. Being a computer geek, he posted the entire journey online, and we followed him through the initial surgeries and chemotherapy, praying that his blood count would be sufficient to allow each chemo dose, praying for an all clear from the oncologist.

The all-clear did not come. There was another tumour, this time inoperable. Another type of chemo was suggested, we prayed for that to be successful. It was not. The tumour caused so much pain even morphine couldn't touch it. Eventually there was surgery just to sever the nerves that transmitted the pain – there was nothing else they could do. Finally, his last days were spent in a hospice in the autumn of 2021, unable to swallow or quench his thirst. We prayed for a peaceful end. That prayer, at least, was answered.

Those of us who bore witness to Richard's journey all struggled to figure out how to respond to this suffering of a good man whom we respected, admired, and loved. And I'm sure we were all thinking of our own mortality: "There but for the grace of God go I," and "Why him?"

I think I can probably say bluntly that all of us here have been through the experience of losing someone we loved, whether friend, parent, sibling, partner, spouse or even child. Some of us are experiencing it right now as we sit here today. It rarely feels just and right when a human life ends. What do we want to say to God when our fervent and desperate prayers go unanswered? What does it do to our faith?

Into the middle of all this comes the long and prominent gospel story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, a story which begins with Jesus delaying visiting his friend when he was sick, in order that he might perform an even greater miracle after he had died. If I'm honest, this feels rather cold – Mary & Martha's prayers go unanswered and they must lose all hope and go through the trauma of their brother's untimely death, just so Jesus can tell them, "I am the Resurrection and the Life!" and demonstrate divine power over death.

Fortunately, Mary and Martha don't let Jesus get away with that unchallenged. God the Son is forced to confront the entirely human grief in Mary's blunt cry of loss. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In response to her weeping, the Son of God is silenced, deeply moved, and himself

brought to tears. I find I don't much care about the miracle. But thank God that Jesus weeps.

In the old King James bible, that got a verse all to itself – the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35 – “Jesus wept.”

For centuries, Christian theology was influenced by Greek ideas that a perfect God cannot be emotionally troubled or moved by anything, as this would be a sign of imperfection. All all-powerful, unchanging God cannot be subject to the vagaries of emotion, so the pure logic of the philosophers goes.

To deal with this conundrum, some theologians split Jesus into two parts, with his weeping being a human response, while the divine Christ remains unmoved, incapable of such weakness. Others argued that Jesus is not really weeping for Lazarus who he knows he will raise from the dead, but because of the unbelief of the bystanders who fail to understand who he is or his message. Several of the Church Fathers even suggested that Jesus was weeping as a ‘controlled display’ to model appropriate human grief to the crowd – but that seems unacceptably inauthentic if so.

I think the much more likely and moving possibility is that Jesus Christ's direct experience of the grief of losing a friend and his weeping alongside Mary and Martha show us Almighty God's true relationship to the suffering of humanity.

In Jesus, God fully participates in and shares our suffering, our anger at injustice, and our pain at all the loss we endure. As a general rule, God rarely airlifts us out of our suffering – much more often he parachutes in to bear the pain alongside us.

In twelve days' time on Good Friday in this church I am intending to read to you again the beautiful sonnets composed by Malcolm Guite for the Stations of the Cross, and while all these poems are deeply emotional, I am always most moved not by the final sonnets about the terrible Crucifixion or even the glorious

Resurrection, but by sonnet nine, when Jesus, struggling under the weight of carrying his Cross, falls for the third time:

He weeps with you and with you he will stay

When all your staying power has run out

You can't go on, you go on anyway.

He stumbles just beside you when the doubt

That always haunts you, cuts you down at last

And takes away the hope that drove you on.

This is the third fall and it hurts the worst

This long descent through darkness to depression

From which there seems no rising and no will

To rise, or breathe or bear your own heart-beat.

Twice you survived; this third will surely kill,

And you could almost wish for that defeat

Except that in the cold hell where you freeze

You find your God beside you on his knees.

Some theologians say that it was precisely Jesus' raising of Lazarus that got Jesus killed in the end, since John's gospel goes on to tell us that it was because of this miracle that many people believed in Jesus, and it was because of his rising popularity that the high priest Caiaphas decided that Jesus had to die and started the plot with Judas that led to his crucifixion.

So, we can read this tale of Lazarus as a story of the anguish of unanswered prayer, or we can read it as a foreshadowing of God's power for resurrection and a demonstration of the divinity of Christ, but what's most precious to me is the revelation that God has indeed experienced the depths of human grief and pain, and even in that cold hell where we freeze, we still find our God beside us on his knees.