

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Seeing Jesus – John 11:1-44 – New Life

We have been looking at the signs in John's gospel under the main heading of 'seeing Jesus' – because we want to see what John has to say about Jesus. And so we come to the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which brings the first half of the gospel to a climax, and which then sets in motion the second half, which will lead to Jesus' death and resurrection. Let's begin by looking at the story.

### 1. The story

The passage moves from the death of Lazarus, through conversations between Jesus and each of the sisters in turn, Martha, and then Mary, concluding with the raising of Lazarus. We'll go through the passage section by section, looking at the main story line as we go, and then we'll reflect a little on its significance.

#### (a) The death of Lazarus (11:1-16)

11:1-3 – Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived in Bethany, a village near Jerusalem. Lazarus falls ill, and a message is sent to Jesus. John tells us that Jesus *loved* Lazarus. So, how does Jesus respond...?

11:4-6 – Jesus' response reminds us of what he said about the man born blind (9:3). There, Jesus said that despite the man's blindness, God and his glory would have the last word. Similarly here: death would come, it would be real and ugly, it would stink; but God and his Son would be glorified through it. Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' sickness and death, but he didn't. He could have healed Lazarus from a distance, like he did with the nobleman's son (4:46-54), but he didn't. He could have left straight away to go to Lazarus, but he didn't. We might be surprised at the delay. If Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, why didn't he go? But Jesus works to *God's* timetable and agenda. And he says that the ultimate result would be that God would be given the glory. That's an important lesson for

us to learn. He loves us even though he allows sickness and suffering in our lives – and sickness is not necessarily a sign that God is displeased with us. He loves us, even though he may delay in coming to our help, and in answering our prayers. He loves us, and he manages our lives with a perfect wisdom. Only when the time is right does Jesus announce his intention to return to Jerusalem.

11:7-8 – The disciples are not too happy at the announcement to go back. Jesus had barely escaped from there a short while back.

11:9-10 – As long as there is daylight, Jesus says, one can walk and not fall; anyone who goes out at night, however, is liable to get into difficulty. Because it is still light, they can go safely; but he must go *now*, because time is running out. Jesus then explains what he intends to do.

11:11-16 – The word 'sleep' is often used figuratively in the New Testament to refer to death. It's a beautiful word in this sense, because it expresses the hope of resurrection. Sleep is a condition from which one wakes – normally(!) – refreshed and renewed. His disciples misunderstand, so Jesus tells them that Lazarus is dead; and he says he's glad because of the faith that will be produced in them by what he will do. Thomas, of course, can see nothing but dark clouds on the horizon.

#### (b) The conversation with Martha (11:17-27)

11:17-20 – When Jesus finally comes to Bethany, the house is filled with many friends who are comforting Mary and Martha. Martha runs out to meet Jesus alone.

11:21-24 – What Martha says in these verses fits with what most Jews believed – that at the end of time there would be a resurrection of the dead. But Jesus says more...

11:25-26 – Jesus says, effectively: ‘Yes, Martha, you’re right about the resurrection at the end of time, but the hope of resurrection and the life of the age to come, and of fellowship with God is found in none other than *me*; I am the resurrection and the life.’ Jesus asks her if she believes this. How does she respond?

11:27 – It’s an amazing confession! Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who has come into the world.

#### (c) The conversation with Mary (11:28-37)

11:28-32 – Martha runs to give Mary the news that Jesus has arrived. Mary comes out to meet him, and all the mourners assume she’s going to the grave, and go with her.

11:33-37 – It’s a poignant passage, showing us that Jesus is deeply troubled and sorrowful. Mary and Martha grieve, and they stand for all those who weep at the painful reality of the loss of a loved one through death. And that weeping is appropriate, for Jesus himself is angry and anguished at the pain caused by death.

#### (d) The raising of Lazarus (11:38-44)

11:38-40 – Jesus commands that the stone of the grave to be taken away. Martha is astonished – which shows that she has not fully understood Jesus’ promise that he would raise Lazarus; she is still thinking he was referring to the resurrection at the *last* day. But Jesus reminds her that, if she believes, she will see God’s glory.

11:41-44 – After praying to the Father, Jesus raises Lazarus with a word: ‘Lazarus, come out!’ And he does. It must have been an amazing sight – power over death, power to give new life.

That’s the sign; but we need to ask, secondly, about its significance...

## 2. The significance

We’ve seen a few times in John that the signs on their own are not good enough. They need to be *understood appropriately*. In chapter 5 we have a sign of Jesus – the healing of the lame man (5:1-15) – which is then followed by a

dialogue between Jesus and others where Jesus explains that he has authority to give life (5:16-30). After the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-14), there is a long discourse about manna and bread (6:25-59) – which tells us that not only does Jesus provide bread for the hungry, but he is *himself* the bread of life for men and women. The same is the case in chapter 9, where Jesus heals the man born blind (9:1-7), but this is in the context of understanding that Jesus is the light of the world (8:12-9:41). ‘I am the bread of life’ (6:35). ‘I am the light of the world’ (8:12; 9:5). And now here, with the raising of Lazarus, we have another of the great ‘I am’ sayings in the gospel: ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ (11:25). So, it’s important to see how John wants us to understand the signs. And, once again, as with the other signs, the main interest is not Mary or Martha, or even Lazarus, but *Jesus*. That’s where we need to focus: what does the sign tell us about Jesus?

#### (a) The life Jesus brings

Jesus is the resurrection and the *life*. Right from the start of his gospel, John tells us that in Jesus was *life* (1:4), and he emphasises that in different ways as we go through the gospel, right through to chapter 20 where he reminds us that he has written it so that we might believe in Jesus and have *life* in his name (20:30-31). Jesus alone can give life, like the life he gave to the lame man (5:21-27); Jesus alone can give the true bread which brings eternal life (6:27, 33-35, 40, 51); Jesus alone can give the water which springs up into everlasting life. (4:13-14; 7:37-39); Jesus alone can give the light which is the *life* of men and women (1:4-5; 8:12; 9:5).

And now, finally, we see him giving life itself – because he is ‘the resurrection and the life’ (11:25). Jesus is the source of eternal life. Believers undergo physical death, but that will not affect the life we *already have* in Jesus; we will live beyond death; death does not mean absence from Jesus’ presence; it does not mean that Jesus has lost his grip on one of his own. He gives life.

(b) The glory Jesus shows

The theme of Jesus' *glory* is also present in the sign. You might recall the statement in 2:11 that the water into wine revealed Jesus' *glory*, and the disciples *believed*. Now, at the start of this chapter, in 11:4, Jesus says that 'the illness is not unto death, but for the *glory* of God, that the Son of God may be *glorified* through it'. And he later says to Martha, in 11:40: 'Did I not tell you that if you *believe* you will *see* the *glory* of God?' Notice the words that are used: 'see', 'glory', 'believe'. In the signs, Jesus' *glory*, or the glory of God, is shown, which is to be *seen* by the eyes of *faith*. So, the raising of Lazarus is linked to the earlier signs by these references to 'glory' and 'see' and 'believe'. But that's already to encroach on to the next point...

(c) The faith Jesus requires

As in a number of other signs, it's important to notice the link here with *faith* or *believing*. When Jesus asks Martha if she believes, she responds using words that sound very close to what John says in 20:30-31 about why he wrote the gospel – 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world' (11:27). That forms a response all of us can make, as we believe in our hearts and confess Jesus with our lips.

(d) The path Jesus follows

Perhaps most significantly of all, two threads are woven through the story – Lazarus and Jesus. Lazarus' death and resurrection foreshadow Jesus' death and resurrection.

- Death

Lazarus is introduced in 11:2 as the brother of Mary who anointed Jesus, with that anointing being explained later in 12:7 as an anointing for Jesus' *burial*. As we've seen, in 11:4, Jesus says that Lazarus' illness is for God's *glory* so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. In John's gospel, Jesus' *glory* is bound up with his *death*. It's in his death that his glory is supremely revealed. Then, in the dialogue with the disciples there is the expectation that he is going to Jerusalem to his *death*. It's his death which has been foreshadowed in the

teaching in the previous chapter about the Good Shepherd giving his life for the sheep (10:11, 14-15). John 10 shows Jesus as the Good Shepherd laying down his life for the sheep; John 11 shows him as one who gives life to the dead.

- Resurrection

But if the story of Lazarus is connected with the *death* of Jesus, it is also linked with his *resurrection*. Lazarus' resurrection is temporary (perhaps all too temporary judging by the fact that in 12:9-11, people are already plotting to have him killed off!). But Lazarus walking bodily from his tomb anticipates Jesus' resurrection. In both cases there is a tomb and a stone that needs to be moved; in both cases the grief of women is mentioned; in both cases, the grave clothes are singled out (11:44) – although (unlike Jesus) Lazarus needs to be helped out of his!

So, the whole passage suggests an interweaving of Jesus' death and resurrection with Lazarus' death and resurrection, looking forward to what will be. As we move towards the second half of the gospel, we move towards the death and resurrection of Jesus, and John is already preparing us for how important it is.

Do we want eternal life? That life can only come through Jesus' death and resurrection. Do we want to see the glory of God? We see God's glory supremely in what Jesus does for us on the cross. John tells us again, to *see* him, and *believe* in him, and receive *life* from him.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 25 March 2007*