

Lent 2023 Gospel Conversations Session Four

Opening Worship

Mary, Martha and Lazarus John 11. 1 – 45

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) (NB this action happens in the next chapter, 12. It also appears in all three synoptics though the women are not named.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” (cf blind man in ch 9 was healed for the glory of God.) ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, (this delay is never explained – we might imagine he would rush off immediately to be with them) ⁷ and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” ⁸ “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” (the disciples are often pragmatic and highlight the dangers to Jesus.)

⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. ¹⁰ It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.” (a reference to Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world.) ¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” ¹² His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus^l) (the twin) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (NB It is Thomas who takes the lead.) ¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles^[b] from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. (as was the custom.) ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. (NB how normally it is Mary who goes to Jesus while Martha stays at home doing the washing up.)

²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” (The normal Pharisaic belief.) ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. (recognise this from our funeral services.) Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” (The first real faith statement in the gospel comes from Martha, the one who is said not to be as holy as her sister. cf Luke 10.38-42 for more about M and M)

²⁸ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (NB they both assume Jesus could have healed Lazarus. Is this a statement or an accusation?) ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, (as was common practice) he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ “Where have you laid him?” he asked. (cf Mary’s question to the gardener in John 21) “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. (the shortest sentence in the NT; shows the humanity of Jesus.) ³⁶ Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man (see John 9 – earlier session) have kept this man from dying?” ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.” (Martha is ever-practical. Four days is significant as Jewish belief was that the soul hovered around for three days, so by the fourth, he would definitely be dead.) ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” (This is the crux of the story: not that a family is restored but that they will see the glory of God.) ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of

the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs.⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” (the two key things which give them their identity.)

Context

This story only appears in John’s gospel, though Luke has a parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Note that the only ‘conversations’ are between Jesus and Mary and Martha. There is no discussion, in this narrative, with the authorities, who talk amongst themselves, nor with Lazarus.

If we read on in the chapter, we find the Pharisees and Jews divided over what to do about Jesus. They are afraid of Roman reprisals. In John (though in no other gospel) the raising of Lazarus is the catalyst for the plots against Jesus, though it is also the cause of belief. It is the pivotal moment after which Jesus moves on to Bethany and then to Jerusalem.

The historical veracity of this story is unclear. If it happened, why did none of the synoptic writers tell of it? Is it related in some way to Luke’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus – a man who was *not* raised from the dead?

We have no idea what Lazarus’ life was like thereafter, whether he had renewed vision or just carried on as before. However, we read in 12.10 that the authorities plotted to kill him because he was attracting too much attention to himself and to Jesus.

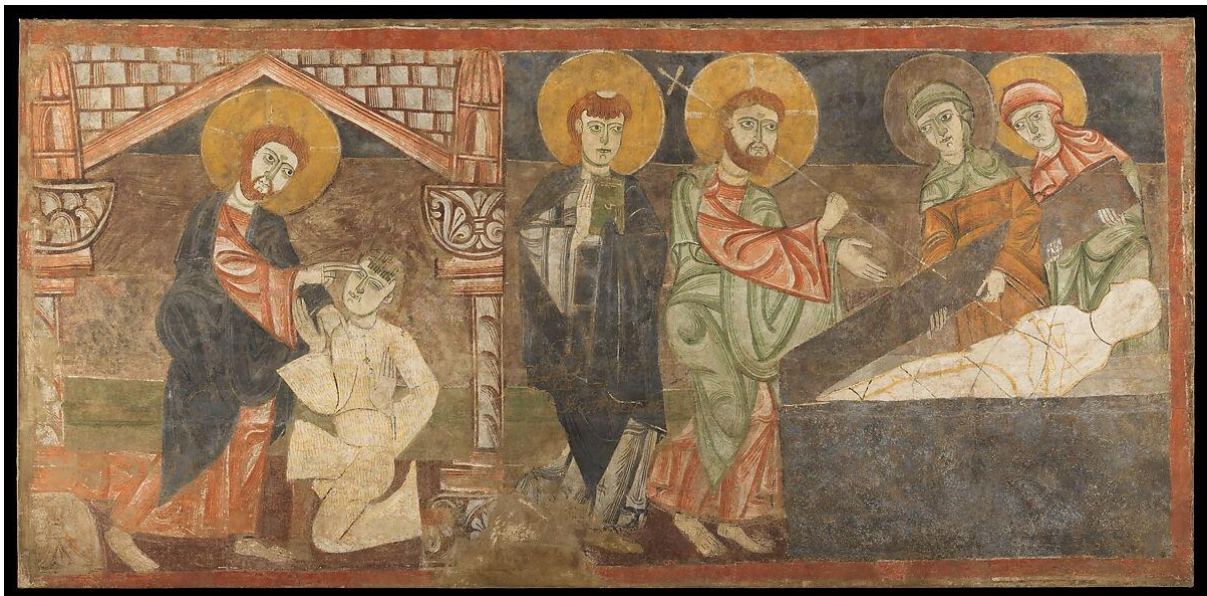


Choose some of these questions to discuss

If Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to continue his earthly life, why does he not do that for people now?

What was the point of this story?

Lazarus is silent throughout. Why does he not say anything, even when he walks out of a tomb with burial clothes on?



The healing of the Blind man and the Raising of Lazarus 12th century (circa 1130) Metropolitan Museum of Art New York (The Cloisters)

Nick chose this painting because it combines two of our Lent group events in one image. Jesus, accompanied by John the Evangelist raises Lazarus. Martha and Mary, in tears, have lifted the lid. The two images are perhaps combined

because they both communicate themes of rebirth and redemption. Can you think of any links between the two?

How does the right-hand panel of this painting (above) image affect your perception of the *written* biblical account, if at all? How does the artist use colour to extend your understanding of the events that are being depicted?

What key differences with the following image do you note?



The Raising of Lazarus – Duccio 1308-1311 Kimbell Art Museum Fort Worth



Time for reflection

Share one feeling and one thought at the end of this session. Thinking about the whole five weeks (including Ash Wednesday) which ‘conversation’ has most inspired you and/or made you think differently?

Finish by reading this poem and then saying the Grace together.

How hard to hear the things I think I know,
To peel aside the thin familiar film
That wraps and seals your secret just below:
An undiscovered good, a hidden realm,

A kingdom of reversal, where the poor
Are rich in blessing and the tragic rich
Still struggle, trapped in trappings at the door
They never opened, Life just out of reach...

Open the door for me and take me there.
Love, take my hand and lead me like the blind,
Unbandage me, unwrap me from my fear,
Open my eyes, my heart, my soul, my mind.
I struggle with these grave clothes, this dark earth,
But you are calling 'Lazarus come forth!'

Malcolm Guite: He who has ears to hear

Excursus: The seven 'I am' sayings in John's gospel

Note that in Exodus 3.14, God revealed himself as I AM WHO I AM, a name which was not to be uttered and which came to be called Yahweh. This is the background for the importance of Jesus' I am sayings as the two words 'I am' would immediately remind the Jews of Exodus 3.14. I am

- the bread of life (6.35) linked with the feeding of 5000
- the light of the world (8.12) just before the healing of the man born blind
- the door of the sheep (10. 7 – 9) relates to imagery of sheepfold
- the good shepherd (10.11) unlike any other shepherd. A reminder of Psalm 23, amongst others.
- the resurrection and the life (11.25) linked to Lazarus
- the way, the truth and the life (14.6)
- the vine (15.1) referring to the church as a vine.

Jesus declared who he was through these sayings, often linking them with an act which demonstrated the title. There are two other 'I am' declarations in John's gospel: in 8.58, Jesus answers a complaint from the Pharisees by saying 'Before Abraham was born, I am.'

In the garden of Gethsemane, (18. 4 – 5) when the mob came to arrest 'Jesus of Nazareth' Jesus said, 'I am he' whereupon 'they drew back and fell to the ground.' It's possible that our translators have added the word 'he' and Jesus simply said 'I am' but, either way, the meaning was not lost on his enemies.