

Week 5

Transforming Lives: hope in the pain of life



Jesus and Lazarus – John 11:1-45

This week looks at the raising of Lazarus, and at the hope that our faith brings in the face of darkness and death.

Welcome and Icebreaker

Don't be too morbid, but take a few moments to think about a hymn or secular song you might choose for your funeral.

In small groups of two or three share your choices, and talk about what they say about your life, personality and faith?

(10 minutes)

Introductory prayer

Pause before reading this prayer, so people in the group can meditate on it and 'make it their own' before praying it.

Out of death, O God, you summon your people to life as you called Lazarus to come forth from the tomb. May we hear again your call to leave the dark tomb of our fears and failures, that we may rejoice in the freedom to believe your promises and proclaim your Son Jesus Christ as the resurrection and the life. We ask this through him who died and rose again for us, our Lord, our Master and our Life, even Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

*Reading – John 11:1-45*¹⁸

This reading will work well with different voices – different people taking the roles of Jesus and the various characters in the story. You will need a Narrator, Jesus, 'Followers', a Martha and a Mary.

Encourage the group to enjoy the flow of the story and its different characters, as well as hearing this as a 'Bible reading'.

- Narrator: A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, was ill. Bethany was the town where Mary and her sister Martha lived. The sisters sent Jesus a message: "Lord, your dear friend is ill." When Jesus heard it, he said,
- Jesus: "The final result of this illness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory."
- Narrator: Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he received the news that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two more days. Then he said to the disciples,
- Jesus: "Let us go back to Judea."
- Followers: "Teacher, just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?"

Jesus: "A day has twelve hours, hasn't it? So whoever walks in broad daylight does not stumble, for they see the light of this world. But if they walk during the night they stumble, because they have no light."
 "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up."

Followers: "If he is asleep, Lord, he will get well."

Narrator: Jesus meant that Lazarus had died, but they thought he meant natural sleep. So Jesus told them plainly,

Jesus: "Lazarus is dead, but for your sake I am glad that I was not with him, so that you will believe. Let us go to him."

Narrator: Thomas (called the Twin) said to his fellow-disciples,
 Followers: "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!"
 Narrator: When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Judeans had come to see Martha and Mary to comfort them over their brother's death.
 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus,
 Martha: "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for."
 Jesus: "Your brother will rise to life."
 Martha: "I know that he will rise to life on the last day."
 Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?"
 Martha: "Yes, Lord! I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."
 Narrator: After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary privately.
 Martha: "The Teacher is here, and is asking for you."
 Narrator: When Mary heard this, she got up and hurried out to meet him. (Jesus had not yet arrived in the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.) The people who were in the house with Mary, comforting her, followed her when

they saw her get up and hurry out. They thought that she was going to the grave to weep there.
 Mary arrived where Jesus was, and as soon as she saw him, she fell at his feet.
 Mary: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!"
 Narrator: Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people who were with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved.
 Jesus: "Where have you buried him?"
 Narrator: "Come and see, Lord," they answered.
 Jesus wept.
 Followers: "See how much he loved him!"
 Narrator: the people said. But some of them said,
 Followers: "He gave sight to the blind man, didn't he? Could he not have kept Lazarus from dying?"
 Narrator: Deeply moved once more, Jesus went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone placed at the entrance. Jesus ordered.
 Jesus: "Take the stone away!"
 Martha: "There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried four days!"
 Jesus: "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believed?"
 Narrator: They took the stone away. Jesus looked up and said,
 Jesus: "I thank you, Father, that you listen to me. I know that you always listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me."
 Narrator: After he had said this, he called out in a loud voice,
 Jesus: "Lazarus, come out!"
 Narrator: Lazarus came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave clothes, and with a cloth round his face. Jesus told them,
 Jesus: "Untie him, and let him go."
 Narrator: Many of the people who had come to visit Mary saw what Jesus did, and they believed in him.

Martha – grief and hope

“Part of Christian maturity involves learning to wait, confident not so much about our chances for a rosy outcome, or about exactly where, when and how God will act, but confident that He will act. We wait in hope even while we “cry out of the depths” to God...” *Dan Clendenin*¹⁹

Martha said: “If you had been here then Lazarus would not have died.”

- How often do we blame God? Is this healthy or unhealthy?

In twos or threes talk about times when you felt that God did not respond to you as you had hoped or expected.

(Make sure people are given a safe space in which to tell their experience.)

Martha said to Jesus “Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God”.

- Do you find affirmations of faith (such as the creed) or a line from a hymn or song or a simple prayer, helpful in difficult times? Share your experience.

In the story, the gospel writer tells us that Jesus wept.

- If he had left out these two words, how would it affect our understanding of Jesus?

Lazarus – living hope (optional)

Lazarus had been dead for four days. Sometimes people who have been resuscitated or close to death, describe a reluctance to return to life.

- How difficult might it have been for Lazarus to respond to Jesus’ command to ‘come out’ of the dark, sheltered tomb?
- How difficult is it for us to come out of the ‘dark tomb of our fears and failures’ (as described in the Opening Prayer) and live a transformed life?

Jesus – life and hope

Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”.

A story

Fazi Rabi is probably the only member of Christian Aid staff arrested because of their strap line.

In the late 1990’s, when the Taliban had just taken over Kabul, Afghanistan was a very dangerous place for anyone to be – let alone Christian Aid workers. Fazi, a field officer and engineer for the organisation, gave the local Taliban office some of their publications but when the main office in Kabul saw them, they thought the phrase “we believe in life before death” was blasphemy, so they arrested him.

Fazi explained that it meant that they believed in putting this life first and that was why they were helping ordinary Afghans, regardless of race and religion, by bringing clean drinking water and adult literacy classes to the poorest parts of the country. They weren’t aid workers as a guise for promoting Christianity.

They released Fazi, but one of his jailers said “It would be better if the strap line was “We ALSO believe in life before death”.

- Do you agree with the jailer?

Where are there signs of resurrection and transformed life:

- in the world?
- in the life of the Church
- in your own life?

“We believe in life before death”

Christian Aid strap line

Choose just **one** of the worship options.

WORSHIP 1 (4 minutes)²⁰

A bowl of water is placed on a table.

All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. If we have been united with Christ in death, we will certainly be united with him in resurrection. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

All **We glory in your cross, O Lord,
and praise and glorify your holy resurrection.**

A cross is placed on a table.

Once we were far off, but now in union with Christ Jesus we have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood, for he is our peace.

All **We glory in your cross, O Lord,
and praise and glorify your holy resurrection.**

A lighted candle is placed on a table.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness,
we lie and do not do what is true;
but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

All **We glory in your cross, O Lord,
and praise and glorify your holy resurrection.**

Silence is kept

All **Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy upon us.**

**May the life-giving cross of the Son of God,
which is mightier than all the powers of evil,
guard your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and for ever.**

**By his great mercy,
God has given us new birth into a living hope
through the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead.
Amen.**

WORSHIP 2

Penitential Act²¹

We do not let life grow in us
when we mar it by sin and indifference.
We ask the Lord of life to forgive us.

pause

Lord Jesus, our resurrection and life,
forgive us our hesitant and weak faith
and our timid and wavering hope:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
forgive us that your life in us
has grown so little since we were baptized:
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, our source of life,
forgive us that we have not let you
raise us up from the grave of sin:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Have mercy on us, Lord,
and forgive us all our sins.
Help us live your life to the full,
that it may blossom into eternal life. **Amen.**

WORSHIP 3 (15 minutes)

Jesus gave instructions for Lazarus to be unbound and released.

Walter Wangerin wrote a wonderful poem called 'Ragman' which describes a strange and mystical Ragman who gives new clothes for old rags²². It is a long poem and it cannot be printed here. But you might be able to view, download and print it from one of the following sources:

<http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/6595/ragman.html>

<http://www.angelfire.com/tx2/jbrown/ragman.html>

Members of the group could be given lengths of bandage to 'wrap up' those aspects of life that still 'bind' them. They then listen to the poem read. They may find it easier to listen if they close their eyes.

Here is a very brief excerpt:

...even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!"...
..."Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!"...

After a short silence, the leader says this prayer in a meditative way:²³

Our Father in heaven, I thank you for sending the Saviour to call me from death to life.

I confess that I was dead in sin before I heard his call, but when I heard him, like Lazarus, I arose.

But, O my Father, the grave clothes bind me still. Old habits that I cannot throw off, old customs that are so much part of my life that I am helpless to live the new life that Christ calls me to live.

Give me strength, O Father, to break the bonds.

Give me courage to live a new life in you.

Give me faith, to believe that with your help I cannot fail.

And this I ask in the Saviour's name who has taught me to come to you.

Amen.

Looking back

If possible try to make time within the evening programme – perhaps even during tea and coffee at the end – to let group members reflect on their experiences, insights and learning during Lent 2008 – both in church and in the group.

Two questions to get you thinking:

- What have you found most helpful?
- What have you found most challenging?

Takeaway, for personal reflection

Epitaphs, inscriptions written on tombstones, can be amusing or very profound.

Read the selection below and consider...

- How would you like to be remembered?

Epitaph of an unknown dentist
Stranger! Approach this spot with gravity!
John Brown is filling his last cavity.

Winston Churchill (1874-1965)
I am ready to meet my Maker.
Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal
of meeting me is another matter.

Benjamin Franklin

The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer
(like the cover of an old book, its contents worn out,
and stripped of its lettering and gilding) lies here,
food for worms.

Yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will, as he believed,
appear once more in a new and more beautiful edition,
corrected and amended by its Author.

Francis Albert Sinatra

The Best is yet to come.