

May these words be pleasing. Amen.

We've had a week away, across in the Lakes, which is a real privilege. We were just an hour's drive away – which is a good thing as we needed to return for Funkey last Sunday. An additional 'return home' was, however, less expected. At breakfast on Tuesday, a cup of tea was knocked right across my keyboard as I worked on my laptop. As for the type of tea - suffice to say that Andrew likes tea with his sugar.....

To my credit I didn't swear, indeed I immediately said 'it's an accident!' before holding said laptop upside down over the sink for it to drain. You will know that feeling of anxiety and stress? – I felt the stress as I drove back across the A66 to get my school-laptop back to the technicians at school. If I wish hard enough, if I care about it hard enough, if I feel guilty about it even more than I do, it'll be more likely that they can fix it. (J!)

Multiply that feeling a thousand times, and far beyond a thousand times again, and there is a much deeper despair over those events in life that really do matter.

Martha and Mary had seen their brother die. Theirs the unbearable witness to his dying, the necessary preparation and burial, the numbing and raw grief that has crushed their waking eyes each morning on the previous four days.

Illness, disability, death – all part and parcel of life, part of the deal, we just accept it (we have no choice). Someone in our church whose grief is particularly cruel and unfair said to me a month or two ago 'I've move on from asking 'why me' and instead ask myself 'why not me'? We accept it as part and parcel of life, we support each other as best we can (this afternoon is our annual service of remembrance and hope).

For Martha and Mary – their situation is different. They know *Jesus*, and Jesus comes to *them*. Mary is cross and accusing - "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus wept, he commands the stone to be opened. Martha makes a practical point: "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." They know *Jesus*, and Jesus comes to *them*. Lazarus steps out exactly like the mummies in Halloween films – "Unbind him and let him go" x2.

If only you had been *here* – many of us could rightly ask. This man last week restored sight to the blind, this week he brings back the dead – if only you had been *here* to fix *my* crisis and yours. (P)

Some of you will know the Rev Andrew Cromarty. He works across in Colburn who recently asked for our prayers. A séance was being held in his village and he was so deeply worried for anyone who might be tempted to attend, to attempt to talk with the dead. A few weeks later and this same séance was here in one of the pubs in town and we pretty much ignored it – which is

maybe the best way. One view is that it's all a load of nonsense to take money off the gullible. The other view is that a *real* séance is phenomenally dangerous and we should warn anyone we know who is attracted to such events not to even think about being drawn in. But, O to be Mary and Martha - to share their joy as they talk, once again, with Lazarus. If only

The manner of the raising of Lazarus remains unusual for us as is obvious from our packed churchyard. The fully dead in this life remain dead and should be left in peace. (P)

The words of Revelation are of great comfort both for our loved ones who have died and for ourselves – for we too will die. No more crying no more dying no more pain. No more anxiety, no more stress, no more depression, no more the crushing sense of inadequacy and guilt. This is the new life promised to all the saints – to you, and me.

Ironic, though, to have this reading alongside the raising of Lazarus. He, like us, has the hope of eternal life after death. We may in time (through faith) grow to lose our fear of death but not (I suspect) of dying. I do not know the time, manner and place of my own death. It may be sudden, more likely a process involving illness, not a process I will embrace willingly. It is a process which Lazarus will have to face once again now that he has been brought back.

On the day that Lazarus died (the first time) countless other people died also around the world. They remained dead. When Bartemaus got back his sight countless others remained blind.

Jesus, I think, is torn. The rules of nature would say that Lazarus should stay in the grave just like all others who have died. That's the deal, that's the rules, it's very simple, we live, we die. But in Christ there are the rules, and there is love (x2). And sometimes they seem to clash. In a hymn we may have sung here before called 'God is Love' we have these words: when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod, then they find that self-same aching, deep within the heart of God. We see this same breaking and aching as Jesus arrives and is witness to a scene of grief around the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus wept – the shortest verse in the bible. The word 'wept' comes from an unusual word normally used to describe the very specific noise of a grunting horse, a noise of deep frustration and anger. Jesus grunts like a horse when faced with the death of friend, the grief of his friends and when faced with the decision he alone can make: Follow the rules of nature and leave Lazarus alone, or follow his heart, and follow the rules of love. Unbind him and let him go.

That same love cannot help but defy the normal rules when faced with the lame, the blind, the deaf, it compels Jesus to heal. But these moments of love must not hold him up. Do not hold me, do not others, my time is not yet come. Jesus is steadfast towards the ultimate expression of his love: His death, his sacrifice, his resurrection, our salvation, our life eternal.

Rules, laws, regulations are good things needed to keep us safe and prosperous. But when we promote the law but relegate the common good then we forget the heart of God. When we remember the rules but forget the love then we forget the heart of God.

This, for us today, can be very hard. This week, in the news: The Church of England has banned a heart-shaped memorial to a stillborn baby featuring hand-and-footprints. The diocese (of Manchester) applied strict rules and said “The stars, heart, hand and footprints would over-sentimentalise the graveyard.” Mrs Bibby said she saw the heart-shaped stone as a ‘symbol of love’. Also this week: A report highlighted the very, very large sums of money raised and stored by some Church of England churches on the so called Evangelical wing of our church. If we ever (as a church) agree to allow gay marriages in church then they will be ready to use this money to split away from the church. These churches argue that they are upholding the standards of God, a great number outside our church claim (rightly or wrongly) that we (the church) are on the wrong side of love – and this perception is a real problem for us. Also in the news (at least for our church here): Yesterday was a long but very productive away day for the PCC at Marrick Priory. Martin led a day long discussion, helped by Bishop Helen Anne, in which we talked ‘vision’ – what is our mission, our vision and plan for the future of our church. One challenge is to stand up for our Christian values not just when the overlap with the world’s values but also when they clash – especially true as we are a civic church. The vision is to have always to have love right at the heart if everything that we do as a church.

We find that self-same aching, deep within the heart of God. Our God is pure, holy and perfect, and perfection demands perfection. But God is also the God of love, and his love conquers all. It cannot help but cure the lame, the blind, the deaf, it brings back Lazarus. Our perfect God offers forgiveness to us who are imperfect.

Our response? – is to seek the kingdom of God and the holiness of God in ourselves and others *but also* to share God’s grace, and patience, and forgiveness and love when we all get things wrong. When we promote the law but relegate the common good then we forget the heart of God. When we remember the rules but forget the love then we forget the heart of God.