

John 11:17-44

Isaiah 38:9-20

All Bible quotations are from the NIV (2011 ed.)

At the end of January, I preached in the morning services about the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine, which is the first sign of his divinity to be told by John. This miracle took place in a village in Galilee, so out in the sticks, and very few people would have known about it at the time. It was hardly front page news when it happened, however amazing it was.

By contrast, the final sign described by John before Jesus goes up to death and resurrection in Jerusalem, was immediately a big deal. The raising of Lazarus definitely hit the headlines. There were lots of people there to see the dead man emerge from the tomb; his sisters Martha and Mary, his friends, Jesus and his disciples, the crowd of mourners. It took place in Bethany, which John tells us was only two miles from Jerusalem, so word will have travelled fast to the city, perhaps carried by some of those who had come to mourn. In John, Jesus' signs of his divinity start at a week long wedding celebration; they end during what would have been the first week of mourning for his dead friend. On the face of it, these two miracles seem rather different from each other. But I think that the turning of the water into wine and the raising of Lazarus are far more similar than at first appears. After all, they both involved people who Christ loved. But the similarities run far deeper than that, and there are three points that I talked about in relation to the wedding which I think can also be singled out here: faith; the generosity and grace of God; and the humanity of Jesus.

First of all, to talk about faith. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus' mother Mary takes the initiative when she realises what is happening, and tells him that the wine has run out (John 2:3). She doesn't ask him, or tell him, to do anything in particular, she simply hands the problem to him and has faith that he will act. I think this is also true of Martha especially, and of her sister Mary too to some extent (apologies, by the way, about the two Marys! It was a very common name). I say particularly true of Martha rather than Mary as it is Martha who takes the lead here, and also defies convention by coming out to meet Jesus, as those in mourning were not meant to leave the house for a week except to visit the tomb. While Martha and Mary of Bethany do seem to reproach Jesus slightly – both of them say to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not

have died” (John 11:21, 32) – their statement also reveals that they believed he could have – and would have – saved their brother’s life. I think it’s really interesting that they say exactly the same thing. It suggests to me that it is what they have been saying to each other, and what those gathered to grieve with them had also been saying (e.g.11:37). This was perhaps intensified by the fact that, as we are told at the beginning of the chapter, the sisters had taken the initiative by sending Jesus a message that Lazarus was ill, yet Jesus had not responded and had not hurried to his side but delayed his journey (11:3-6). Despite Jesus not rushing to the rescue, both women had a deep faith in him. They have a confidence such as that expressed in our reading from Isaiah, where the recovered King, Hezekiah, simply states “The Lord will save me” (38:20). Martha emphasises her faith when she goes on to say “But I know even now that God will give you whatever you ask” (11:22). If Christ had arrived earlier, Martha knew that things would have been different; but even though he had arrived too late, in human terms, she still believed that Jesus could change what had happened. She had complete faith in him. Like Mary at Cana, she had turned to Jesus and trusted him to help. As I said in January, this is an example to all of us to take our problems and our sorrows, whatever they may be, to Christ.

So Martha and Mary of Bethany, like Mary before them, had a deep faith in Christ. What then of God’s generosity towards us, which is symbolised by the wine at the Cana wedding? The overwhelming nature of that generosity is shown here in the conversation between Martha and Jesus, and in the raising of Lazarus. Jesus tells Martha “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (11:25). I incline to think that Martha had a pretty good idea of what Jesus meant from the way that she responds, and any doubts she may have had would soon have been swept aside. After all, even before her brother is brought back to life she acknowledges Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (11:27). Jesus was telling her what he had been sent to do, to bring us eternal life through God’s grace. This wonderful, incredible gift is granted to us now, through belief in Jesus, and is not just a hope for the future. He is telling Martha that life in and with him has power over death. It is this generosity that is expressed in the reading from Isaiah: “in your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back” (38:17).

We have seen not only Martha and Mary’s great faith but also God’s extraordinary generosity and grace. Finally, both these miracles also show Jesus’ humanity. At Cana, he understood the social consequences the wedding couple

would face if it became known that they had run out of wine at such an important occasion. In the raising of Lazarus, we see Jesus' humanity in many ways. We are told several times in this chapter that Jesus loves the dead man and his sisters. Now of course God does love us all, but this strikes me more simply as a man who loves his friends deeply. Famously, of course, Jesus weeps as he is shown to the tomb, sharing in the sorrow of Mary and Martha (11:35). He grieves for his friend; he perhaps also weeps in despair at the brokenness and disbelief of the world, and the suffering of his people. He is also angry, perhaps for much the same reasons. Translations vary, but where Jesus is described as "deeply moved" or "greatly disturbed" (11:33,38) the Greek verb suggests anger. The grief and anger are despite the fact that he knew the power he had, and what he was going to do; they seem very human emotions. Jesus also, I suspect, understood, as he had similarly at Cana, the difficult situation which Martha and Mary faced with their brother dead. Lazarus would have been the head of the household, and probably provided for them. They would not have inherited whatever money and land their brother had, as everything would have gone to their closest male relation. The implications for them were therefore potentially very serious, and Jesus would have been very much aware of that. This brings to mind Jesus' raising of the widow of Nain's son, who was her only support (Luke 7:11-17). There is some debate about whether or not God suffers with us; I think that here, unquestionably, in the person of Jesus, he does suffer alongside Martha and Mary. As it says in Isaiah 53, "Surely he took up our pain, and bore our suffering" (53:4). He still does so now, and will for ever more.

The raising of Lazarus is the final sign John describes before Jesus' journey to death and resurrection in Jerusalem; we have moved from water turned into wine to a man brought back to life, but despite the difference in scale there are clear connections between these two miracles. We see the amazing faith of Martha, who proclaims her belief that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God" (11:27). Like Mary at Cana, she has faith that Jesus will make all things right. Christ's grace and generosity, and the gift of life he brings, are dramatically demonstrated as he arrives at a place of sorrow and death and brings life and rejoicing. We also see Jesus' humanity. He is with us in all our suffering, and understands and shares in our sorrows, just as he did with those of Martha and Mary. Now, as then, he is the resurrection and the life.

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