

# Brancepeth Sermon

## 26<sup>th</sup> March 2023

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*Romans 8:6–11; John 11:1–45*

*Open our ears, O Lord,  
to hear your word and know your voice.  
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,  
that we may serve you today and always.  
Amen*

I need to begin this sermon with a side note.

It's nothing to do with the main point of my sermon,  
but I'm afraid my mind snagged on something in the text,  
and I can't let it go past without mentioning it.

You see, our gospel text this morning,  
from the gospel of John,  
keeps talking about 'the Jews',

and at one point the disciples say to Jesus,  
when he says that he wants to go again to Jerusalem,  
'Rabbi, *the Jews* were just now trying to stone you,  
and are you going there again?'

John uses that phrase, 'the Jews', a lot.

When he wants to talk about the general response of  
the people, the crowds, to Jesus,  
he often refers to them as 'the Jews'.

And eventually, in John's telling, it is 'the Jews'  
who call for Jesus to be crucified,  
and when the disciples hide away after the crucifixion,  
it is for fear of 'the Jews'.

Now there are two problems with this.

The first is simply that,  
in texts like the one we heard read today,  
*everyone* is a Jew.

Mary and Martha are Jews. Lazarus is a Jew.

The disciples are Jews. Jesus is a Jew.

So it's very confusing for John to refer to one specific group as 'the Jews', over against everyone else.

But the second problem is that John wrote all this down some decades after the events he was recording.

And by that time, it seems that, in John's circle, 'the Jews' was slowly becoming a name specifically for those Jews who weren't part of John's Christian community, and who were perceived as antagonistic to it.

And that fact would just be a historical curiosity – an odd example of how words shift their meaning over time – were it not for the long, violent history of Christian anti-Semitism that came after it.

Because, throughout that long history, Christians have been *disastrously* comfortable with talking about 'the Jews' as a group, and blaming that whole group for the death of Jesus.

And we now read these texts  
as heirs of that long, shameful history  
which means we should be very cautious indeed,  
in how we handle texts that talk about ‘the Jews’ as a bloc,  
*especially* if they are pictured as a bloc hostile to Jesus,  
or responsible for his death.

So when we get to one of those passages,  
I sometimes try mentally to substitute  
‘the Judaeans’ for ‘the Jews’ –  
because that’s another way of translating the word John uses,  
and it’s a reminder to myself *not* to join in with  
the long and murderous Christian habit of  
thinking that John is talking about all Jews –  
all Jews in Jesus’ day, all Jews through history, and all Jews today –  
as a uniform bloc, hostile to Jesus, and responsible for his death.  
Because that is absolutely *not* the lesson  
we should be drawing from these texts.

\* \* \*

So, with that mini lecture out of the way,  
let's talk about the glory of God.

When Martha cautions Jesus against opening Lazarus' tomb,  
because of the likely smell,

Jesus says, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed,  
*you would see the glory of God?*'

What does he mean by that?

What, exactly, is she going to see?

By using the word 'glory', Jesus seems to mean that  
she is going to see something  
of God's own splendour, the light of God's presence,  
the majesty of God, somehow manifest in front of her.

You might think of Moses on Mount Sinai,  
hidden in a cleft in the rock  
because the dazzling brightness of God  
would otherwise have blown him away.

What on earth does Jesus mean,  
promising that Martha will see this glory?

Well, the first and simplest answer we could give is that  
she is going to see a miracle.

Lazarus coming back to life  
is not the kind of thing that can happen.

It is, by all normal standards, impossible.

But Jesus prays, and God *does* this impossible thing.

Is that what it means to ‘see the glory of God’ –

Does it simply mean, seeing God do impossible things?

Well, maybe – but I don’t think that’s what Jesus meant.

Or, at least, I don’t think it’s at the *heart* of what he meant.

Because he doesn’t seem to have been all that interested in  
miracles for miracles’ sake,

or simply as demonstrations of God’s power.

That doesn’t seem to be how *he* used the word ‘glory’.

So, what *did* Martha see?

I want to suggest that what matters is not just  
the *fact* that there was a miracle.

It's the *substance* of this miracle that matters.

I think Martha sees something of the glory of God  
because of the particular *kind* of miracle that happens.

I think she sees the glory of God because,  
in this miracle,  
*her own brother* is restored to her.

Look again at the passage, and see what it tells us about Lazarus.

It doesn't tell us what he looked like.

It doesn't tell us how he behaved.

It doesn't tell us how righteous he was.

It doesn't tell us his life story.

Instead, we *only* get told about his relationships.

We know that he was brother to Martha and to Mary;

and we know that he was Jesus' friend – that Jesus loved him.

We know that, finding Lazarus dead,

Jesus was greatly disturbed, and that he wept.

Lazarus' death was the end of all these relationships.

The villagers of Bethany lost one of their neighbours,

Mary lost a brother, Martha lost a brother,

and Jesus lost a friend.

Someone they loved was taken from them,

and they were left with nothing but memories and grief.

*Jesus wept.*

It's 'Jesus began to weep' in our version,

but the older English translation is 'Jesus wept'.

the shortest verse in the Bible.

*Jesus wept:* for his loss and for Mary and Martha's.

And given how little the gospels tell us about Jesus' feelings,

that verse stands out a mile.

Something special is going on here, and it has something

to do with Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters.

And when Jesus says to Martha,

'Did I not tell you that if you believed,

you would see the glory of God?'

he is obviously, in context, responding to her *grief*—

to her anguish at what she has lost.

‘Did I not tell you, Martha, that if you believed,  
you would see the glory of God?’

So what does Martha see, when she sees the glory of God?

She sees what she most longs for.

She sees grief undone, and  
she sees her love brought back to life.

*That’s* what she sees.

There was no flash of light.

There was no lightning bolt,  
no mountain-top shaking with thunder,  
no pillar of cloud or of flame.

There were no special effects.

*That’s* not what she saw.

I know we are still in Lent,

and I don’t want us to get ahead of ourselves,

but I think that what she did see is perfectly captured  
by the words of an Easter hymn:

*Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain,*

*Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;*

*Love lives again, that with the dead has been:*

*Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

*That's what Martha saw, when she saw the glory of God.*

*She saw *love come again*, like wheat that springeth green.*

Most of us aren't going to get to see miracles

like the raising of Lazarus,

however much we might long to do so.

But this miracle is a pointer to something we *can* see,

to something of the glory of God that we *can* experience.

The raising of Lazarus matters

because of what it shows us about God,

and the way that God relates to us.

And what it shows us is fundamentally that

God is *on the side* of the love that surrounds Lazarus,

the love between Lazarus and Mary and Martha and Jesus.

When God displays God's glory in this story, it is by taking hold of that love, and raising *that love* back to life.

Think of it this way.

Lazarus, Mary, Martha – they were made by God for love.

You and I, *we* were made by God for love.

And that is what it means, I think, to say (as the Bible does) that we were all made *in the image of God*.

We were made to experience, to inhabit, to display, to pass on, God's love, the love that is God's own life.

the love that is God's *glory*

That's what we are *for* –

it's what our bodies are for, what our lives are for.

And it's what Jesus came to bring back to life in us, because we forget it so completely.

And so when we *do* love,

even in the very ordinary ways in which

sisters might love a brother,

or a friend might love a friend,

we *shine* with God's light and life.

When we love, *we display the glory of God;*

we enable others to see the glory of God,

to see the power that sustains the universe,

to see the fire at the heart of all things.

And I know that this probably sounds like

a far-fetched interpretation of the word 'glory',

but, later on in John, Jesus prays to the Father, and says,

'The glory that you have given me, I have given them,

*so that they may be one, as we are one.'*

The glory that the Father gave to Jesus,

Jesus now gives to us –

*so that we may be one,*

that is: so that we might be *united in love*.

Jesus shares God's glory with us by leading us into love,

by restoring us to the love for which we were made.

So, you and I in this church or at home today –

insofar as we are learning to love one another,

learning to love our families and friends,  
learning to love even our enemies –  
*we* are becoming images of the glory of God.  
Very ordinary images,  
highly fallible images,  
not always very convincing images,  
but images nonetheless: images of God's life and light,  
images created, tended and restored by God.

And if we see *that* –  
if we see that we are made for love,  
that love is our deepest purpose,  
that love is what our lives are for,  
that love *is* what Jesus wants to bring back to life in us –  
well, then we *are*, I think, like Martha  
*glimpsing the glory of God.*

*Amen*