

The reading is John 11:1-45.

In the midst of all the restrictions, in the midst of all the talk about COVID 19, in the midst of so many announcements about what you can do and what you can't do, in the midst of all these things Easter slips into play. It slides into our world this year almost unnoticed. It's not far off now .. and, it would be so easy to lose sight of how this season is the most important season of the Christian year. It would be so easy to let the measures designed to flatten the curve of the virus to crowd out this season of the Christian year when we call to mind the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It would be so easy for our lives to be filled with the pandemic.

The gospel of John is preparing us for what is to come. We are coming to a climax. The gospel of John 'shapes itself around seven 'signs' or miraculous deeds that testify to who Jesus is. The first is the wedding at Cana: Jesus turns the water into wine; the others are the healings the official's son, the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda and the man born blind the signs include the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water. The raising of Lazarus is the 7th and final sign.

The reading begins with a 'certain man' being ill. There is nothing unusual in that, except this man is one whom Jesus 'loves'. We do not know how they knew each other; nor do we know what kind of confidences they had shared one another; his sisters are Mary and Martha, whom Jesus also loves. Mary, it seems, was the one who had anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. The village in which they live is Bethany; it is not far from Jerusalem, no more than 2 miles distant; it is set on the southern slopes of the Mount of Olives.

For Jesus to be there, well there is a risk. The disciples know that: they remind Jesus of how the Jews were wanting to stone him and now he is heading into a danger zone. They are carrying out their equivalent of what today we would call a risk management strategy; they are assuming that it is not a good idea for Jesus to head down to Lazarus' side while he still lives; maybe they feel that if Jesus says Lazarus is asleep, then the worst of the illness has passed - so why bother

going - but that is not what Jesus means. Lazarus is asleep: he is dead. On arrival in Bethany Jesus is deeply moved and will sweep for his friend.

There are quite a number of miscommunications. There are more to follow. It is a stressful time for the disciples as well as for Mary and Martha. It is not quite the same thing as the panic that can surround us in the present moment but it is clear that Jesus, on the one hand, and the others, on the other hand, are looking at things through different eyes. Mary, Martha, the disciples - they are operating on a down to earth physical level of what is unfolding - but Jesus, well, he sees things differently: there is a spiritual sight here. He talks about the glory of God. And in response to Martha's declaration that she knows that Lazarus will rise again on the day of the resurrection, sometime well into the future. Jesus responds: I am the resurrection and the life.

The Lazarus story is very familiar. Lazarus comes out of the grave. And while many of the Jews believe the plot to kill Jesus now takes centre stage. There is a sense in which this story of the raising of Lazarus is like a preparation for the dying and rising of Jesus himself.

What might we make of this story in the light of our situation today? Could it be that Lazarus - in a sense - is us? Lazarus is love: could it be that this is a story of Jesus' love for us - but more than that: the Aramaic version of his name - Eleazar - means 'God helps'. Could it be that Bethany might be likened to any of our towns and cities in lockdown? The Syriac form of the name means something like 'the house of misery', 'the poor house', 'the house of affliction'.

Of course we need to be careful of not letting the text do more than it should. But I wonder if there might be some merit in making more room for the Easter story in this troubled time. Some people are not well; some will have lost their jobs or are likely to do so. Some people are cut off from those whom they love; there is so much advice been given to us about what we may do and not do. That advice can change from one day to the next.

In the midst of this wave of uncertainty, here we have a story of how God helps us; the gospel of Matthew would say 'God is with us to the close of the age'. It is not a time to jump to conclusions and imagine that the drought the water shortages, the extreme heat, the bad air, the floods, and now the virus are a sign of God's displeasure; it is not a time to say that these are signs of God's anger with you or with the nation. In the midst of the corona virus menace this Lazarus story invites us to look beyond the pressure points for just a moment and know that God helps that God is with us in the house of affliction.

Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul will speak of how we are called to imitate Christ, and how those whom he loves are invited in share in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the kingdom of God and the care of the world. Last we heard that the man who was born blind - it was him, nor his parents who had sinned and that was the reason for his blindness. He was born blind. Those who follow Christ are not protected from harm, from illness, from suffering, from affliction. But stories like the Lazarus story reminds us of what lies beyond those moments. They remind us of the Easter story itself and that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.