

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

The gospel story about the raising of Lazarus is a well known one in the Bible and shows us the power God has over life and death. It also shows us how Jesus intercedes for us to God.

Lazarus, along with his sisters Martha and Mary, were Jesus’ very best friends, and Jesus often stayed at their house in Bethany.

We learn, earlier in John Chapter 11, that the sisters had sent word to Jesus saying “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard the message he said, “⁴ ... This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.’

It’s curious why Jesus didn’t immediately go to Bethany. Did he really think that Lazarus was not going to die from his illness or was he so sure that Lazarus would be restored to life he didn’t need to hurry. But by the time Jesus eventually arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. In verse 32 we hear that when Mary meets Jesus she kneels at his feet and speaks to him sadly, but almost accuses him, saying ³² ... “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved, troubled, and ‘groaned in spirit.’ This last phrase is better interpreted from the Greek as ‘angry.’ Why would he be angry? And why later are we told that Jesus wept, if he thought Lazarus was not ill to death?

John’s gospel, or indeed any of the gospels say little about the emotions of Jesus. And yet we know that he was both human and divine. Perhaps Jesus is showing his human side here. We know that Jesus really loves Lazarus, Martha and Mary, so Mary’s gentle weeping and the loud shrieking grief of the Jews present were perhaps enough to cause the welling up of emotions in Jesus – grief, fear, anger, frustration. Lazarus has been dead for four days – a significant amount of time. At the time of Jesus, it was believed that the life force of the body stayed in close proximity for three days. So, because Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, he is beyond all hope of life. Maybe that plays into the anger of Jesus – was he too late to restore Lazarus?

Jesus then goes to the tomb and says, “Take away the stone.” Martha points out that already a stench is coming from the tomb, so clearly in her mind she thinks it’s too late for her brother to be restored. But Jesus replies “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” This is a repetition of Jesus’ first reaction to hearing about the illness of Lazarus, when he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

The people present take away the stone. Then ‘Jesus looks upwards and says, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” Jesus then calls out to Lazarus, who walks out of the tomb, still with his grave bandages on.

Jesus performs many miracles in his time in the world, and we may think that all his power to reverse illness and to restore life came from him. In this story Jesus makes it clear to the crowd that it is God, his Father in

heaven, who has that power. Jesus says that the miraculous acts are also performed for another reason. So that people may believe that Jesus was sent by God. The Son of Man is on earth to show the way to God and to restore God’s Kingdom on earth. Jesus, who is both divine and human, is the vessel, the vehicle for this. Earlier in John’s gospel (14:10) Jesus says “¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you, I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” We are to look to the Father first but recognize that Jesus and God are part of the same whole.

The Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a very difficult concept to grasp and has occupied theologians to centuries. A mystery really for us. Suffice it to say that Jesus is our advocate with the Father - our route to God. Jesus is ‘at the right hand of God and intercedes for us.’ We are also told in the Bible that the Holy Spirit is an advocate. John 14:26, it says that the Holy Spirit will "teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

Today we commemorate All Saints Day, which was on November 1st. What is a Saint? It’s a person who is recognized as being holy and having a close relationship with God. The word "saint" means "holy". It’s usually meant as someone set apart or recognized as having had a particularly holy life. In most of his letters, the apostle Paul refers to his people as saints, including the church at Corinth, where there were significant moral and theological problems. To Paul, every Christian person is a saint. Different Christian denominations have varying definitions of what a saint is. In some churches the person needs to be officially Canonised or made a saint by the church. Most agree that saints are very, very close to God – one could almost say married to God, as they eventually devoted their lives completely to God.

In the same way that Jesus intercedes for us, so the saints, although totally human, intercede for others. This Christian doctrine, begun in about the 3rd Century, is held by most Catholic, Orthodox, Lutherans and Anglicans. It maintains that the saints can come between us and Christ. To intercede is to go or come between two parties, to plead before one of them on behalf of the other. In the Apostles’ Creed we say that we believe in the ‘communion of saints’, which is taken to mean the intercession of saints.

Where does all this intercession of Jesus and also of the saints mean for us?

First, it’s comforting to know that when we have trouble, need, difficulty or sadness in our lives, we have someone to turn to. We can pray to Jesus, knowing that he is our way to reach our Father, our God. We may pray for healing, wholeness and direction in our lives, and ask that we may always do God’s will. We also have the saints who can intercede for us. Maybe there is a particular saint who interests you, because of the life that they led, or that you feel close to, and to whom you wish to pray as well. The saints are very close to the Father and also close to us because they too were human. We can see them as a bridge between human and divine.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN