

# Why was Jesus Angry?

a sermon preached on the

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: John 11:1-45

Why was Jesus angry?

That most likely seems a surprising question in relation to today's gospel. After all, our English translations give no sense that he was! The Jerusalem Bible version we have heard says: "At the sight of [Mary's] tears, and those of the Jews who had followed her, Jesus said in *great distress*, with a *sigh that came straight from the heart*."<sup>1</sup> The NRSV says of Jesus' emotional state: "[Jesus] was *deeply moved* in his spirit, and was *troubled in himself*."<sup>2</sup> Most like one of those mushy sympathy cards is Today's English Version: "[Jesus'] heart was *touched* and he was *deeply moved*." There are occasions when we find that English translations of the Greek text are not only inadequate, but as in this case vacuous.

There are two Greek words describing Jesus' emotional engagement at this moment not far from Lazarus' tomb. The first literally means 'to be moved with anger' or 'to admonish sternly', and also means 'to snort', as in horses. Mark uses the same word in the story of the woman who anointed Jesus in the home of Simon the leper, for the anger of the disciples towards the woman for wasting money.<sup>3</sup> The second literally means 'to trouble', 'to stir up', 'to disturb'.<sup>4</sup> Our English translations give the impression that Jesus was emotionally reacting to the fact of Lazarus' death, and with something akin to pity or empathy for Mary, Martha and the crowd. Once again we find the sentimentalising tendencies of Bible translations. Whereas, in fact the Gospel says that Jesus was moved with *anger* and *admonishment*.

But why? What is there to be angry about? A common explanation on offer is that Jesus was angry about the fact of human death and the suffering this caused those he loved. According to this explanation Jesus is pictured as any mourner at a funeral, especially someone close. I have come find this unconvincing. After all, Jesus delays his departure from Galilee two days longer, explaining to his disciples that: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when he finally does decide to depart for Bethany he tells disciples: "For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe."<sup>6</sup> This death is clearly expected. So why is Jesus angry?

Could it be that Jesus is angry not about the fact of Lazarus' death itself, a death which he fully expected and waited for, and which in itself is perfectly normal? Rather, could it be that Jesus is angry with Martha, Mary, and the whole mourning family and crowd? A family, it is reckoned with whom he had some intimacy and experience. Could it be that he is angry with them *because of their attitude towards death*? John tells us that Jesus' anger is a response to this statement: "When Jesus saw [Mary] *weeping*, and the [many] Jews who came with her also *weeping*..." This crowd is behaving normally, according to the customs and rituals, in the face of this death. Mourning parties, weeping, wailing, all the trimmings, so to speak.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:33 Jerusalem Bible

<sup>2</sup> NIV "[Jesus] was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." KJV: "[Jesus] groaned in the spirit and was troubled." NEB is the nearest to the Greek: "[Jesus] was moved with indignation and deeply distressed."

<sup>3</sup> **εμβριμαομαι** *embrimaomai* Mark 13:4 Mark's story is not to be confused with John's version of Mary's anointing of Jesus at her home in Bethany in John 12:1-8, and referred to in John 11:1.

<sup>4</sup> **Ταρασσω** *tarassō*

<sup>5</sup> John 11:4

<sup>6</sup> John 11:15

There is another failure in English translations of today's story - two very different Greek words are both rendered by the one English word "weep". The one, which John applies in the case of Mary and the crowd means loud ritual wailing, a weeping not because of sadness but out of formal cultic requirement. However, when Jesus saw the place where Lazarus had been laid John employs an altogether different word, not the public ritual wailing of a crowd, but private and very quiet shedding of tears, a 'grief expressed by inarticulate sounds'.<sup>7</sup> Seeing all this ritual wailing, Jesus snorts with anger, admonishing them. Why be angry with mourners? Certainly, this is not the kind of pastoral practice I was taught at seminary, and there's no chance a funeral directing business would survive if it followed Jesus' lead!

Biblical scholar Gil Bailie offers this persuasive argument: This crowd is going through the customary ritual wailing, and Jesus is angry about the grip that death has on these people, even Mary and Martha.<sup>8</sup> Ritual mourning is a cult event, a mass behaviour which creates communal solidarity. The weeping and wailing that accompanies such cultic events exploits a natural death for its cathartic, tribal-bonding potential, and there's nothing like catharsis to galvanise a crowd. This rests on a certain fascination with death, and a communal unanimity against a perceived common enemy which such fascination generates. All this is immediately recognisable in our culture also. Theologian James Alison takes this a bit further and makes the case that our fascination with death in effect gives sacred meaning to death itself. If ever that was doubted, just consider our practices and customs around cemeteries, mausoleums, and other burial grounds - we are inclined to attribute to burial places a significance which makes them sacred *in themselves*. But why would Jesus be angry about this? Isn't this 'normal' human behaviour?

Well yes, that is indeed the point. It's because sacralising of death is 'normal' practice, that Jesus snorts with anger and indignation. The **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangellion* (good news) is that, in Jesus, death is nothing, no-thing. Death is not sacred, burial places are not sacred. And because that is so, weeping and wailing and 'normal' mourning practices fundamentally undermine the gospel's message. Mary, Martha and the crowd, in spite of Jesus' teaching and ministry among them, have fallen back under the spell of death as sacralised cultic event, as though death is some-thing. Jesus is angry about the grip that death has over these people.

"I am the resurrection and the life,"<sup>9</sup> Jesus famously tells Mary. The point of resurrection life is that death no-thing. Death itself is perfectly normal. "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."<sup>10</sup> To turn it into an occasion for ritual, cultic mourning which makes for communal solidarity is to attribute it a power which it does not legitimately possess, and thus to make the mourners victims of a cultic entrapment. Gil Bailie has suggested that today's story is unhelpfully entitled, and recommends that it would be more accurately labelled: 'The story of coaxing Martha and Mary into the Light of the Resurrection'. Jesus' raising of Lazarus is an invitation to see the world, including the natural world of death, altogether differently. It is an invitation to look away from our fascination with death, an invitation to contemplate with Jesus the freedom and liberation from all that binds us, which is resurrection life.

The church gives us this gospel story on the fifth Sunday in Lent, when we are well on our way toward Holy Week and its defining events. At Jerusalem, in Holy Week, Jesus taught us to look away from our fascination with death - no longer merely with words, but by acting out in his own body the undoing of death's fascination and hold over humankind. This and every eucharist recalls us to that good news. Jesus' instruction at the end of today's story is not primarily addressed to Lazarus, but to all of us bound up in fascination with death: "Unbind them, and let them go."<sup>11</sup> Thus unbound may we follow Thomas' lead: "Let us also go [to Jerusalem], that we may die with him!"<sup>12</sup>

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>7</sup> κλαίω *klaiō* vv31,33 δακρυῶ *dakruō* v35

<sup>8</sup> Bailie G, 'Notes on Lectures of the Florilegia Institute: The Gospel of John', cited at [http://girardianlectionary.net/res/john\\_tp-8\\_nts.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/res/john_tp-8_nts.htm) (cited on 6 March 2008)

<sup>9</sup> John 11:25

<sup>10</sup> John 11:26

<sup>11</sup> John 11:44

<sup>12</sup> John 11:16