

The God who wants to comfort us

Well, good evening everyone. Let me get your attention. Let me draw you together, and we're going to turn to focus on our big topic of the week, which this week we've called, 'The God who wants to comfort us'. And I thought I would start tonight by giving you one of my top tips that I think is guaranteed to ruin any good party. Okay? You up for that? Do not say that I am not a generous man. Okay, you may have your own individual ways of ruining parties, but here, I think, is a guaranteed way, regardless of who we are. A universal way for how to ruin a party. You ready for this?

So what you've got to do is, you turn up, you can imagine the scene, you've arrived at the party and it's great so far. Okay, the music is playing, the food is fantastic, the company is great, everyone that you want is there. And no-one at this point has been on the dance floor and made a fool of themselves, no-one's been singing karaoke in a kind of tone-deaf way. It's a fantastic party, you're enjoying it. Okay, you with me? Good. Well, here's how to ruin it. Just wait until the conversation is flowing, and just raise your voice a little bit, and say, 'I'll tell you what! This seems like an ideal moment for us to talk about death.'

What do you think? That is it, isn't it? If you get a reputation for saying that at parties, I think you can be guaranteed that you will not be invited to many parties, will you?

The fact is, of course, that talking about our mortality, talking about our death at parties seems so out of place. Now, I know that. But I guess my question tonight is, well, if not at parties, when? When do we talk about what will certainly happen to us? You might say, 'Well, maybe we could talk about it after work.' Well, we've had a hard day at the office or the factory or wherever we work. I just want to have my tea, watch some TV.

What about at the weekend? Well, not at the weekend because we've got all sorts of other things. We want to relax. We want to enjoy ourselves. What about if we go out for dinner with a friend, or maybe go round to their house? Well, no, it's not the time for that, is it?

Well, maybe at funerals. Now, this is fascinating. In my job, I do speak at funerals. But even there, as I look at people in the eye and ask them to allow the coffin to speak to them on a day like this, that reminds them that one day that will be theirs, I can see them looking at me, thinking, 'How inappropriate! How inappropriate, on a day like this, for you to speak to me about my death!' And I think, well, when are we going to speak about our mortality?

Now, there are many reasons why we really don't want to face up to the fact that one day we will die. We're very much an entertainment-driven culture, and we're all looking for anything we can to make us smile and to be happy, and on the sort of 'smileometer', death doesn't really rank very highly, does it?

We're also a culture that really fears the future. We don't really think about death because we don't have many answers for it. We fear the unknown, and I think we also fear what the fact of our death will mean for all those achievements. What do we know about a coffin? Well, there's no storage space in a coffin, is there? You don't take your record of achievements with you. You don't take any of your possessions with you. It's just you. And the fact of our death just threatens to ruin all those times, all those efforts, of their significance.

And I guess the other thing about death, which is why we don't really want to think about it, is, although we know it will happen to us, it just doesn't really seem round the corner for us, does it? We know at some distant point it will happen, but it just never seems to be round the corner for us. So when you combine all these things together, it seems to me that in our culture you can get through your entire life without having a serious conversation with anybody else about death.

Now, tonight, as you can probably tell, I want us to talk about our mortality. Now, I don't do that because I am a miserable, morbid Scotsman. I hope by now you have realised that that is not me. I don't want to be miserable. I don't want to be morbid.

But the reason I want to do it is because I do believe that in this book Jesus gives some amazing answers, some really comforting answers to you and me about what the followers of Jesus can expect. So grab your Gospels, and it'd be a great help if you would turn with me to John chapter 11. So if you could find John chapter 11, and tonight you are in for an amazing treat. You have 45 verses of John chapter 11 to look forward to. Is that all right? Excellent.

Well, we'll start at verse 1. Have a look at what we're told: "A man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is sick.' When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."

Now, I'm going to stop there, and I want to ask you a question. Given all that we have just been told, what do you think we should read next? So we've been told about the love of Jesus for this family, we've been told that this man called Lazarus is sick... Well, what do you think we should read next?

Maybe, well, Jesus heard this, he loved him and he jumped on the fastest camel he could, and, you know, headed to Bethany. Maybe. Or maybe you think, well, Jesus didn't actually have to get there to sort out the problem. He's done it before, a few chapters before, in John chapter 4 he had healed a royal official's son without even getting there; just a word, and the guy was healed. Well, Jesus could just have done that, couldn't he? On the fastest camel, or just where he was, he could have healed him straight away.

But listen to what we are told: verse 6. "Yet, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days." Now, that's shocking, isn't it? He heard he was sick, and he deliberately stayed where he was two more days, and why did he do it? Are you ready for this? This is shocking. He stayed where he was two more days to make sure that by the time he arrived in Bethany, the place where Lazarus had lived, he did this to make sure that when he arrived, Lazarus would have been dead for a few days.

The shocking news is, he deliberately stayed back to make sure that Lazarus was really dead. Now, you think, that is shocking, isn't it? But why do that? Well, Jesus deliberately did this so that the people of that time, and people like you and me, could see something glorious about God. You know, Jesus said that the sickness would not ultimately end in death, and that wasn't because he knew he was going to kind of rush in and rescue Lazarus before the final breath. He knew he would die, but he knew that ultimately he would come and raise him physically from the dead. And Jesus knew that would be a glorious thing that we could discover about God.

'Cause as wonderful as it is for Jesus to come and heal a sick person, how much more glorious is it for Jesus to come and raise a dead, and not just a dead, but a decaying man from the grave. Now, that is more glorious. And how much better for you and me? 'Cause yes, we would like people to be healed from sickness, but what is the great answer that we want? Not just sickness, we want the answer for physical death. And that is the reason that Jesus delays. So that we would have that answer for death, and so that we would see something glorious about God.

Now, in verses 7-16 we have a conversation recorded two days later with Jesus and his disciples, and I love this. Let me read it to you. Verse 7: "He said to his disciples," this is after the two days, "'Let us go back to Judea.' 'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?'" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by

night that he stumbles, for he has no light.' After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him.'"

And don't you love this? Verse 12: "His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep." They're so honest about themselves.

"So then he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us go also, that we may die with him.'"

Now, the bit I want to point out is how Jesus referred to the death of Lazarus. He knew for certain that Lazarus was physically dead. But how does he describe it? He says, 'He's fallen asleep.' Now, why is that? Well, Jesus was trying to make this amazing, outstanding claim, that, as easy as it is to wake someone from an afternoon nap, that is how easy it is for Jesus to raise someone physically from the dead.

Now, let me just try and explain what I mean. Now, there are occasions when I kind of wander down in the house, and my wife is asleep on the sofa. Okay, now you might think that is a lovely, cute sight, there she is, not always snoring away on the sofa, but she's kind of having a nap on the sofa, and I come into the room, and well, I don't go, 'Oh no! She's having a nap!' There she is, she's kind of purring away, and if I want to wake her up, it's quite easy.

Now, I've learned the lessons of history, that I've got to do it in a right way, because although koalas are quite cute, they can also be quite vicious if they are woken in the wrong way, so I don't want a grumpy Victoria. But I don't find it that difficult to wake her from sleep.

Well, as easy as it is for me to wake my wife from a nap, that is how easy it is for Jesus to raise someone physically from the dead. Well, that's his claim. Let's have a look at how he gets on when he arrives. In verse 17: "On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.'"

Now, you can feel the disappointment, I think, in her words. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." You know, if you had been around, if you'd got here quickly, then this would not be the scenario. And yet, even through the words of disappointment, there is still some hopeful expectation that maybe Jesus could do something. The question is, what could he do? It's not as if he'd just arrived and Jesus has just been on some advanced paramedics course, and that he can apply the CPR. It's not that at all, is it? He's been dead for days. And it's not even that Jesus can help with the arrangements for the funeral. He's missed that. But now that he's arrived, what could he do?

Well, look with me at what Jesus says in verse 23: "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' And Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' And Jesus said to her," and note these words, "'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord,' she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'"

Well, there's Martha, and she believed in some sort of future hope, some sort of future resurrection. That's what many of the Jews at the time believed, that there would be a future day when all those who had faith in God would be raised physically from the dead. And that's what she hoped. She knew she would see her brother again, but at some distant day in the future. And

Jesus believed in that day as well, but here, do you see, he makes it much more personal and much more centred on him. 'Yeah, yeah, there's a future day coming, but let me tell you about me. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Now, what does he mean by that? Well, he says two things, and you've got to see the two things to understand what Jesus means. He says, "I am the resurrection," and he says, "I am the life."

Now, what does he mean? "I am the resurrection." He says, 'I am the one who is going to be responsible for raising people physically from the dead at that future day. I'm not just going to be part of the show; I am going to be the star of the show. I'm the one who's going to be physically raising people from the dead.' And I love this, because it's all physical. The ultimate hope is physical resurrection from the dead.

I don't know what your hope of heaven is, but it's not some boring existence, you know, sitting on a cloud, playing a harp. Does that excite you? You know, maybe a few rounds of the harp... But what about after that? Well, Jesus says the ultimate aim at the end for all his followers is physical resurrection from the dead. "I am the resurrection," he says.

But not just that. He says, "I am the life." And this is when it gets really controversial. Because Jesus is claiming that we may exist without him, but that we can't live without him. He says it's very possible to exist in the world, to breathe, to dance, to watch things, to listen to things, and yet not to live, because only by coming to follow him personally can we really find life, spiritual reconnection with the God who made us.

Now, last week we thought about that illustration of the whale and the beach, and it's a bit like this. If you watch the whale on the beach, it can gasp for breath, can't it? It can take a little breath, it can just about move a little bit, but is it really living? Well, no. It's not living. It has to be taken from that environment and put in its wonderful environment of the ocean to truly thrive. Well, Jesus is claiming that only he can give us life. He is the resurrection and the life, and therefore he can say, "He who believes in me will live," or "He or she who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." That is, whoever believes in Jesus will live physically one day, even though they will die physically. But whoever comes to Jesus personally will live in a way that will never stop.

And then Jesus asks that wonderful question to Martha. You see how personal it is? "Do you believe this?" And she says, well, notice what she says? Not simply, 'yes'. She says, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." That is, her expectations were of this promised Jewish Messiah, who, when he arrived on the scene, he would be responsible for all the physical resurrections, and she's saying, 'I've got it. I know who you are. You are this promised Messiah.'

Well, that's a big claim, isn't it? To be the resurrection and the life. But we all know that there are people who make big claims, but who cannot substantiate them. For example, if I said to you right now that I have the greatest voice in the world. You know, 'Look out Frank Sinatra, you have not a patch on me. I have the greatest voice – just you wait!' Now, what would you say to me?

For those of you who have heard me sing before, you might be thinking, 'Please don't,' but otherwise you might say to me, 'Prove it! Prove it!' And how would I prove it? Well, someone would get me a microphone, and I think within the first two seconds, your lovely delicate ears would be crying for mercy. Because it is very obvious, if you listen to me sing, that I am tone deaf. I could make a big claim, but I cannot substantiate it. But what about Jesus? Big, big claim, to have the power of life and death. Well, let's see how he gets on.

Look at verse 28: "After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.' When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how

quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said," and you can see the same sort of tension here, can't you? "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied."

And the next verse? The shortest verse in the Bible. "Jesus wept. Oh, then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'" See what they're saying? 'Oh yeah, he could do certain tricks. He could do certain miracles. But what about this one? This man's been dead for days – what can he do now? Shed a few tears?' Well, what can he do?

Well, look on, verse 38: "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said." You've got to be pretty sure of yourself to do this, haven't you? "But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.'" In other words, she says he stinks. You know, don't move the stone.

"Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'"

You know what happened? "The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.' Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him."

Well, there you go. The evidence that Jesus has the power over life and death. Now, it seems to me that in many aspects of our life, we are very sceptical. That we take a lot of convincing. But there seems to be one area of life where people will believe almost anything without any basis. And that is the area of death. We will believe all sorts of things about the future without any basis at all. But what about Christians? All this talk about Jesus as the resurrection, the life, do we have any basis for that? Do we just want to believe it because it sounds so good? Well, no. here is Jesus, raising a man physically from the dead.

Now, I would never dream of doing that. At any funeral I was at, or that I conducted. You know, imagine that: I go to the coffin, and I say, 'I'm just going to open up the coffin for a minute, and I'm going to talk to the body.' Do you think I would be asked to conduct any funerals in my life again? You've got to be pretty sure of your power for this, and Jesus is convinced that he can raise people from the dead.

Now, what we've got to understand is that this is not a quaint story. This happened. This has been recorded by reliable people so that we can believe Jesus' great promise to be the resurrection and the life. Now, the question is, will we believe? Will we come to Jesus, surrender to him as our King, come as we are, and follow him? Because if we do, Jesus says, 'If you come to me, you will live now, and that life will never stop, and the ultimate end for you as one of my followers is to be physically resurrected in a physical new world without pain and without suffering, to live in the presence of God forever.'

Now, there's a lot to think about there, isn't there? So why don't you go back onto your tables and see what you make of what Jesus has just said?

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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