

Martha

Imagine Martha, her brother Lazarus was ill. In despair she did the only thing she could do. There was no NHS, no hospitals. Lazarus may have just had the flu, that was turning into sepsis, but Martha would not know that. She only knew that her brother was very ill and that he would die if nothing was going to happen. Like many other men of Lazarus age he would die. So she and her sister sent a message to the only one who could heal him: Jesus. We do not know from John how the three of them know Jesus. Only from the message we know that the relationship was deep and that he loved Lazarus. From Luke we know that Jesus stayed for a while at the house of Mary and Martha, but Lazarus was not mentioned in that context.

But Jesus did not come. Not in time.

So Lazarus dies. And Mary and Martha have to bury him, most likely on the same day he died.

Surrounded by family and friends Mary and Martha are at home mourning their brother's death. Can you Martha's their feelings? A lot of them are in mixed up in grieving: denial, unbelief, anger, frustration, anxiety, overwhelmed, helpless, hostility, and many more. And always the brain goes 'what if', what if Martha could have done this or that? What if she had sent the message to Jesus earlier? What if Jesus would have been on time? He has healed so many people, why did he not heal Lazarus?

And then Martha hears that Jesus is approaching she goes to meet him. What would we have said to Jesus? Where were you! Couldn't you have been here earlier? She phrases her complaint a bit softer: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." This is normal, this is what we would expect anyone to say. But then she surprises us with the following statement of faith: "But even now I

know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” What did she had in mind? What in this hopeless situation where everything is still so raw, but would she expect Jesus to do? Can she hope that Jesus would make Lazarus alive again? Is this still her denial of the grieving process speaking? Or is there a glimmer of faith?

Jesus confirms this glimmer of faith: “Your brother will rise again.”

That brings a halt to Martha’s thoughts: surely that is not possible today! It must be at the end of times: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” [When the Messiah returns, but does she yet believe that Jesus is the Messiah?]

Jesus then makes his greatest claim so far in John: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me (e.g. ‘trust me’, even though they die, they will live, and everyone who believes in (= trust me) me will never die.”

Martha emboldened by these words can add her own statement of faith: “Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” .

In her time of despair, mourning, doubt and turmoil, Martha had faith in Jesus, she believes in him, she trust him, that whatever he would do it would be good for her and for her sister. Does she know what he would do? Does she demand from him that he does something very specific? No, her faith in him is relational. Now that Jesus is here, things will be fine. In what way? Perhaps in the distant future Lazarus will be alive again, at the end of the times, and Jesus will do this. What she yet cannot even fathom is that Lazarus will be alive just a few moments later ...

We see Martha again at the end of the story. Jesus has met with Mary and is now approaching the grave with all the other mourners. He has shown his own grief and emotion (Jesus wept). For Lazarus?

He knew that he would be raised again! For Martha and Mary, for the hardship that they had to go through? Or for the people who did not want to believe in him, yet? It is unclear.

Arriving at the cave where Lazarus was buried, Jesus demands the stone to be rolled away. And here Mary is questioning ... is this what he really means? Or does he want to honour Lazarus dead body? "Lord, there is already a a stench because he has been dead for four days". Jesus the challenges her faith: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So, reluctantly the remove the stone. Maybe that Martha ordered them to do this, as the sister.

And then Jesus prayer makes clear that what is going to happen next, was according to Jesus's plan, even at the time when he waited to come to Mary and Martha upon receiving the message. Father, thank you that you have heard me, I knew you always hear me, but I have said this for the people here witnessing, so that they believe that you have sent me."

And then: "Lazarus, come out!" And he came out....

What would Martha feel and think. Would or could she believe what Jesus has done, and therefore believe more fully in him? What about the others? What about us?

Conclusions

1. The raising of Lazarus is a clear sign that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. He is sent by God. Jesus did his miracles so that people believe that he is the Son of God.

2. This resurrection however is not greatest miracle that Jesus aims for all of us: Those who believe in him, even though they die, will live. This is the final eternal life. The victory over death won on the cross. Lazarus, will have lived and he will have died again. And then,

assuming that he also believes in Jesus, will also live again eternally. That is the final miracle. Not that Jesus heals us today, makes things ok today. He does, to show himself. But all of us still have to die, to gain eternal life in Jesus.

3. What then is faith? Alice, in her book, speaks about the Shield of Faith, and how difficult it is to maintain faith in the darkness of our earthly lives. She uses Martha as an example. Even though she could not believe that Jesus would raise Lazarus from death on that day, she maintained her faith in Jesus. As she knew that she and Lazarus would live eternally with Jesus. She did not know how, and by what means, and her faith would again be sorely tested when she heard that Jesus had died on a cross. But here she held up the shield of faith: Jesus is her and Lazarus' redeemer.

4. In the armour of God, Paul says of the Shield of faith: "take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one". The shield of faith is an active spiritual weapon. In the darkness of our lives, the enemy will compound whatever we experience with additional flaming arrows: doubt, self-doubt, god-doubt, you are not good enough, it is your fault, nothing can fix this mess that you are in, etc, etc.

It is with our faith, that we shield against these lies of the enemy. The certainty of the salvation we have in Jesus. The certainty that Jesus is with us and never leaves us nor forsakes us. The certainty, that whatever we do wrong and mess up, Jesus will forgive us and has forgiven us. That he has died for us, and in that way has bought our righteousness and given it to us. Out of grace, not because of what we have achieved. That Jesus has the victory already. It is the faith that says, despite everything in our lives: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is now in the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit

5. Alice, also speaks about linking our shields of faith together. Like

the Roman soldiers did in warfare. We have to help each other in times of despair. When one's faith is wavering another faith may strengthen them. By encouraging them, by reminding them of the love of Christ and his salvation, by praying for each other. Paul speaks about us as the Church being the body of Christ. Imagine this body of Christ equipped with a large shield of faith, made up of all our faiths together.

6. Faith is also a gift of the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor 12. v4: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit". v7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." v8: "To one is given through the Spirit": and then there follows a whole list: wisdom, knowledge, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernments of spirits, various kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues. And among that list is also the gift of faith (v9). If we lack this gift of faith, ask the Holy Spirit to increase it for you! Like the father of the boy with epilepsy: 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

Prayer