

St Hilda's Sermon – 2nd April 2017

During the last week we have been hearing news of Cyclone Debbie in Australia. There were the first reports of its forming, then speculation as to how big it would be and where it was likely to hit land and then warnings to people to prepare or to evacuate the area. Even after it was no longer a cyclone Debbie continued to cause havoc. This week our gospel tells of that gathering storm that is going to soon envelope Jesus.

John's gospel is very different to the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, which are called the synoptic gospels. They look at the story through the same eyes and can be compared quite easily. John is quite different. 90% of the content of John does not appear in the other gospels. Why? It was written quite a while after the other gospels. People knew the story, who Jesus was, what he did. He doesn't need to tell of Jesus birth, baptism, being tested by Satan, no parables, no exorcisms. He does tell of the stories we have heard of in the last few weeks, the conversation with Nicodemus, meeting the Samaritan woman, healing the man born blind and today, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In Holy week we will re-enact the washing of the disciple's feet on Maundy Thursday, another story that only appears in John.

John is not particularly concerned with the timeline. He puts the cleansing of the Temple toward the beginning, where the other gospels have it toward the end in Holy Week. Here he begins this chapter talking about Mary who poured perfume on Jesus feet and wiped his feet with her hair. But this doesn't happen in John's gospel until the next chapter (12) just before he enters Jerusalem on the donkey.

Last time I preached I talked about Jesus on a journey from Jerusalem to Galilee. He appears to be based in the north, Galilee, but he travels frequently to the south for the festivals and most of the action of John's gospel takes place here around Jerusalem.

As he travels to Jerusalem for the major festivals he heals and teaches and the Jews become increasingly concerned about him, trying to stone him on a number of occasions. He carries out healings, but not the way they should have been done. He doesn't obey the rules but will heal at any time and frequently that anytime is on the Sabbath, the holy day when no work may be done.

In John the teaching of Jesus is pointedly in opposition to that of the Jewish leaders. Last week Graham spoke about the healing of a man born blind. The day that that occurred was the Sabbath and when the Pharisees investigate Jesus accuses them of spiritual blindness – the group most devoted to following the Law!

The debate is about who Jesus is. Could he be the Messiah? If he is he is behaving in a very unexpected way and not obeying the rules. He doesn't come from the right place

(Bethlehem not Galilee). If he is not then he is blaspheming in claiming to be God and must die. There is no in between position. They try to seize him but he slips away.

In our story today, Jesus hears of his friend Lazarus serious illness. He is probably about a day's journey away on the far side of the Jordan near where John the Baptist had been baptizing. Probably Lazarus died shortly after the messenger left to tell Jesus. Jesus takes 2 days and then decides to go to him. When he arrives he is told that Lazarus has been dead 4 days.

The disciples are not keen to go especially when they are told by Jesus that Lazarus is sleeping. They know the situation and that they are all in danger. Thomas is not being over dramatic when he says: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Jesus tells them Lazarus is dead after an initial misunderstanding about sleep. But he says that the illness and death of Lazarus is "for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Glorification may sound exciting and good news but when Jesus speaks of glorification in John's gospel he is referring to the cross.

In those times people there would be deep mourning for 7 days followed by 30 days of lighter mourning. It was regarded that after 3 days the person would be most definitely dead, not in a coma (as we would describe it) and beyond any hope of recovery. It was a hot climate and burial was (and still is) fast. Mistakes could happen but after 3 days there was no doubt. The body would have begun to deteriorate and smell as Martha points out to Jesus.

Weeping was not a polite snuffle behind a handkerchief but loud and dramatic. If you have seen the pictures of bodies killed by terrorists in the Middle East and the crowds of people and the wailing of the mourners you get some idea of what it was like. The louder the wailing the more you expressed your love for the one who had died. There were rules about giving room to the family but it was very important to go to pay your respects. The Talmud instructed them to visit the sick and show sympathy to mourners. It was very close to Jerusalem so many people would have gone from there.

So the place was crowded and noisy and full of people who would have known exactly who Jesus was and how he was regarded by the Jewish authorities. Jesus was walking into trouble. He is no fool; he knows what he is doing. Probably the 2 days that he waited were to pray to the Father. Previously when the Jews tried to catch they couldn't because it was not his time. This time however was likely to be different.

It is emotional and Jesus shows his emotion. He was deeply moved in his spirit. The word used implies a sort of emotion that caused a groan to be wrung out of him. N. T. Wright translates it as: "he was deeply stirred in his spirit, and very troubled....Jesus burst into tears."

It is not just the emotion of the occasion but also the knowledge that he is voluntarily stepping into a set of circumstances that will not end well for him. The final act of his earthly life is about to begin.

He knows what he will do. He will raise Lazarus from the dead. In John's gospel there is no room for any other explanation. As with the man born blind where a form of medical treatment would not be sufficient to heal him, here there is no possibility that he is in a coma. He has been dead too long.

The response must either be belief in him and who he claims to be, from the Father God at the very least, or complete rejection. There is no in between position possible for the onlookers - or for ourselves.

The next section in the Bible is entitled 'the plot to kill Jesus'. Some believe and some go to tell the authorities who believe that they must act and kill him to stop him destroying their system of worship. They know that he cannot be the Messiah; He doesn't come from the right place; he doesn't behave as he should; they have too much to lose to believe.

For us the challenge is for each of us to consider 'what do I believe?' Who is Jesus for me? Is he the Son of God, who came and lived on earth, died on the cross and rose again, overcoming death and opening the way for all of us, if we choose, to have a relationship with God? Or is that too difficult and demanding, a possibility to be ignored and put to one side, maybe for consideration another day at a more convenient time or simply ignored as something that cannot possibly be true?

And, if I accept Jesus for who he says he is, what does that mean for me? For him it was not an easy way to take. He ended up on the cross, an appalling way to die. For him glorification came through a crown – of thorns- and lifted up on a throne –a cross. Many of his disciples also died for what they believed and today, in many countries, believing in Jesus can result in prison or even death.

In New Zealand it is more likely to possibly be ridicule rather than death but it is becoming more difficult to explain who Jesus was and is to those around us. The media is far more likely to look for the dramatic fall from grace rather than preach the good news. Easter is a time of year when there are often stories about the spring festival from the northern hemisphere that the Christians usurped, and bunnies and buns are more popular than crosses. If we stay silent it is easy for many people to believe nothing.

On the pews are envelopes to support the radio programme that volunteers put on to explain what it is really about. You may wish to consider supporting them.

Prayer: Lord, help me to take time these next 2 weeks leading up to Easter to pray about what you mean to me. Help me to draw closer to you, to know you more deeply, to

experience your love for me and to be able to share that with others in my actions and even in my words. Amen.

Judy Youmans