

St James' Church, Weybridge

Lent 5 – 22nd March 2026

Today's Readings

First Reading Romans 8:6-11

As human beings we urgently need the Holy Spirit within us, leading us, so that we live in ways that are pleasing to God. We receive the Holy Spirit when we open our hearts to the power and presence of our risen Jesus Christ.

Gospel John 11:1-45

The raising of Lazarus was an astonishing miracle which prefigured not only the resurrection of Christ, but the life-giving power of his Spirit within us. The word of Jesus raised Lazarus just as the Father's word would raise him on Easter morning to new life.

HOMILY *"Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* (John 11: 25, 26)

Today's long Gospel reading is unique to John. It speaks of the prefiguring of the Resurrection of Jesus, in the death and raising of his good friend Lazarus. The setting for this miracle is familiar to us; Lazarus' is very unwell, and is at the end of his life and expected to die, a set of circumstances through which our Lord reveals something new and wonderful to his followers. No doubt the dramatic visual impact of Lazarus coming out of the tomb, 4 days after his death was awe inspiring! But why were the disciples, or us today surprised by this, that Jesus has power over all things, as he had taught just days before. Furthermore, He asks a direct question of all involved, including Martha, "Do you believe this?" How do we respond today to that question of belief?

Today's Gospel miracle is the sixth, and I would suggest most significant of John's "signs". And it is easy when looking at the text to miss one of the most striking moments, when the fusion of Deity and humanity meet with the reality of our everyday life and struggle. Jesus delays going to see Lazarus when he could have been there earlier and his disciples don't understand. Then, when messengers tell Jesus that his friend has died, he weeps. The longest miracle story contains the Bible's shortest verse and how significant that moment is; in the face of it all, "Jesus began to weep." (John 11:35) But why, and what is he weeping for? Our Lord must have known he would raise Lazarus from the dead, so why the outpouring of grief?

A traditional view holds that Jesus, confronted with Mary weeping at his feet, recognises his own fate; his betrayal and death – the Cross that waits ahead. (This has similarities with Luke 7:38, *"She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair."*) Perhaps in this moment of grief, Jesus caught a glimpse of the agony that he was to face in his own death upon the Cross and he recognised the genuine human agony, both physical and mental of bereavement. Yet, these tears are not self-intended. It seems that when Mary met our Lord, full of her own grief and emotion over her brother's death, surrounded by others who were also weeping and mourning, Jesus is deeply moved by their grief and he weeps with them. For just for a moment, we see our Lord filled with human emotion and in the process. Jesus knows what it is to be us, to mourn the loss of a loved one. And therefore, God knows. When Jesus dies upon the Cross, God knows what it is like to lose a Son.

Of course we are told that Jesus knew love and to be separated by death from those whom we love is so final, so difficult. In that moment he must have experienced for himself that which each one of us has to go through many times during our lifetime. Bereavement, loss, separation, pain, anguish, hurt, questions, darkness, fear and so much more; the emotions of the human heart.

Tomorrow lunchtime at Guildford Cathedral, many will gather to remember Bishop Andrew Watson – alongside his family, friends, and colleagues - a difficult occasion. At Bishop Andrew's request, his funeral is being held in the context of the Eucharist, the liturgy in which heaven and earth meet and the veil is thin - where Jesus meets us today in bread and wine, the very presence of our Lord today in our midst as we "Do this to remember him." Our prayers are surely with all of Andrews family, and his close colleagues at this very difficult time. We stand with them and weep, and pray, but also have hope that death is not the end, the very hope Andrew himself expressed so movingly in his letters before he died. Because he believed, as I do, as all people of faith are called to believe, that with Jesus there is life everlasting. As Jesus taught, *"Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."* (John 11: 25, 26)

Even though our Lord knew that Lazarus would live, he was still moved to weep with the ones he loved and in so doing he reveals Gods abounding compassion for all people. Jesus cared about their sorrow, just as he cares about ours, today. He didn't refrain from showing emotion and we should not be ashamed to express our true feelings to God, who knows us, loves us and calls us by name.

So, our Lord, with his God given foreknowledge of all that is to come, raises Lazarus as a form of reassurance to his disciples, before his impending rejection, judgement, suffering and passion. Jesus wants them to understand that, though he suffers and dies, he is the Lord of all things and all time and that God has power over death and will raise him to new Life – and us too!

Death is not the end of the story; the end of the Gospel. Now, with God there is life. The resurrection of Lazarus is God's salvation in action. It foreshadows Christ's own Resurrection eight days later and at the same time anticipates the resurrection of all the righteous – and the hope of eternal life, heaven. As we are reminded by St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* (1 Corinthians 15: 55) Death is not the end for with Jesus there is life! As Holy Week approaches we are called to answer the same question as the disciples, "Do you believe this?"

Hopefully we can answer 'Yes Lord, I believe'. But for many of us there are still doubts, and so we are called to walk with Jesus from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, as we are drawn right into the heart of God's mission of salvation; this may cause us to face our own sadness, bereavements and challenge our faith too. Perhaps only then can we emerge, with faith, into the new light of Easter Day; and it is a troubling journey through death to new life. This is a walk that will change us if we allow it; a trip filled with tears of sadness and of joy as we journey with others here in Weybridge.

Jesus weeps with us in our times of darkness and he loves us into eternal life. We, his followers, disciples today are called to journey with him deeper in faith. Today's Gospel, the prefiguring of the Resurrection in the raising of Lazarus, should offer us hope that death really is not the end; for with God there is life and that new life is granted to each one of us. Make a commitment to journey this Holy Week and Easter with the Lord; the way that leads to resurrection and life eternal. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, March 2026