

Sunday 26th March 2023.

Community.

Scripture: John 11:1-23 and 24-44

This can be seen as a strange episode in the life of Jesus.

Word comes to him from Martha and Mary, that their brother Lazarus was ill. They were probably the closest friends that Jesus had, apart from the Apostles.



Jesus's reaction seems one of unconcern and he did not leave for Bethany where the brother and sister lived for two days by which time Lazarus had been buried for four days.

Now Jesus had delayed for two days so it is likely that Lazarus would have been dead by the time Jesus had arrived.

Yet, when Jesus had received the news about Lazarus, he 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."*

At the time, those that followed Jesus would, no doubt, have scratched their heads at another statement from Jesus that they did not understand and would not until after His Resurrection.

When Jesus did decide to go to Bethany, the apostles were reluctant at first, knowing that the last time he was in the area, there was an attempt to stone him. It was, however, nearing the time for Jesus to meet his destiny. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem and word would quickly reach the people.

Jesus made another statement that, no doubt, would have puzzled his followers when he told them that *“Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”*

Should it have puzzled them?

Twice, by then, Jesus had raised two people from death.

There was the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader, as told by Mark in 5:21–43. Jesus took her hand, told her to get up. Immediately she did and began to walk around. I find it interesting that Jesus then told her parents get her something to eat.

There was the son of the widow of Nain, a town near Capernaum. Now that woman was in dire need. With no husband and no son, she would be left with no income, penniless and with no home. The body of the son was being carried out of the town for burial and with her was the whole town. Having pity on the widow, Jesus touched the bier on which the body was laid and told the son to get up which he did at once. That story is in Luke 7:11–16.

It was different with Lazarus. Both the girl and the son had been dead for only a short while. By the time Jesus arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

Arriving at Bethany, Jesus is met by Martha, the busy sister of Lazarus. She slightly admonishes him but lessens those words with a statement of faith that God will give Jesus whatever he asks of him.

This exchange leads to one of the key statements ever made by Jesus.

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Moments later, Martha acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah. She leaves Jesus and soon after Mary come to him.

It is then that Jesus raises Lazarus.

The two most significant events in our lives that we have no control over are our births and our deaths. The most obvious truth is that we are there for both, but only one of them will we be aware of – our births. Although we may be vocal at that time, we will not be aware of that, and we will be silent at death.

Both times are usually times of community. At our births it will be the community of our families, and close friends. At our deaths, it will be the same, but usually far more. Sometimes it is not. When my father died in 2005, there were over 130 people at his funeral. There were only ten physically present at my mother's funeral in 2021, because of COVID lockdown, although there were many on-line. I recall feeling quite annoyed. My mother deserved more. No doubt many people have felt the same at their loved ones' funerals during the lockdowns.

There was community when Lazarus died. Mostly, there always are community around special events in our lives but – what about other times? What of community in our daily lives? Has community changed?

About thirty years ago, in America, a man visiting his local bowling alley, noticed the number of people bowling alone, not in the groups he had seen in years gone by. His observation led to a book called *Bowling Alone* in which he reported on the disconnection between people that had occurred causing the disintegration in social structures in that country. I was studying for the Diploma of Community Work at Chisholm TAFE in Frankston at that time – which is how the book came to my attention.

Although I have never undertaken any formal research into whether this phenomenon had surfaced in Australia, I have watched with interest to see if it has occurred and thinking back over my own life experiences.

I grew up in Highett, and saw the street where I lived, change from an unmade road with a very smelly and dirty creek at its lower end that separated us from several streets that would once connect when the roads were made. That was in the early 1960's.

The creek held the liquid waste from the Highett Gasworks which were located where the Moorabbin Magistrates Court now stands. It was black and foul, and I ruined clothes jumping over it, much to my mother's annoyance.

That street was a community. Most families mixed, although there were some stay outs. Of course, there was the community of the Harding St boys against the Herbert St boys, and the occasional yonnie fight. Yonnies were small stones, good for throwing. As kids we were in other people's houses, and they were in ours.

I mention this because of the number of houses I now see that have high front fences, that, to me, are a symbol of the rejection of community. Once, driving along Station St from Aspendale to where I lived for a time at 389 Station St in Bonbeach, I counted at least 275 high fences. They may have been a defence from the noise of trains, yet they seemed, almost forbiddingly, a rejection of neighbours, one of the first communities that we, as children, experience.

One of Jesus' most important parables was that of the Good Samaritan. He spoke of the Jewish traveller who was waylaid by robbers and left for dead. As he lay there, a priest, passing by, saw the man and crossed to the other side of the road. So, too, did a Levite pass by on the other side of the road, both unwilling to become defiled by touching an injured and bloodied man. However, a Samaritan saw the man and tended him, carrying him to an inn and paying for anything the innkeeper might need to spend on the injured man. The Samaritan was the good neighbour. Jesus was saying by this parable that the old distinction was now gone.

The Samaritans and the Hebrews did not mingle, as to the Jews, they were a mixed-race people whereas the Hebrews were the pure descendants from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This parable is in Luke 10:27 – 37.

God chose the Hebrews to bring into the world his plan for its redemption and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In him the separation of the Hebrews had come to an end. He had come for all humankind. In time all humankind would

be one community under Christ, an eventually that has yet to come, and perhaps will not.

It is in community that lays the beginnings of the breakdown of suspicion and fear between people, first in the local neighbourhood and then wider. Yet, and it is so sad, we are living in a time where community is breaking down. Divisions are being sought and created between people, and there are increasing incidents of violence. We see it in the media every day.

The Pharisees and the scribes that opposed Jesus have their descendants today in our society. They are called by different names and most, I suspect, would be offended if they were identified as such, for most seem to be opposed to the word of God.

Yet, at the same time, there remain many communities with members who are supportive of each other. There are sporting communities. There are communities for senior citizens. There are communities for art appreciation, for the reading and discussion of books, for craft work, for helping in the neighbourhoods where people live, and many others.

I live in a community in a retirement village. There is caring and help. It is not, however, a Christian community. I have identified 19 people who hold active Christian beliefs. We are not allowed to hold religious meetings in the community facilities yet recently a resident spoke with Village management and was told she could place Christian material in letter boxes. This was the Australian Christian Lobby's action plan of distributing the Gospel of John to all households. There are 113 households in the Village. I have

heard positive comments so far, and these from people who are not churchgoers. At the same time, these people rally around when there is a death. In the five years since I moved in there have been thirteen deaths of residents plus those of relatives of residents.

I have been illustrating community here. These are grassroots communities and that was where Jesus started and aimed his ministry.

I want now to list those to whom Jesus turned his attention as mentioned in the Gospels:

- the poor
- the blind
- the lame
- the crippled
- the lepers
- the hungry
- the miserable or to put it another way. those who weep.
- the sinners
- the prostitutes
- the tax collectors
- the demoniacs or, again, putting it another way, those possessed by unclean spirits.
- the persecuted
- the captives
- all who labour and are heavy-laden.
- the rabble who knows not the law
- the crowd

- the little ones
- the least
- the last
- the babes
- the lost sheep of Israel.

There are twenty-one on this list and, perhaps, some could be joined to it.

All these people were despised by the Pharisees and the scribes.

Why?

Essentially it was because these people were seen as being of lower social classes than those who governed them and despised them. The Pharisees and the scribes were the leaders of the Jewish society in Jesus' time.

Do you see this at work today?

It is Satan at work, intent on tearing apart communities.

That is happening today in our time. Communities, and society is made up of communities, are being torn apart because too many people are focussed on themselves.

Jesus told a parable about this when He spoke of the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisee stood proud and upright, boasting on his keeping of the Law and his fasting, obsessed with his own virtue. The publican would not look up, and humbly asks God for mercy.

It was the publican, sometimes called the tax collector, who was justified before God, not the boasting Pharisee. It was the Pharisee who was the sinner. The text is Luke 18: 9 – 14

It was the Pharisees who would bring about the death of Jesus and bring to humankind the way to achieving redemption and salvation if we say Yes to Jesus and seek to do His will.

Two millennia ago, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, stated that Jesus was the Messiah. She did so publically in front of the community that had rallied around her and Mary, her sister. We read in John 12:45:

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

We who follow Jesus Christ are a community. We could be called the community of faith. We could be called the community of hope. We are a community of action.

I have used this illustration before many times. Its inspiration comes from that old hymn which goes, *Jesus bids us shine with clear pure light, You in your small corner and I in mine.*”

As I have said before, there are two ways of being in a corner. One is to face into it away from the world. That was is to exclude community. The second way is to face outwards from the corner with arms outstretched in welcome. That is the community of inclusion.

We who follow Christ welcome the world and will help all in the world that we can. There is, however, one point of our welcome

and that is that we seek to bring others into the embrace of Jesus Christ.

We will, as Christians, try to help all and to welcome all but not at the denial of our faith in Jesus Christ. Sadly, that seems to be the point at which many of us who follow Jesus Christ are often excluded, even within families.

Jesus said, as written in Matthew 10:32 –

³² “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”

That is, of course, rejection but not of the love that God has for all of us. There will be sadness in heaven but still hope for repentance until the time comes when death will take the last chance of repentance away for the sinner.

Lazarus had a second chance at life. Jesus said that Lazarus only slept. There are health situations that seem like death, and at the time of Jesus, medical knowledge was still vastly limited. To his sisters and the community of mourners, Lazarus was dead. Perhaps he was but to Jesus, the Son of God, given powers beyond human understanding, it was only sleep.

There are many in the world today who are asleep to the wonder of the community that we who follow Jesus have in our lives. We are apart of a wonderful community of faith and of hope.

I will end in a prayer.

God of community,

*whose call is more insistent than ties of family or blood.
may we so respect and love those whose lives are linked with
ours?*

*that we fail not in loyalty to you,
but make changes according to your will.
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

Amen