

John 11.1-45

Romans 8.6-11

One of the resources I use for my sermons is a set of reflections on the Sunday readings by Tom Wright. But this week there was a problem. Tom writes, “A preacher who needs help with John 11 is in bad shape.” Maybe when I read that I should have told Brenda that she should do the sermon instead. But I didn’t.

What I did find helpful was remembering the purpose of the gospels. They are not just biographies or accounts of Jesus’ public ministry. The Greek word we translate as ‘gospel’ is literally ‘good news’. The authors are not just telling us what happened, where Jesus went, what he had to say. They are to show us God in the person of Jesus. To provide an insight into the person of Jesus Christ and what it was that God is seeking to achieve in and through him. (Catholic Australia website, The Gospels)

Our story starts with Lazarus becoming very sick, and his sisters sending a message to Jesus. When Jesus hears this, he doesn’t immediately go to them, as we might expect. He sees a wider perspective – that in his delay God’s glory will be revealed. When Jesus does go, a couple of days later, he knows that Lazarus has already died. Perhaps we could see in this that the power of Jesus, of God, is not limited to minor healings but can be much more.

The sisters’ actions can also have something to say to us. They want Jesus’ help, but don’t put any pressure on him. A model of how we should approach Jesus in prayer. With confidence but not insistence. Not dictating what form the answer might take.

The journey to Judea is going to be dangerous for Jesus, as his disciples are only too aware. They try to dissuade him. But Jesus chooses to go anyway. Thomas encourages the other disciples to go with him, in spite of the dangers.

When Martha hears that Jesus is on his way, she hurries out to meet him. Her disappointment shows: ‘If you had been here my brother would not have died’. But still she has hope: ‘Even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.’ Jesus deals gently with her and her need to talk. And she comes to understand that Jesus is indeed the Messiah.

Martha then fetches Mary. She *also* tells Jesus that if he’d been there, her brother would not have died. And she weeps, as do those who have come to comfort the sisters. We are told that Jesus is deeply moved even to anger.

He goes to the tomb, asking for the stone to be rolled away. And calls on Lazarus to come out. Out stumbles a man bound by the linen grave clothes. Jesus' work is done, it is up to others to loose him and let him go. Jesus does his part, and calls on others to contribute.

Dr Thomas Philip sees the story like this:

It's a mix of feelings: fear and courage, confusion and trust. This story speaks to our lives. We pray and wait, but sometimes the answer feels delayed. Even then, a greater plan is at work. We are invited to trust, keep moving forward, and believe that hope and life will come. Small steps of courage and faith in waiting can open the door to something far greater than we imagined. (Thomas Philip, in *With Love to the World*, 19 March 2026).

Sarah West, in the Lenten booklet we are using, sees this reading as being about more than Jesus just restoring one man to life. 'It reveals the pattern of God's work in all creation, the willingness to enter what has decayed and call forth new possibilities.' She mentions, in particular, how we have misused the planet. Yet there *are* signs of new life stirring, she says, and people working to restore it. A slow renewal of every act of care that trusts life is still possible.

Since she wrote this, we've seen the war in the Middle East break out. An intense assault on both humankind and the planet. Maybe we can see some small steps of courage in the many countries that are refusing to join in.

Our first reading from Romans contrasts living according to the flesh and according to the spirit. We need to read this carefully – not as a denigration of the human body; nor to say there are two parts to a person – the flesh and the spirit. But a contrast between two ways of life. On the one hand, a way that is controlled by the values of a world in rebellion against God, and on the other, one shaped by the Spirit. One commentator is quick to point out that the Spirit is always *God's* Spirit, never a possession to be acquired. A spirit of empowerment enabling us to leave behind the reign of the world's values. Not a spirit which we can define and use to exclude others.

As Thomas Philip sees it, a choice between living life in our own strength, and a life lead by the Spirit, God's presence guiding and renewing us from the inside out. It's not about trying harder but trusting deeper. (*With Love to the World*, 18 March 2026)

Let's make the choice that gives life not only to us but to humankind and the planet.