

Lord God, you live with us in Jesus Christ and dwell in us through your Holy Spirit. Help us to hear your voice today. Amen.

- It was such a happy little house. Mary, Martha and Lazarus, three adult children of one family living together.
- They had their sibling rivalries of course. That time Jesus came to tea and Martha rushed around preparing whilst Mary just sat and gazed at Jesus, but they loved one another dearly. They were a safe refuge for each other. Mary after her failed marriage. Martha after her husband died, and Lazarus, supposed to be looking after them. Lazarus who just didn't seem interested in girls. They needed each other.
  - Of course we don't know why they weren't married. A cause of some disdain in biblical times. We don't know whether they were young or old, rich or poor. We don't actually know very much about them at all, but we do know that they loved each other and, that they were very close friends with Jesus. You only have to read today's Gospel reading to feel the depth of emotion going on.
- But disaster had struck. Lazarus was seriously ill. Not the Corona virus but clearly something equally virulent, because just three days after Jesus heard he was ill, he had died.
  - Lazarus was no longer 'with' them. Buried quickly, the official mourning would go on for days, but the gap in their aching hearts would last considerably longer. A lifetime of emptiness seemed to stretch ahead of Martha and Mary.
- Do you find that it is more meaningful to 'be with' people or to 'do things for' people?
  - Would Mary and Martha have had different answers to this question from each other?
  - Are you at your happiest when you are surrounded by the people you feel most comfortable with, perhaps chatting, or going for a walk or watching a film together? Or are you most comfortable when you are doing something for them? Drying your children after their bath, making a birthday cake, making a shopping list with your aged parents?
- Suffice it to say that Lazarus was no longer 'with' Mary and Martha, and the void was clearly almost unendurable.
- And Lazarus was no longer 'with' Jesus either.
- To cut to the chase. Of course, Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead. A story with huge depths of meaning on which whole books have been written, and for St John, one of the prime reasons why the Jewish authorities decided to arrest Jesus. I encourage you to read on over the next few days and feel the politics and the tension rising.
  - And if you do, you'll discover being brought back to life was not entirely a blessing for Lazarus. Read how, as well as Jesus, he became a marked man, living proof that Jesus could do extraordinary things.
  - But he was 'with' Mary and Martha again.
- The extraordinary truth is that the first three chapters of Genesis, which we were looking at until our Lent groups were so rudely interrupted, emphasize that God's wanted to be 'with' us continually. It was only wayward sin and the apple that made a divide between humans and God, stopping him from walking in the garden in the cool of the evening breeze.
  - And St John is quite clear that Jesus, the Word, was there '*in the beginning*' with his Father as the Holy Spirit hovered over the face of the deep. God's plan from the beginning of time was that his Son Jesus should be 'with' us.
  - Which leads us to the mind-blowing question, 'Would the incarnation, God's Son being born as a human being, still have happened even if we did not need to be rescued from the effects of sin?' Jesus being physically 'with' us. I've never thought about that before this week.
- One of the very many things we can draw out of this extraordinary miracle story is that physical distance doesn't always matter when you have developed bonds of love and affection.
- Jesus and Mary, Martha and Lazarus were clearly secure in their deep abiding love for each and therefore able to 'be with' each other even though separated by 30 miles or more, a huge gap in those days.

- And that can be very powerful to remember at times like this when we cannot meet physically together.
- We are bound together because as Christians we have the Spirit of Christ at home in us. God has made his home with us, as Jesus made his home with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Listen to these words from the Romans reading and ponder what they mean. *'you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.'*
- I hope this week you have been contacting each other and have been contacted in turn. If not, then please don't sit waiting for a call, take the initiative and ring someone else! Perhaps especially if you are feeling fed up at home. One of the very simple ways to be 'with' each other and to acknowledge that Christ is 'with' each of us.
- Sometimes we are called to wait as Christians. Jesus made Mary and Martha wait. Two whole, seemingly endless days. It was only on the third day that he did something. Does that remind you of another third day?
- We are waiting and some of us are worrying. Many of us now know someone who is ill, a substantial number, someone who is in hospital because of the virus. We are waiting and praying and hoping.
  - That makes being 'with' each other, especially important and poignant as we share the angst and support each other in prayer and virtual companionship, secure that we are 'with' each other, united because Christ has made his home in each of us.
- And I don't know about you, but there is also some comfort in this reading when we are panicking about the person who is ill. An assurance that being 'with' transcends death. An assurance that the waiting period will not last forever. An assurance that even though we are not physically close, we are spiritually united in Christ. If the worst comes to the worst, we will still be weeping uncontrollably with Mary and Martha at the tomb, but Jesus will be weeping with us, and after the waiting is over we will all be united in Christ, physically once again, in the fullness of the Kingdom of God.
- So in the strangeness of the next few weeks, read the passage again and remember the strength in Christ that it brings. Amen.