

MUM'S FUNERAL TALK

As a Christian, one of the most common questions I find asking myself in any situation I find myself is the following: "What does God think about this?" I believe it's one of the most important questions we can ever ask, because answering the question we don't only find out God's **opinion** about something, but since God is the creator of all things, we also find out what **reality** actually is in any situation. But the big problem which faces us in answering the question "What does God think about this?" is of course, how can we ever know what God thinks about anything? Well, as Christians we believe that God has revealed himself ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. If we want to know what God is like, what God thinks, what God would do in a given situation then what we need to do is to look at what Jesus was like, what Jesus thought and what Jesus did. And fortunately we have four detailed accounts of what Jesus was like, what he thought and what he did - in the Bible – what we call the four Gospels.

So now, to my question: "What does God think about this – what does God think about mum dying and what does God think about us gathered here today to remember her?"

The amazing thing is, that we can find an exact answer to this question, because we have a fantastic account of how Jesus reacted when a very close friend of his, called Lazarus, died one day. Let's read part of the story and then think more deeply about some of Jesus' reaction to this tragedy.

TEXT – JOHN 11:17-44

JN 11:17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. **18** Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, **19** and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. **20** When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

JN 11:21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. **22** But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

JN 11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

JN 11:24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

JN 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; **26** and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

JN 11:27 "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

JN 11:28 And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." **29** When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. **30** Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. **31** When the Jews who had been with Mary in the

house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

JN 11:32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

JN 11:33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

JN 11:35 Jesus wept.

JN 11:36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

JN 11:37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

JN 11:38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

JN 11:40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

JN 11:41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

JN 11:43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

HOW DID JESUS REACT TO THE DEATH OF A FRIEND?

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When Jesus came face to face with the death of his friend, he had two primary reactions. We read here that he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled", and that "he wept."

Let's look at each one.

"DEEPLY MOVED IN SPIRIT"

Deeply moved in spirit is a strange expression. We don't go around today saying that Joe Blogs was "deeply moved in spirit" do we? What does it actually mean in our everyday language? Well, Bible experts offer these more real translations of the original greek word: 'Jesus ... became angry in spirit,' or 'He was outraged in spirit ...'. Or to explain the situation

in more words, one expert says “What John tells us, in point of fact, is that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state, not of uncontrollable grief but of inexpressible anger.”

Jesus was very angry about death. Reading the account of her life which Mum left us, I found out that Mum was also angry at death’s intrusion into her life. And after granny’s death, I’ve noticed that Emily has also had moments in which she has expressed great anger at losing her granny, her “baba”. And the amazing thing is that God is also very angry about death.

Why? Because death is a terrible corruption and intrusion into God’s perfect world. Because death shouldn’t be here. Because, if everything had gone according to God’s original plan we should never have experienced it. Because death, in the Bible, is described as an enemy.

The Bible teaches us that in the beginning, there was no death in God’s creation. Death came about as a direct consequence of humankind deliberately walking away from God. We find this out in the first few pages of the Bible, and then as we continue reading we find out that the rest of the Bible is God’s resolution of this fundamental problem and tragedy. The rest of the bible outlines God’s plan to beat our disobedience, and consequently, to beat death itself. Death is a terrible enemy, and that is why Jesus, and mum, and Emily, and I, and no doubt you, have known anger in its presence.

JESUS WEPT

In this shortest verse in the Bible we read that God, in the form of Jesus, who will one day personally wipe away every tear from every weeping eye, shed his own tears. I read that one Bible expert translates this verse as “Jesus burst into tears”. God is not removed from our grief. God does not stand aloof, coolly observing how we react to mum’s death. He’s been there himself grieving. He knows about that uncontrollable, spontaneous, soul-rending, primeval crying from the centre of our being which we’ve all experienced when we’ve lost someone close and dear to us.

And as I read this account, and as I’ve been doing my crying and mourning over mum, it has only confirmed to me what the Bible says about death – that it is wrong, that it shouldn’t be, that it is an enemy. As I’ve been weeping, bursting into tears, I’ve experienced a deep sense that something is so very wrong with this universe and that this shouldn’t be happening. Death isn’t natural, because it was never in God’s original plan. No, death is not natural, we should say that it is “sub-natural”. And that is exactly what Mary and Martha thought when they said: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." They both hit the nail on the head. Have you ever noticed in the stories about Jesus, that where ever He was, he restored everything to the way it was originally designed to be. His miracles are not so much ‘super-natural’ as ‘natural’ – that is restoring the original natural order to his creation, making everything the way it was originally meant to be. Un-doing the ‘sub-natural’. He

calms the life-threatening storm – restoring the sub-(natural disaster) to His natural order. He heals the lame man – restoring a man suffering from a sub-natural handicap to His natural order of peace and wholeness. And he does the same with the sub-natural death of Lazarus. He undoes what was never meant to be and restores His order, His perfection, His will.

And he promises the same to us.

John 11:25-26 "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Mum is the first really close person to me to die. Of course, ever since childhood I've known that one day we all die. But until it happens to someone close, that fact remains a bit abstract. Whilst life is fine, family and friends are safe – there is nothing to force you to really dwell on the fact that we are mortal. But in the last few weeks I've been trying to put myself in mum's shoes. She was very much aware that soon she would die. For someone in their sixties, there aren't very many new experiences in life, but facing death is something new. A person hasn't faced such a dramatic transition since the day they left the warm comfort of their mother's womb and came out into a hard, cold world. But Mum was adamant that she wasn't afraid of what would happen to her after death. Even up until her last moments I didn't detect once single ounce of fear in her. Regrets – yes some. Anger – yes a bit. Sadness – yes, of course it is sad to say goodbye. But no fear. How could that be? We are all afraid of the unknown, and she had never been the other side of death before. How, in those last few days, could she have such a peace and security that she would be alright after death? Why wasn't she terrified of what might happen to her – separation from her loved ones, annihilation, hell?

It was because she owned the right answer to Jesus' question. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. **Do you believe this?**" Yes, with all her heart she believed it.

But at this moment maybe you're thinking –

"That is great for her, but I don't have such a faith – what am I to do"

Or maybe, if you're truly honest with yourself, you may think:

"It's good that her beliefs helped her in her time of need, but that doesn't make what she believed in true – you can believe in a nice fairy tale to make you feel better, but that doesn't make the fairy tale real"

But what she believed in is no fairy tale. No fairy tale was ever historically documented in exquisite detail and verified by historians. No fairy tale has ever inspired its first believers to

lay down their lives for its sake. And Jesus wasn't talking hypothetically about death the way you or I might speculate about the afterlife. Jesus not only **talked** about beating death, he **personally beat it** when he came back to life. Jesus not only **talked** about the resurrection, **he personally resurrected**.

Coming closer to the reality of death than I ever have before, I've been amazed that as human beings we don't treat it more seriously. One day we're all going to be in mum's place. The richest of us, the fittest of us, the cleverest of us can do absolutely nothing about it. It's coming to us all, sooner or later – all we can do is adjust our place a little in the queue to death's door, we can never leave the queue. The reason I live and work in Siberia isn't because I love the snow and walking my children in the dark in the morning at -35 c to kindergarten. I don't love foreign cultures or food or the adventure or travelling. There's only one reason I live and do what I do, and, incidently, why I'm not personally here today – because I believe that God has called me to share the hope which mum had with as many people as I can in Russia – so many here do not know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. It was hard enough for mum to die, and hard enough to watch her die, but with all my heart I wouldn't want anyone to go through what she went through without the hope she owned in her heart. That would be truly terrifying. And that's why I'll do just about anything I can to spread that hope around as much as I can.

So, to end, I want to leave you with Jesus' amazing claim and penetrating question – please think, how do you answer him today? If you can't answer him with a definite 'yes', like mum could, then please talk to John, or Dad, or Brian, or anyone else who owns that hope about how you can have it too.

Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. **Do you believe this?**"

Amen.