

Passion Sunday, (6th Sunday of Lent)
Sunday 2nd April 2017.

Also the Baptism of Saralynn van Oordt.

Main passage: John 11

Prayer:

May these spoken words, be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is a special day for Saralynn Elise Magdalene – she will be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And today, in the Anglican Church Calendar starts Passiontide. What is Passiontide? This is the period of Lent which runs from today until Holy Saturday – the day before Easter Day.

In these coming days, we turn our attention upon the suffering – that is what, in this context, the word ‘passion’ means – the sufferings of Christ – remembering them and what God achieved through them. Lent is often a time where we consider our own worship, discipleship, and witness – we consider our own personal ‘Up’, ‘In’, and ‘Out’ you could say. Yet Passiontide, as it begins, causes us to focus upon Christ his sufferings and why.

And these sufferings are remembered in some of the very visual actions in this service. For during the baptism ceremony we will mark Saralynn’s forehead with the sign of the cross – recalling Christ’s sacrificial death for all of us; and in bread and wine – we recall the broken body of Christ on the cross and the blood that he shed for us all.

Our reading from John 11 shares the amazing sign of Lazarus' resurrection.



'The Raising of Lazarus', tempera and gold on panel by Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1310–11, Kimbell Art Museum (public domain)

Yet as we listen to the words, it also points us very strongly to this passion of our Lord: **death, grief, resurrection.**

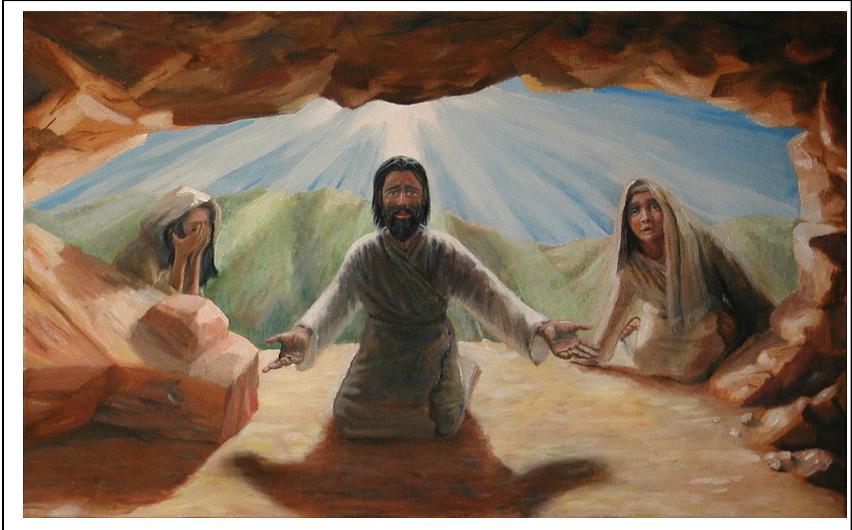
Firstly, there is the threat of **death** that Thomas mentions – that people seek to take Jesus life, (v8 & 11). This desire is officially turned into a murder plan because of the events of Lazarus

being raised – as you read on in this chapter, (see verses 45 onwards). Jesus by bringing life to Lazarus caused final agreement of the plot to kill him– a plot to kill him, which would bring about eternal life – and give baptism the meaning we believe it has.

Secondly there is the painful **grief** of Martha and Mary. So vividly written which many of us who have lost loved ones can relate to. Yet this time of the church year invites us to grieve as well – to consider how this man, this wonderful person who showed authority over sickness, death, nature and sin, how this man who loved all who came to him and who had time for all, how this man could be killed on a cross?

Why are we in a world which would do such a thing? But perhaps when we watch our social media, or news, or read any part of history, we can understand how in fact it was possible... And perhaps we wonder how it can all be changed...

Perhaps as we grieve at the world in which we live, we understand why Jesus becomes angry (v33-38). We see v33 – “he was deeply moved and troubled.” The Greek says he was indignant in the spirit. The Greek word is ‘en-brimo’ which is used in Greek for horses, snorting in the nostrils. When it is used elsewhere in the NT it is about anger, indignation, someone being rebuked. Who is he angry at? I’d suggest, he is angry at how this world is – it is not the way it was meant to be when it was created by him and through him.



Finally there is Lazarus in a tomb. Days after death. A stone rolled away. A dead man raised to life. **Resurrection!** As we read it on this day, it is not only a great sign – the sixth in the Gospel of John so far – but also another pointer to what will come. Jesus in a tomb, a stone that needs to be rolled away, grave clothes left behind as Jesus is raised. But while Jesus raises Lazarus, Jesus said himself in John 10:

“The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”

He has authority not only to lay down his life – as he will on Good Friday – but to take it up again as he will on Easter Day. Passiontide does not state that evil had won. No rather, Jesus own words remind us that Jesus remained in control, there was

a purpose, a desire that all would come to him, and discover and receive eternal life – a desire that all, Annalyne, Bram, Maria, Elisabeth, Christiaan, and Saralynn would come and receive all God longs to give, all possible through the passion and resurrection of Christ.

Consider the words of **Martha** and **Jesus**:

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.’²³ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’²⁴ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

²⁵ Jesus said to her, ‘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. Do you believe this?’ (John 11:21-26)

Martha’s words.

She has a loss of hope. She knows the *past* she shares with Jesus – ‘if you had been here’. She has hope about the *future* – ‘I know he will rise again at the last day’, but the *present* – ‘I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask’ – is she being respectful or she does not know what to hope for, she does not want to say that Jesus can raise her brother from the dead – as he has raised at least two others in his ministry - in case he would say no? We see in other gospel cases, people ask things of Jesus ‘Rabbi I want to see’ (Blind Bartimaeus – Mark 10:51-52), or the leper who says “if you are willing, you can make me clean,” (Mark 1:40). Martha does not ask but leaves the choice to Jesus...

Is it easier to lower our expectations of God, down to the lowest common denominator, than to risk being disappointed because it does not work out as we would like? There was a 1950s book by JB Philips titled: 'Your God is too small.' I'd like to challenge Bram, Annalyne, Maria, Elizabeth and Christiaan – bring this little girl up with great and high and biblical expectations of our God, in whose name she is baptised and prayed for – as St Paul “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or can imagine.” (Ephesians 3:20). Bring her up with a vision of a God who raises the dead who can do the impossible – who can even raise people who are spiritually, emotionally or even physically dead.

But as we have great expectations of our God - occasionally God will not meet them. It will not be in his will or in his timing for example. And in those times, may you model and walk with Saralynn that shows your faith in those times of disappointment and challenge and questions...

Martha says: 'if you had been here.' As we baptise Saralynn, we do not baptise her into a faith or into a relationship with God that says, she cannot be totally honest with her heavenly father. It is beautiful that we can be – Jesus listens to these pain filled words from Martha and repeated by Mary. They must have hurt – as it says, he was troubled. But they say it and he listens. He cares as we see in his tears. What wonderful God we have who cares about our suffering and listens to all sorts of our prayers.... Not a distant God, but one who hears, listens, is concerned, has compassion...

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.' We see how Jesus wants to move Martha who has a correct general belief in a final resurrection to a personalised belief in him who alone can provide it. He is the hope not only of our own resurrection in the future days. He is the hope that as we face death he is the only one who can get us through. It is an eternal hope.

And so baptism is not a social event, a family tradition, something part of Dutch or British custom – it is much more – it is of eternal value – as we respond to Jesus we see some huge promises being made but because we know he is risen, that Passiontide is not the end, that there is a day after Holy Saturday, we know this event has power...

In the past weeks, we have heard some long gospel readings. The woman at the well (John 4), who thirsted for life, she met Jesus by chance and found the living water. The man born blind, (John 9), who lived in darkness, who was healed and then came to Jesus the Light of the World – for all who are in spiritual darkness. And finally Lazarus, known by Jesus, loved by him like Jesus loved John, but Lazarus could not come to Jesus, Jesus came to him as the Resurrection and the Life.

And these three themes are ones we pray that Saralynn, through the example prayers and walking alongside her of her Annalynne and Bram and Maria, Elisabeth and Christiaan.

That Saralynn will discover for herself that Christ is living water – he meets our spiritual thirst; that he is the light of the world – show dispels our spiritual darkness; and that he is the

resurrection and the life, he gives us hope beyond this life and that without him we do not have spiritual life.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.