

All Saints' Sunday

FREE TO LIVE

John 11:32-44

All Saints' Sunday

Analysis by Paul Jaster

32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." 40Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

DIAGNOSIS: Bound to Die

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Anger & Despair

“Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Mixed in with Mary’s genuflection and reverent appellation is anger and despair. Friends don’t let friends die; at least not a friend as powerful as Jesus. “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” murmurs the crowd. This is the same anger and despair we so often feel when some person close to us dies. Isn’t God our friend? Couldn’t God have reversed the illness, cured the cancer, let the treatment work? If only God had been by the bedside, my spouse / my sib / my son or daughter / my mom or dad would not have died. God does this for others. Why not for us? Doesn’t our obedience and friendship with Jesus count for something? Aren’t we “the saints”? Aren’t we, like Lazarus’ sister Mary, holy ones of God? We are faithful, obedient, respectful, courteous.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Anger & Disbelief

What Mary does (kneels) and what she says (“Lord, if only...”) look and sound like faith, but they are not. The Scriptures make it clear that “faith” is more than loving Jesus (I love my 17-year-old daughter, but that does not mean I trust her unchaperoned on Friday night); nor is faith calling Jesus “Lord” or believing there is a resurrection someday in the future (see v. 24). When Jesus saw Mary, Martha, and their friends weeping, he was greatly disturbed, shook his head, and wept his own tears of anger and frustration: not simply at the depth of their despair, but also at their disbelief! Hadn’t he, by this time, performed six vivid signs to demonstrate the lush, abundant life he came to bring? Hadn’t he already crossed from heaven to

earth, from the safe side of the Jordan to its deadly side, to say there was no obstacle—even death!—he could not overcome? Disbelief even by Jesus' closest, most saintly, most loving and sympathetic friends only shows how sick with sin we really are—how distant we are from God. And even Jesus himself preaching to us, and showing us signs, is not enough. It takes a totally new beginning (John 1). It takes a death and resurrection—his and ours.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Anger & Death*

Even saintly, genuflecting, Lord-loving, resurrection-believing friends of Jesus die, not because Jesus isn't here, but because we are "flesh" (1:14), part of a perishable human race. In other words, ultimately the problem isn't our morality, it is our mortality. And yet, there is something even worse than death. The angry tears of Jesus show that nothing angers God more than our disbelief and obliviousness to God's nearness in the Christ. This "anger" (God's anger) can lead to the death that lasts forever as opposed to the death that glorifies the Father and his Son, Jesus. We are all bound to die—including the Word made flesh. It is a relentless law of human nature (it also is God's law). The only question is: What happens next? Something or nothing?

PROGNOSIS: Freed to Live

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Glorious Life*

Jesus does not stop death from happening. He did not stop Lazarus's death from happening. He did not stop his death from happening. He will not stop our death from happening. But what the Father does "in Jesus" stops death from being the last thing that will happen. There is another way that life comes to its conclusion than through death. There is the way of life—a glorious life. And Jesus is that way. To illustrate the point, Jesus commands the stone rolled back and cries, "Lazarus, come

out!” And for the first time ever (in John’s gospel), a dead man rises. And Jesus says, “Unbind him, and let him go” (the final phrase is *lusate* in the Greek). To students of the language, *lusate* is not only the aorist active imperative of the model verb *luo*, but it is an explosive verb that expresses the freeing of a prisoner from all that binds him or her including the commandments of God and statements of the law. In other words, this is dynamite! This is the most powerful form of the most powerful verb in Fred Danker’s DBAG (the definitive Greek/English lexicon). Here is the seventh and most perfect sign (short of our Lord’s own death and resurrection towards which all signs of both law and gospel are pointing). The relentless law of human nature, death (which is also God’s law), is fulfilled and yet surpassed, repealed, annulled, abolished to our jaw-dropping, eye-popping amazement and delight. The death and resurrection of Christ himself means that Jesus has the “last word” now. And the “last word” in this pericope that Jesus speaks (penultimate to his final word on the cross) is *lusate*: Let him go! This will be the last word we hear before the party starts at our resurrection. Listen for it!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *[Son of] God-ly Faith*

And many were filled with faith (v. 45); but better still is that faith which comes without the signs. We are not told what happened to Mary, but we suppose that like the blind man in chapter nine, her eyes were opened and she saw the resurrection life not only as a future hope but a “real present” in the Living Lord, who is always near and close at hand no matter what his apparent distance. This is true for all the faithful who respond to Jesus’ declaration and question (vv. 25-26) with Martha’s words: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” These are the saints. God’s holy ones. The faithful...be they living or dead.

And voila! The distance is bridged. And God is happy. Very happy. No wonder Jesus popped the cork of resurrection bubbly a couple of weeks before his own resurrection. Nothing makes Jesus or his Father happier than faith in God's word of resurrection promise.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Gutsy Daring*

Jesus took a risk crossing the Jordan to the Bethany near the Mount of Olives where his friends Mary and Martha lived (see 11:7-16); likewise the eternal Word of God took a risk in becoming "flesh" and crossing over from heaven above to earth below. Thomas, our twin, had it right, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Although he would have said it in a much cheerier fashion had he known the other half: we die and rise with him in baptism "so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:5). Those who follow Jesus are freed from their angers, despairs, and fears about self-preservation. They are "saints." They are those "holy ones" who take risks and live gutsy lives for the sake of others despite the danger to themselves. They celebrate the real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist despite his apparent absence. They toast the lives of the departed faithful as those who are already very much alive to God today (in the present, not just the future). And they comfort others in their time of sorrow with that holy comfort we ourselves have received from God. They laugh at the thought of a bound-up Lazarus hopping out of the grave (wrap up a teenager in toilet paper to make this visual). And they shout "lusate!" just for the sheer joy of it. In this manner we are freed to live the glorious life God intended, as the holy ones who glorify God's name. Jesus was right: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified in it." Death leads to glory. And we, the holy ones of God in Jesus Christ, can joyfully experience a bit of that glory now, even as we dare to believe it.