

## See how he loved him: John 11 32-44

What's the shortest verse in the Bible? John 11: 35: Jesus wept. It's a pub quiz question. Although if you're a listener to Paul Sinha's Perfect Pub Quiz on Radio 4, which slightly subverts the genre, you'll realise that pub quiz questions often miss out detail for the sake of good phrasing.

Here, the omission is that verses in the Bible haven't been there forever – they only began in 1551 to make it easier for people to study and discuss the Bible together. And that this is only the shortest verse in the King James Bible and some other translations, not to the Greek or Hebrew original texts...The shortest Greek verse from the New Testament comes in Luke 20 – a 12 letter Greek phrase forming a not especially memorable part of a discussion with the teachers of the law about marriage and the resurrection (*and the second* in English). The shortest in the OT is a snatch of 1 Chronicles – three names from a genealogy *Eber, Peleg, Reu* (9 letters in Hebrew)

But whether this story about Lazarus and his sisters contains the shortest verse or not, the focus on Jesus' emotional state here is arresting. John writes: *When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.*

Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus has died after an illness. The funeral is over, but the mourning period continues. The sisters and their friends and neighbours are weeping... the word for weeping here is the one that tells us about the *sound* of grief... the ululations... the keening... the wordless yet articulate voice of sorrow. In first century Judah, the expectation was that as well as mourning themselves, the bereaved family would hire flute players and possibly some women to wail (to encourage everyone else to join in?). Grief was not a private matter, but a communal event. And it was noisy.

Bereavement in our context may be quieter, but right now we can recognise that same expression of grief especially in video footage from Gaza and Lebanon ... cries of the grey dust covered figures left standing after a bomb has hit... people cradling wrapped bodies as they are carried from the hospital...

At this sound of grief, Jesus is deeply moved... Scholars debate (a lot) about whether Jesus is sad or angry... frustrated or outraged. I don't know.

One thing I do sense, though... is that here Jesus is motivated by love... the loss of someone he loved... the pain of the sisters left behind... This emotion shows us Jesus the human person just moments before he demonstrates that is not all he is in the miraculous raising of a dead man.

Even though I think we're supposed to understand that Jesus in some way knows what will happen next, he weeps for himself and he weeps with the sisters in their pain... but I wonder whether he also weeps for and with everyone... because of the terrible, universal fact of death... Because we all share in that experience of grief and loss at some time.

See *how he loved him*, some of the bystanders say, literally so, because while everyone else's grief is audible, when Jesus weeps, there's no sound of sobbing. In that short phrase, *Jesus wept*, the gospel writer chooses a different word for weeping – a word that refers to the tears coursing down his cheeks that express his silent sorrow.

The scene shifts to a cemetery of some kind... and to the cave where Lazarus has been buried. And now Jesus is silent no longer, but decisive. He commands that the stone is moved... There's an edgy interchange with Martha, who (characteristically) points out the impracticalities of this request, thereby highlighting the utter impossibility of what will soon occur. Then Jesus prays and calls the dead man by name... *Lazarus, come out*.

While the gospel writer tells us about how people reacted when Jesus arrived, and about how Jesus responded to them, there's no comment about the bystanders at this moment... the action seems to unfold noiselessly as the dead man walks out, still wearing the cloths he was buried in.

Just as grief is communal, so also is resurrection... *Unbind him*, Jesus tells the crowd. Those who laid out the body, those who have mourned Lazarus' death are invited to undo their work and release him from his grave wrappings. To return him to his family and to his community.

For John's gospel, this is the final sign... the last of the indicators of who Jesus is. For all the wonder of this miracle, what happens to Lazarus is just a preview... not much later, Jesus will rest lifeless in a cave tomb, much like the one Lazarus has walked out of... not much later, too, Jesus will himself be found, walking in a cemetery garden... to die no more, having in his resurrection defeated the old order of sin and death...

Today, on All Saints Sunday, we look back with thanks for the lives of the saints of the past, like Lazarus and his sisters, like the people our churches are named for, like the people known only to us who have helped us on our journey of faith... And we look ahead, to the day when God's saints... all of us, as well as all of them... will experience the new heaven and new earth, the dwelling of God with people imagined in the book of Revelation.

But we also bring to mind what God's saints bear witness to, that there is no death or grief or fear so deep and dark where the voice of Jesus cannot reach, calling us by name, and summoning us out into light and life. So, as we have reflected on this story, let's also rejoice, because Jesus has conquered death – for Lazarus and his sisters, for the saints of the past and for us as well...