

Restored to Wholeness

(Preached at Footscray Baptist Church on March 29, 2020 by Cheryl Williams– John 11:1-45 & Psalm 130)

The psalmist cries out for help, for mercy, for forgiveness.

The psalmist waits for the Lord, puts their hope in the Lord in the knowledge that God will enfold them with unending, all-encompassing love.

I think this week many of us have cried out to God for help and for mercy, not just for ourselves but for the whole world. It feels a bit like we are surrounded by hopelessness – daily increases in the number of confirmed cases and deaths from Covid 19 are reported on our TV screens; queues lengthen at Centrelink; despite the promise that we have enough food, shelves remain bare and prices are going up; businesses are shutting up; people worry about mortgages and paying the rent; we need to stay at home and we wonder what will happen to the homeless, to asylum seekers and others relying on our generosity.

In our story from John's gospel we also find people crying out to their Lord for help, for mercy. Mary and Martha in their time of need call on Jesus to come, to come and see their predicament and help them.

The psalmist out of his despair addresses God quite personally and pours out their heart. Clearly the world had gone out of kilter, there was chaos, everything was upside down and he felt his separation from God quite keenly.

I am sure many of us can identify with this at the moment.

But the psalmist hasn't given up hope – he is still able to trust in God's unending love.

Mary & Martha have sent for their friend Jesus to come and help them as their brother is very ill. Jesus takes his time, in fact he stays on longer where he was and when he finally gets to Mary and Martha, their brother, his friend has been dead for 4 days.

When he arrives both Mary and Martha ask in their own ways – where were you? If you'd been here sooner this wouldn't have happened.

Jesus responds to these two women quite differently. With Martha he has a discussion at the tomb about the resurrection. She, even though she is unhappy about him dallying to get there, thinks he can still do something. She understands about resurrection and that one day all will be resurrected. However, Jesus tells her he is the one who brings new life and then he acts. Martha though, whilst she can confess that she knows Jesus is the Son of God, the one for whom they had hoped, she is still a little bit dubious, she is worried about the smell.

Mary on the other hand is not as practical as Martha and she is consumed by her grief – she is weeping and others have gathered around her to support her. Upon seeing her distress, Jesus also gets upset. And then Jesus weeps – not just shedding a few tears but that cry of agony that comes from deep within, that gut-wrenching cry, the cry that shakes your entire body. Clearly, he shares their grief.

And those watching on – they wonder too, why did Jesus take so long, what is he going to do now.

Then he acts – first he prays. Then he asks or rather shouts for Lazarus to come out. Then he calls for the cloths to be removed and Lazarus freed.

Our world cries out right now for help, it cries out in the midst of the same kind of grief, of fear.

Our readings today speak into our fear, into our time of waiting, into our grief. Our readings speak to us of wholeness.

Lazarus is freed to live life in all its fullness. Jesus discloses who he is to Martha and she can move on in life with a new understanding. Mary knows that Jesus shares her grief and deeply cares about her and her family – she too is experiencing life

anew. Her friends witness the compassion and ability of Jesus to change people's circumstances and they too find faith and a whole new life opening up for them.

So how do these stories speak into a world that feels surreal at the moment.

I think they show us a little bit about God and the way in which God interacts with the world.

I see a God who in Jesus:

- 1. Is not the cause of our problems but meets us in the midst of our confusion, in our fear and in our tears.*
- 2. Knows grief, pain, loss, confusion and shares in ours.*
- 3. Weeps with us, really feels our pain in a gut-wrenching sense. Shares our fragile human existence.*
- 4. Restores us to wholeness – Lazarus has a new chance at life; Martha gets a new chance – she knows who Jesus is and is able to confess that to him, she has a new sense of wholeness and she gets her brother back. Mary discovers a new Jesus, a Jesus who weeps with her and in so doing helps her heal her grief. She too gets her brother back. Those surrounding and comforting Mary and Martha also get a new wholeness, they begin to put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah.*
- 5. Jesus, on the other hand seals his fate – this final miracle or sign puts in motion the steps and plan to capture him and put him on trial.*

It is okay to cry out to God for help and mercy, in fact I think we should be doing much of that at the moment.

It is okay to weep, to grieve that which has been lost.

However, we need to wait – we can't always get what we want when we want it – however that doesn't mean God is not in our midst, is not sharing our pain.

I am sure that God wants life, life in all its fullness for everyone. Perhaps we need to see the opportunity in our changed circumstances, to listen to what God is teaching us and showing us about what is important in this anxious time.

A friend sent me this message yesterday – ‘In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.’¹

May God be with you. May God show you the new life, the wholeness Jesus is calling you to. May we all do what we can to help others experience such wholeness. May you all know deep in your heart the unfailing love of God that is offered freely. Amen.

¹ Quote from Dave Hollis