

## “WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

### 2. God’s Gratuitous Grace

*John 11:17-44*

When things are “normal” and we meet in church on Sundays, every now and then I’ll say to someone at the church door, “How are you today?” and get the reply, “Well, I’m all right now. But I’ve been in hospital most of the week and no-one came to see me.” I express my apologies and explain that I had no idea they’d been unwell, then ask who they’d told about it. “Oh, I didn’t tell anyone,” they’ll say, and obviously assume that my spiritual gifts should have enabled me to know what was going on, or that I ‘phone round the hospitals every day to check whether anyone from the congregation is in there.

In the story we’ve just heard, Jesus **did** know that Lazarus was ill. If we’d read from the beginning of *John 11* we’d have seen that Lazarus’ two sisters, Mary and Martha, who were great friends of Jesus, had sent word from Bethany, where they lived, to Jerusalem, where Jesus was staying, to say that their brother was very ill. As John notes, it was less than two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem – like walking across the city of Lichfield – but Jesus decided to stay put for a couple of days. When he eventually turned up, Mary and Martha were naturally rather annoyed that Jesus hadn’t shown up sooner, because by now Lazarus was dead: he was in his grave and already starting to smell.

There are just a couple of words in that story that we’re going to focus on this morning as we continue to reflect on what kind of Christians we might be. We saw last week that being a Christian is all about being, not doing – that we find our identity in Jesus Christ himself and that is what should shape our lives as his followers. Indeed, we are to try and model our lives on him and on the characteristics of his Father God in all that we do. So today, we’ll think about God and the reflection of his love in us.

The two words we’ll look at in this story are the two in v35, which many of you will be aware is the shortest verse in the whole Bible – “*Jesus wept*”. Jesus has belatedly arrived in Bethany and Lazarus is dead and buried, his two sisters mourning his passing and a bit resentful that Jesus wasn’t there earlier. As the sisters invite him to look at the grave, John tells us, Jesus wept. And the startling thing about this, when you stop and think about it, is that Jesus didn’t need to weep. He knew that Lazarus would be brought back to life. He knew everything would be alright. He, alone amongst all the people there, was the one who least had any cause to weep. It was an act of gratuitous grace, a totally unnecessary thing for him to do, but he was “*deeply moved in spirit*” by the two sisters and by the other mourners who were there. He identified with them and wept out of love for them.

And that’s the way with God. He is willing to do things he doesn’t need to do out of his limitless love for his creation. In fact, he doesn’t need to do anything at all. God is totally self-sufficient and has no need of anything. He didn’t even need to create a world – he could have existed without making the universe,

without creating this world within it, without putting human beings in it. But he did do it and, like everything else, it springs from his infinite grace – it is totally gratuitous, an amazing act of love.

Because, you see, God is generous and extravagant in all he does. He does what he does because he loves his creation, he loves us as human beings. Jesus hinted at this in a story he told about someone who employed workers in his vineyard. The employer hired people at different times during the day but, in the end, paid them all exactly the same. Some of the workers grumbled, but the employer – whom we take to be modelled on God – said *“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”* God is generous. We read again and again in the Bible that he *“lavishes”* good things on his people, that he lavishes his love on us. Just a couple of examples from the New Testament this morning. This is Paul, writing to the Ephesians, in the magnificent first chapter of that letter: *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us”* (Ephesians 1:7,8). And John, in his First Letter, has this to say: *“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”* (1 John 3:1).

God does not hold back on what he gives us. He is not mean-spirited or tight-fisted. He wants his children to have the very best and to have as much of it as we can take. This is a God who is full of grace, who has limitless supplies of it, and wants everyone to benefit. Of course, some people refuse his gifts. Some ignore them. Some are suspicious of them. Some take them and abuse them. But God keeps on giving. His reserves of grace never run out. Isn’t that amazing! God doesn’t need to do any of that, but he does it out of love for you and me.

Now the immediate consequence of that for us is that we can rely on the limitless love of God and enjoy his extravagant generosity to us day by day. But in the context of considering what kind of Christians we should be, we need to remember that we are created in his image, just by reason of the fact that we are human, so we should reflect that generosity in our own lives. Sadly, that image of God in us has become tarnished through the presence of evil in our world, but when we make that decision to follow Jesus, to become Christians, then we have an obligation to try and imitate God, to do our best to reflect his qualities in our lives. Paul, again writing to the Ephesians, says this: *“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children”* (Ephesians 5:1), and if God is generous, extravagant, then we should be too. The gratuitous grace of God should inspire us and encourage us to be open-hearted. In *Deuteronomy 15* we read of the way God’s people were to respond to each other when in need: v8, *“be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need”* and v11 *“I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.”*

The writings of the prophets towards the end of the Old Testament make it clear that many people didn't really take too much notice of that part of God's law, but it the readiness to share – and share generously – is reawakened amongst the followers of Jesus – the first Christians – as we read in *Acts 2*:

*“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

It was something that made other people take notice. And there's more in *Acts 4*:

*“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had ... And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”*

We are to be the kind of Christians who show love extravagantly, not mean-spiritedly or reluctantly. It's a command, according to Paul as he writes to his young friend Timothy: **“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share”** (*1 Timothy 6:18*). God has given us everything – without him we are nothing – and he doesn't need to do that: it's out of the boundless nature of his love. So that is how we are to respond to each other.

And it is how we are to respond to God, as well. We are to worship extravagantly, too – to express our gratitude for God's gratuitous grace towards us by offering him the very best of ourselves. My daily readings recently have taken me to those bits of the laws that God gave Moses for the people of Israel and I have been struck again by the sheer magnificence of the regulations for worship – not just the Tabernacle, the great portable worship placed they carried round with them with its amazing carvings and fabrics and embroidery – but also the vestments of the priests and the luxury of the incense and the other aids to worship. This wasn't some austere little chapel with no colour and no sense of wonder – this was something special, designed by God but built and furnished by people who had been given artistic gifts by the Holy Spirit. Our worship should somehow reflect that too. It should be full of stuff that is non-productive, that doesn't seem to need any justification other than that it's for God – art, painting, music, sculpture, dance, all those things that raise our gaze above the industrial efficiency that is expected in the world around and which we have come to assume is what we need in our worship too – indeed, in so much of our life as Christians. We call it “good stewardship” or “efficient use of resources”. If we are to reflect the character of the infinite, spectacular, magnificent, awe-inspiring God of gratuitous grace, who doesn't need to do anything but acts out of love and the sheer joy of demonstrating that love, then “efficient” is probably the last word we should use.

We have an amazing God who has done astounding things for us – not least in allowing his Son to be executed on the cross and then bringing him back to life again. He calls us as followers of Jesus – as Christians who bear the name of his Son – to reflect his love, his generosity, his extravagance – in every part of our lives day by day. Generosity to our fellow human beings and extravagance in our worship. And doing it so often just for the sheer joy of doing it. Why not give a try this week? Some random acts of kindness as you go about your daily routine. Expressing your worship in a different way, perhaps. But always full of gratitude to the God who gave everything for you – even though he didn't need to. That's partly the kind of Christians we need to be. But we'll look at a bit more of that next week as we look at what it means to be a new creation in Christ.

### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) Do you think you would you have responded to Jesus as Mary and Martha did (vv21,32)? Why/why not?
- 2) Why do you think Jesus wept?
- 3) Share some of the ways in which God's extravagant love is shown – either from the Bible or for your own experience.
- 4) What stops us from being as extravagant as God is the way we respond to each other? Should we try and change that? Why/why not?
- 5) In what ways could we be more extravagant in our worship – personally and collectively?
- 6) What are you going to do in response to this?