

The Lord of Life

by Mariano Di Gangi

Jesus reveals himself as the resurrection and the life, offering eternal life to those who believe in him.

Duration: 28:53

Scripture: John 11:17

Topics: "Jesus", "Resurrection", "Faith in Christ"

Description

Mariano Di Gangi emphasizes the profound self-portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John, particularly focusing on His declaration as the 'resurrection and the life.' Through the story of Lazarus, Di Gangi illustrates the themes of affection, affliction, and affirmation, highlighting Jesus' love for His friends and the reality of death that all must face. He encourages believers to confront their fears of death with the assurance of Christ's love and the promise of eternal life. The sermon culminates in Martha's confession of faith, affirming Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, which serves as a model for our own belief in Him. Ultimately, Di Gangi calls for a response to Jesus' question, 'Do you believe this?' as a pivotal moment in our faith journey.

Transcript

On these Sunday evenings, we have been going to the magnificent gallery of art that is the gospel according to John, and there we have seen the self-portraits of Jesus. To those who hunger, he portrays himself as the bread of life. To those who seek guidance in the labyrinth of this world and in its growing darkness, he presents himself as the light of the world.

To those who are as sheep without a shepherd, mercilessly exploited, he offers himself as the good shepherd. And tonight, to all who sit in the land of the shadow of death, he makes himself known as the resurrection and the life. Reading from the 11th chapter of the gospel according to John, beginning at verse 17.

The story is familiar enough, but we need to hear it again. The 11th chapter of John, beginning to read at verse 17. On his arrival, that is his arrival in Bethany, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not

have died.

But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus said to her, 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. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him.

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. In the sixth chapter of the book of the Revelation, we have that vivid graphic portrayal of the horseman of the apocalypse. One rides on a white horse, determined to dominate all the others in ruthless conquest.

One rides a red horse, symbolic of bloodshed in revolution and war. One rides a horse that is black, signifying scarcity, exploitation, hunger, famine. And the fourth horseman of the apocalypse rides a pale horse, and his name is death, and following him is the grave.

Now, I refer to the sixth chapter of the book of the Revelation, not so that we might all rush out and get our prophetic charts and begin to see where things are going to fall out in the Middle East. I don't mention this to stimulate eschatological speculation. But rather to point up the fact that we all, sooner or later, must reckon with the last enemy whose name is death.

Suppose you are in Tel Aviv, or in Baghdad, or in the Sudan, or in Somalia, or in South Africa. You would have a sense of the imminence of death, and you could do more than hear the hoofbeats of the horseman. How would you face death? How would I face it? It's not just a situation of war or revolution like that faced right now by the independence-loving people of the Baltics under renewed Soviet aggression, with people getting wounded and being killed.

How would you and I face death if the doctor looking at the x-rays comes to a diagnosis and says the prognosis is poor, your time is limited, get your things in order? Would it make any difference at all that we are Christians in the way that you and I face death, whether it's in wartime or in sickness? In the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to John, the Spirit of God gives us strength and clarity of vision with which to face the last enemy, whatever the field of battle may be. Reading and rereading this very familiar story, I discern several emphases that I'd like to share with you tonight. And the first is that in this 11th chapter of the Gospel of John, there is a recurring reference to affection, and we need to be assured of that affection if you and I would face the last enemy and win.

Right at the beginning of the chapter, there is a reference made to the family circle that lived in the town of Bethany. It was called Bethany because it had palm trees and dates nearby, and Bethany simply means the house of dates. Living in that village of Bethany were three people of note, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

And it's interesting that at the beginning of this chapter, Lazarus is described as the one whom the Lord loves. Martha and her sister and Lazarus are described in verse 5 as beloved of the Lord Jesus. Lazarus is a dearly beloved friend of Jesus.

Mary, who loved to sit at Jesus' feet and contemplate and meditate as he taught the truths of God, Mary, who gave the precious ointment to Jesus as an example of her costly devotion to the Lord, and her sister Martha, who was busy and troubled about many things but who in the final analysis did provide hospitality for Jesus, these three are loved of the Lord. Now we are told in Scripture that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. Jesus gives an interview to Simon Peter after the

resurrection, and he questions him on the matter of friendship, of loyalty, and of love.

And we need to sing from the depths of our hearts, more love to thee, O Christ. But here it's not a matter of our love for the Lord Jesus, it's a matter of the love of the Lord Jesus for the likes of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. You and I will never be able to confront the last enemy, to look death in the face, and have a sense of triumph unless we are assured of the affection of Jesus, that he loves us with a love that will not let us go.

The Apostle Paul reminds us of that love when in 2 Corinthians 5:14 he refers to the love of Christ which constrains us, not primarily our love for him which is faltering and weak, but his love for us which is sacrificial even unto death. It is the love that he displayed in coming down from heaven to earth. It is the love that he displayed in becoming the servant of others.

It is the love that he demonstrated in going to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. His love for us constrains, challenges, urges, and channels all our devotion back to him. And what the Apostle says of us being constrained by his love, he personalizes when he says, I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

We need to be sure of the deathless affection of Jesus Christ, that he loves us and that nothing, neither life nor death, can ever separate us from his love. That is where it begins, affection. But the next theme that we run across in this chapter beyond affection is affliction.

It is written, Lord the one you love is sick. Though he is a friend of Jesus, Lazarus takes ill. Though he is beloved of Jesus, he is not exempt from disease.

He is not immune against the things that plague the common lot of the human race, disease. Adding to the disease is the matter of delay. The sisters send a message to Jesus.

They share with him the sad news that Lazarus, their brother whom Jesus loves, is sick. And isn't that the very essence of prayer? To take our concerns, to take our burdens, to take our worries, and to bring them to Jesus and to tell it to Jesus, believing that we can cast our care upon him, for he cares for us. After all, had not Jesus taught them to ask so that they might receive, to seek in order to find, to knock so that it might be open to them? And that's exactly what they did.

They sent a message to Jesus. They shared their concern with him, but he didn't come. A morning goes by, an afternoon, an evening, another morning, another afternoon, another evening, day after day goes by.

The delay is intolerable for them. It adds to the affliction of disease when there is delay and no answer seems to come from the Lord. Isn't that why the hymn writer asks that the Lord would give us and teach us the patience of unanswered prayer, which may very well be a deferred reply? You see, the sisters didn't know, neither did Lazarus know, that this was to work out for the glory of God, that this was to work out for the manifestation of the magnificence and majesty of God, but this would turn out to confirm the faith of the followers of Jesus.

And so there was not only disease, but delay, and the delay aggravated the situation of sickness and added to their affliction, and then there was death. Ironic, the name Lazarus is a diminutive of Eleazar, which means he whom God helped. How did God help him? He got sick.

How did God help him? The master delayed his coming. How did God help him? He died. Whether one is a saint or a sinner, sooner or later, the last enemy has to be faced.

It can take a king like David and could take the most obscure of the commoners in his realm. It can take the rich man who goes about in high-powered cars, and it can take the beggar as well. It can take someone as strong as Samson or as weak as a little child.

Bereavement, a sense of loss, sorrow, the presence of mourners who come streaming out of Jerusalem and go those two miles to be with the sisters at their time of sadness points up the affliction, which is theirs. And if that weren't enough, you add one more factor, that of disappointment. It wasn't merely bereavement, but disappointment, and you sense it in the way that Martha speaks and the way that Mary will speak later on in this same chapter.

If only you had been here, my brother would still be alive. What do you hear in that cry? You hear, for one thing, a conviction that if he had been there, he indeed would have had the power to rescue him. But you also have a sense of complaint arising out of disappointment that becomes to the point of bitterness.

If you had been here, if you had come when you were sent for, this would not have happened the way it did. In all my years of pastoral work, I have found that one of the things that tortures more than anything else the survivors is replaying things. What if it had been done this way or that? Suppose we'd have found this doctor or this cure earlier.

Suppose the brakes had been pumped instead of being jammed on in a moment of panic so that the car would not have gone and smashed against a tree. My father would still be alive. If only I had done this, if only I had done that, and we can torture ourselves by the instant replay of a sad episode.

What if these sisters were as human as the rest of us? Deep affliction, disease, delay, death, disappointment, combining and conspiring together to make them break under the load. Affection, also affliction, but it doesn't end there. It ends on the note of affirmation.

Already Jesus had given a hint as to what is to come. He has told his disciples that death is not going to be the end of this story with Lazarus. He has referred to the fact that Lazarus is sleeping.

He doesn't mean by that that his soul is in a sense of stupor. He didn't believe the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the sleep of the soul, but he was dead in the sense of being in the posture of sleep from which he would be awakened to live again. Already Jesus has led Martha to the acknowledgement of the fact that her brother will rise at the last day.

Not all the Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducee sect, for example, did not believe either in a future resurrection or in a final judgment, but Martha was convinced that her brother would rise again at the last day. That indeed is what Jesus had taught her to believe.

That is what Jesus had taught others of his contemporaries to believe. In the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, in verses 28 and 29, Jesus makes it crystal clear that the day will come when those who are dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and will rise from the dust of death, some to a resurrection of blessing, others to a resurrection of judgment and condemnation, but they will all rise at the sound of his majestic voice, and she knew that the dead would be raised at the last day. Isn't that what Jesus teaches again in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel when, like a recurring refrain, we find the words, and I will raise him up at the last day.

So already Jesus has given hints as to what is about to happen, and now we come to the self-portrait where Jesus reveals himself, describes himself as the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. He who believes in me, he who is alive through faith in me, shall never die.

And what is this but the basis for the last two phrases of the Apostles' Creed? I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, the resurrection of the body, not merely to live on as a melancholy memory in the mind of those who come after us, but to be raised from the dead, incorruptible, glorious, with a new body like the resurrection body of Jesus, to be a fit dwelling place for the spirit of the just made perfect. That is the Christian hope. And Jesus speaks of the resurrection of the body, though there be death, there shall be resurrection.

And what about the soul and spirit of man? If you believe in me, says Jesus, you will never die. You will have a new quality of life, lived in communion with the living God, which is everlasting. Jesus not only reveals himself as the resurrection and the life, but he puts a poignant question to Martha.

Do you believe this? Scripture is not given to us in some detached way. Scripture involves us, and once we have heard it, we are without excuse, and we must answer yes or no when the Spirit of God says, do you believe this? Do you believe in a world of mortality, that he is the resurrection and the life? Do you believe in him as the one who will raise you from the dust of death and is the one who can give you now the power of an endless life? Revelation always demands a response and leaves us without excuse, and we have the response that Martha made. Yes, Lord, she said to him, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.

Exegetes and theologians have quibbled as to whether or not she understood the fullness of the statement that she was making. I leave that to them. I go by what she said, and it is a magnificent confession of faith.

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. I believe that you are the Christ. The very confession that Simon Peter made at Caesarea Philippi is made by this woman from Bethany.

You are the Christ. You are the Messiah. You are the Anointed One.

God has anointed you to be a prophet, a priest, and a king. God has anointed you to be the infallible prophet who will reveal to us the will of God for our salvation. God has anointed you to be the priest who on the altar of the cross will offer up the sacrifice of his sinless self to atone for the sins of his people.

You are the one anointed to be a king, to reign in righteousness and bring in peace for all your subjects. I believe in you. You are the Christ, and you are the Son of God.

Earlier in this book, in the tenth chapter of John, Jesus had proclaimed himself as the Son of God, and his hearers had discerned in what he said that he was making himself equal with God, and he never corrected them. He never told them they were wrong. They were right on target.

For the Son of God is one who with the Father is equal in power and glory. From all eternity, the Son has been with the Father, and now the Son has come into the world to accomplish our salvation. And so she looks at this Messiah, and she beholds him who is the Son of God, the exact express image of the invisible God, and she says, you indeed are the one who was to come into the world.

She had an insight and a conviction that not even the greatest preacher of that first century possessed. Who was he? John the Baptist. John the Baptist who with courage preached repentance for sin and denounced judgment on the impenitent.

John the Baptist who pointed to Jesus and said to everyone, here is the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world. John the Baptist who said, I must decrease, he must increase. You would say a man totally committed to the glory of Jesus.

But the time came when John was cast into prison, and all the reports he heard of what Jesus was doing on the outside only served to deepen his despondency and to strengthen his doubt. And John the Baptist at one point wondered why this Lord to whom he had dedicated himself and who had become the theme of his preaching ministry should now neglect him once he had been cast into prison. And he sends messengers to Jesus to ask, are you the one who should come, or should we look for another? There's no doubt in Martha's mind, you are the one who was to come, and you are here within my reach.

I believe in you. What is our response to Jesus? Do we acknowledge him as the Christ? Do we adore him as God's equal, his son? Do we realize that he is the one who was promised through the prophets of the Old Testament and in the fullness of time has come into the world to be the Savior of the world? If so, believing in him, we are linked to him who is the source of life everlasting, and we have the hope that as he has been raised from the dead, even so we too shall triumph over the last enemy. Jesus said, 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. Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, conqueror of death, we know that you have brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Help us to repent and to believe the gospel and to put our trust unreservedly in you. This we ask that we might have a glorious certainty of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

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