

## Fifth Sunday in Lent - March 26, 2023

Focus: **Cling to the life-giving Lord**

Function: To encourage people to keep trusting in Jesus all the time, especially when faced with life's most brutal storms.



When Alice and I migrated to Melbourne in 2003, we started a furniture design and importation business and worked very hard. We were full of aspirations to get it going. However, one day in the following year, I became very unwell. I kept shivering with high fevers and Panadol didn't work. At the hospital, I was found to have Endocarditis, which is a life-threatening inflammation of the inner lining of the heart's chambers and valves caused by bacterial infections. I was hospitalised for two months and treated with strong antibiotics. But a few weeks after having recovered and discharged, I was readmitted to Royal Melbourne Hospital due to another bout of high fevers, this time caused by lung infections. Over the 13 months, I was admitted to the hospital 11 times, all due to high fevers caused by infections. Our lives and dreams were falling apart.

I think most of us, if not all, have experienced difficult times in life before. Regardless of the degree of difficulty or grief, how have you coped and passed through?

Today, we hear the story of these siblings: Martha, Mary and Lazarus, who all were dear friends of Jesus. Lazarus became gravely ill, and his sisters were very concerned and feeling helpless, and they quickly sent Jesus a message: "Lord, your dear friend is sick." Martha & Mary would have hoped that Jesus would rescue them once he received the message.

Similarly, Alice and I prayed to Jesus, hoping we could resume normality soon. I was later diagnosed with Myelodysplasia Syndrome (MDS for short). It is a form of blood cancer that may progress to become leukaemia. But, according to my haematologist, my only option was to have a bone marrow transplant before contracting an infection in the brain, which would be fatal. However, the fatality rate would be as high as 30%; one out of three patients undergoing bone marrow transplants may not survive eventually. The reality became worse.

Meanwhile, the typing process (that is, matching the donor's stem cells with mine) intricately involves matching 12 components of specific proteins in our stem cells used by our immune system to differentiate cells that belong in our body or not. Unfortunately, my best 1-out-of-4 chance of any of my two brothers in Singapore could match fell through. And the chance of getting a non-related donor of the same ethnicity as me was practically impossible; a one-in-millions chance. The reality seemed to be hopeless then.

We were overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness as undergoing a bone marrow transplant seemed so risky and impossible to find a matching donor. We didn't know what other remedial treatments could be possible. We had hit the wall.

Since Martha & Mary were dear friends of Jesus, they would have known Jesus well, knowing that he had the power and ability to heal and restore any person simply by speaking. Therefore, when they sent Jesus the message without saying anything more than "Lord, your dear friend is sick," we may presume they were hopeful that Jesus would do something. Perhaps they hoped that Jesus would say a word to heal Lazarus immediately, or Jesus would set off to Bethany to their aid as soon as possible.

Similarly, Alice and I turned to Jesus in prayer. We surrendered to God the search for a matching donor and what would follow. We asked Jesus to provide us with a matching donor IF the transplant was God's will for us, regardless of the outcome.

Jesus arrived at Bethany, not immediately as Martha & Mary had hoped for, but in his timing. He said, "The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory."

Indeed, everything will happen in God's timing which will be beyond our expectations. Just three months into a worldwide search for a suitable stem cell donor, one day, I received a call from a nurse in the transplant team that they had found two matching donors, one from Hong Kong and the other from Taiwan. The nurse asked me to take my time to carefully discuss with my family before making the all-important decision. But I told her immediately to proceed because God's sign for me was loud and clear: I had asked for a matching donor, and God had provided TWO.

So, I began full-body radiation and chemotherapy the following week to wipe off my own bone marrow before receiving the new stem cells. That morning on 22 July 2005, when the nurse returned from Hong Kong with the donor's freshly-harvested bone marrow stem cells, the doctors gathered around me as the new stem cells were transfused into me. My haematologist said humbly, "That's all we could do for you medically; what happens next is beyond the team."

Indeed, like Martha & Mary, whose hope was in Jesus, we knew we had God's hands embracing us. We believed that Christ was leading us through the valley of darkness. Like Martha & Mary patiently and hopefully waited for Jesus to arrive, we patiently and prayerfully waited for God's will for us to unfold in the subsequent 14 days and hoped for the ideal outcome.

Without any active bone marrow, my body couldn't generate new blood cells. So, every morning's blood test results written on the whiteboard in front of my bed were zeros: haemoglobin: zero, white blood cells: zero, platelets: zero. At the same time, painful side effects of the radiation and chemotherapy manifested, ulcerating my mouth lining, oesophagus, stomach and the rest so much that I could not talk or swallow anything at all. But in the meantime, I was given blood, fat and fluid transfusions daily to sustain my body. Like Lazarus, who was buried for 4 days in the tomb, I felt that I was entombed for those 14 long days.

I guess most of us, if not all, have experienced grief in losing loved ones. And for some, the grief might be so intense that it stayed with them for a fairly long time as they missed their loved ones dearly. We see this in Martha and Mary.

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, in their grief, Martha & Mary said to him, "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! Whether this is a confession of faith or an accusation that Jesus had arrived too late is difficult to determine. However, it clearly emphasizes one point, and that is, Jesus is the one who brings and sustains life.

And Martha added, "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for." Although Lazarus had died, Martha & Mary believed Jesus could still do something miraculous.

And indeed, Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; 26 and those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Truly, Jesus is the Life and the Resurrection; we shall have life in him. Through faith in Jesus, we shall draw from him the life-giving Spirit to renew our spirit and mind. And this life that we have in Jesus is not something installed for us in the future, happening only on the last day but now. Jesus is speaking of life & resurrection as a present reality. Indeed, after raising Lazarus back to life but still wrapped in the burial cloths, Jesus instructed, "Untie him, and let him go." So, when we cling to Jesus, our life-giving Lord, he will untie us from whatever binds us – our fear, anxiety, loss, grief, etc – so that we may be freed and be socially, physically, spiritually, and emotionally alive.

Like Martha & Mary, Alice and I were confident that Jesus was with us all the time, giving us the strength to pull through, and we felt exceptionally peaceful. I was thankful for having a higher pain threshold, and I requested the pain-killing morphine to be reduced to the minimum so that I could have a clear mind to pray.

As the stone to the tomb entrance rolled away, Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" and out came Lazarus. On the morning of the 16th day, the nurse came into my room and happily wrote the score on the whiteboard: haemoglobin: 0.2, white blood cells: 0.1, platelets: 0.1. Thank God, that was the sign of life!

The donor's stem cells began to grow and multiply in my bone marrow, my blood count increased, my immunity improved, and all the ulcers gradually diminished. Jesus had raised me back to life and unbound me.

Thankfully, seventeen and a half years have gone by, and I have been in complete remission. We are always grateful to God for this grace of a second lease of life, however long this may be. Indeed, everything is possible with God, including changing my blood group from AB+ to A+.

Indeed, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. All who believe in him will live. So may we cling to Jesus, our life-giving Lord, trusting in him all the time, especially when we are bound by life's crippling issues. Amen.