

Putting Life to Death

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of February 2000. The preacher is Andrew Pridot.

His sermon is entitled, Putting Life to Death, and is from John chapter 11, verse 45, through to chapter 12, verse 11.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you've not left us in the dark, but that you have revealed yourself in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, that you've made the way of salvation plain through him.

We thank you for this. Please help us to listen to what you have to say to us tonight about Jesus and his gospel, that we might grow in our confidence in him and in our desire to serve him with our lives.

We pray these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Try not to pop too much. One of the things I like reading are rock biographies, not sort of geological rocks or anything like that, but rock and roll biographies.

[1 : 16] I have a fascination with the tragic heroes of rock and roll, and recently while I was on holidays in Narooma, I had the opportunity to read a biography on the Beach Boys.

I was on the Beach Boys. I was on the Beach Boys. I was on the Beach Boys. But the thing that struck me most when I read this book was this feeling that I'd read it all before. All of these biographies, and I've read quite a few now, have this sort of one theme that goes through all of them.

These guys get to a point of fame and fortune. They're adored as gods. They're adored as gods. But more often than not, they become victims to their fame.

They think they're free. Their great gospel, if you like, is freedom at all costs. But they end up becoming victims of their fame. So they get trapped in little hotel rooms in all these magnificent countries that they travel around the world.

They can't even get out and have a look because their fans are hanging around the door. They have to stay in this little room. Or perhaps they're victims to their recording companies. They have all these great hopes of producing the next masterpiece that's going to change the world or something.

[2 : 21] But really, they're pushed around by the people that want them to do certain things for financial reasons. Some even get pulled around like puppets to the extent that they even lose their lives at the hands of some crazed fan.

And John Lennon, of course, is a classic example of that. Now, you could read the story of Jesus in this way, couldn't you, in the Gospels? Jesus was a person who said and did extraordinary things. In this passage, we see a number of different responses to his fame, to Jesus Christ, superstar, if you like. So you've got the crowds that follow him around. Oh, that sounds familiar. You know, they're hanging around Jerusalem.

I wonder if Jesus is going to come up for the Passover. Where is he? Maybe he'll do another sign that we can have a look at. Then there are those who went a bit further than these crowds. Their interest led them to put their trust in Jesus, to follow him.

And then there's that amazing example of Mary's devotion to Jesus, where she anoints his feet with a perfume and wipes them with her hair. And you've got the tragic ending too, don't you?

[3 : 31] You know, the end of the Gospel story. All of this adulation, perhaps, and popularity upset people in authority, people, perhaps, that he challenged. And they set out to put him to death.

And sadly, that's what happened, wasn't it, to Jesus? His great career was interrupted by death. Now, I say you could read the Gospel stories in this way.

But I should also say that you'd be wrong in reading them like this. For it's clear, and you will have seen this as you've been going through John, hopefully, that Jesus is no victim of chance events. He's not pushed around by people in power or his wandering fan club, whatever it is. No, Jesus is the one who is sent by God to carry out his great plan of salvation.

Just before the passage we had read to us tonight, it's the end of the raising of Lazarus, that last sign recorded in John's Gospel, the seventh sign. And Jesus said, he gave thanks to the Father out loud for hearing his prayer and raising Lazarus.

[4 : 41] And the reason he did that, he said in verse 42, was so that the people standing there, might believe that you sent me. What we're going to discover in this passage is more about who Jesus was, what it meant that he was sent by the Father to carry out his great rescue plan, and what it means for us to follow him, to put our trust in him.

Okay, I mentioned before the sign of the raising of Lazarus. You'll know that in John, the miracles of Jesus are called signs.

And you know by now, of course, that signs are never ends in themselves, are they? If instead of following the signs to go from Clayton, where I came from tonight, to come to Doncaster, I'd stopped at each one and collected them on the way, because I thought, oh, that's a beautiful sign. I'd love to have that in my collection at home. I think I'll pull that up out of the ground and put it in the boot. If I'd done that and then driven off, I would have completely missed the point of why the sign was there. I would have ended up in a completely wrong place.

Well, maybe not tonight, because I know Doncaster, but if I was going on holidays or something, the point of the sign is to point. Same with Jesus' signs.

[5 : 58] They're only of use to us if we move in the direction in which they're pointing to Jesus and who he was and what he came to do. Again, the last sign recorded for us in John, the raising of Lazarus, has this effect of pointing people to Jesus.

In fact, that great miracle, that sign, is what drives the action of this passage. But as usual, when people come to Jesus, there are two quite different responses to him.

The first response is in verse 45. And perhaps if you don't have your Bibles open, it might be good to open it to page 874. And we see there in verse 45 of chapter 11 that many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Mary is Lazarus' brother. She and Martha have just seen what Jesus has done in raising their brother from the dead. And these other Jews, these other people with her, have seen it as well. And they've believed in Jesus. What does that mean, believing in him, believing in Jesus? Well, it's certainly more than just intellectual assent to a truth, having gained all the evidence.

[7 : 19] It's at least that, but it's much stronger here. And as we'll see in a moment, it doesn't matter how much physical evidence some people have, they will not believe in Jesus.

No, what it means is entrusting yourself to Jesus, putting yourself, if you like, your life, your need for forgiveness, even your death, as Mary and Martha discovered, into Jesus' hands.

Many of the Jews believed in Jesus. That was one response. Have a look at the other one. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, What are we to do?

This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

Just like today for many people, Jesus was the unwelcome interruption to the status quo, to the way things were, to lives, in which people had either domesticated God, turning him into a neat set of ideas or perhaps religious practices or traditions, or else they just ignored him completely.

[8 : 40] Now with the Pharisees and the chief priests here, we see again that it's not a matter of not enough evidence. Verse 47, they've seen the signs.

In fact, it is because of these signs that they find him such a threat. What stops them from believing in Jesus, from entrusting their lives to Jesus, not the lack of evidence, but their own wills?

It's a sin issue, isn't it? It's a rebellion issue. They don't want to entrust their lives to Jesus. They don't think they need to do this. So why was Jesus such a threat to them?

Why is Jesus such a threat to us, to the status quo? Well, the chief priests were part of the Sadducees, the priestly class, the ruling party of the Jews, if you like, and they had this sort of love-hate relationship to the Roman overlords in Jerusalem.

As long as they could maintain a certain amount of peace, no sort of rebel uprisings, they had a certain amount of power. They ruled like vassal kings under the Roman overlords.

[9 : 53] The Romans worshipped peace. The Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, they came down heavy on anything that upset that. So they were walking a bit of a tightrope so that they could have this authority, this power.

The Pharisees were another group of Jewish leaders. They were the law keepers, the religious, the teachers of the people. The people looked to them for life and teaching about God.

So perhaps we can see a bit more clearly the problem that they have with Jesus. We've just seen and we see again and again the Gospels. Jesus had more and more people who were following him.

These leaders were scared of uprising. They saw the threat to their own authority, the delicate balance they'd achieved with the Romans. But sadly they mask these fears under a mock concern for our holy place.

It's literally just the place, probably a reference to the temple in Jerusalem, and the nation or the Jewish nation. It's a sad thing when even God's own people see his very coming amongst them as a threat or an interruption to their comfortable religion.

[11 : 08] When they would rather have peace with the world than peace with God. We see it here. We see it in the world around us.

We see it throughout the history of the church. Perhaps most frightening of all, we see it in our own churches. Perhaps even in our own lives. I wonder, what are the things that stop us from trusting in Jesus?

Why is he such a threat to our lives? Well, while these guys are trying to work out what to do with this troublemaker, it's the high priest that year, which I think is emphasised there, the year that Jesus actually would die.

He's the one, Caiaphas, who gives voice to their desires. Verse 49. One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, you know nothing at all.

You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. It's obvious, guys. This is politics. And in politics, sometimes we have to make compromises.

[12 : 22] Sometimes for the sake of many people, one person, even an innocent person, has to be removed, has to die. After all, this is the real world. Isn't it?

That's what Caiaphas has in mind here. And if you skip down to verse 53, it doesn't take the others long to catch on. From that day on, they plan to put him to death.

And so this is a turning point in the Gospel, isn't it, as we move steadily towards Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and execution. So is that it?

Is it Jesus Christ's superstar? Is this the beginning of the end? Was Jesus just another great historical figure who fell victim to sinister political intrigue? Well, no.

It's not true, is it? I've left out two verses there. Verse 51. He, that is, Caiaphas, did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.

[13 : 35] Even without knowing it, Caiaphas is God's prophet. He's God's mouthpiece. God is speaking through him. He thought one thing. God had another thing in mind.

God is using his high priest to announce the gospel. That is, how he would save his people from their sin. One man dying for the nation.

It's clear here that God is in control, isn't it? God is in control. One man dying for the nation. The word for here is a strong one when it's used to refer to Jesus' death in the New Testament.

It means in the place of, as a substitute for, instead of. As we read on in John, read the whole of the New Testament, it will come to signal Jesus taking, as our substitute, our sin, the guilt, and the punishment we deserve for that upon himself, so that we can be set free from God's just judgment. We can be forgiven and be set free to live for him. Jesus has already pointed to this. Not sure how long ago you heard from John 10, where he describes himself as the good shepherd.

[14 : 54] Verse 11 of that chapter, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life, here's that word again, for the sheep. And God's plan has always been bigger than just the Jewish nation.

Have another look, back in chapter 11 now, in verse 51, he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. The Old Testament prophets yearn for the day when God's exiled people might be brought back to the land and be made one again. Here's just one passage that talks about that from Isaiah 43, verse 5 and following.

Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, give them up, and to the south, do not withhold.

Bring my sons from far away, and my daughters from the end of the earth. Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

[16:01] And if you read on in Isaiah, and if we look in the New Testament, even if we go right back to the promises first made to Abraham, we see that this people, the people called by his name, would include even people from without the Jewish nation.

Gentiles, people from all over the earth. Again, Jesus said this back in John 10 when he was talking about himself as a good shepherd, that there were people in his flock outside of this sheepfold, outside of this people of God.

So again, we see Jesus is not a victim. This is God's plan that's been promised in the prophets of old, that's been carried out, that Jesus is bringing about in his very person, eventually, and most profoundly, in his death.

Jesus is not pushed around by religious authorities. They might think they have the upper hand. They might think that putting him to death is a way of stamping him out. It's actually playing God's hand.

Everything that Jesus says and does in John's Gospel is moving towards that hour. Keep hearing about that hour when the Son of God will complete the work that he came to do.

[17:22] I think that's why we read in verse 54 here of chapter 11 that Jesus no longer walked about openly among the Jews. The news from this plot got out.

Could have easily happened. The council probably had about 70 people meeting in it. A group of that size information can easily leak. Jesus has heard about it.

He no longer walks about openly among the Jews. Again, who's in control here? Jesus is in control. It's not the hour yet. There's more that he has to do and teach, especially.

We'll hear about that in future weeks. Okay, in verse 55 now, John gives us the time frame in which all these things are happening.

It's Passover time, almost, and people are going up to Jerusalem and preparing themselves for this important festival. We'll come back to that in a moment, but it's an important thing to remember.

[18:20] It's Passover time. But the hot gossip going on in Jerusalem is of course focused on Jesus. And as well as those who opposed Jesus and those who put their faith in him, it says in verse 9 of chapter 12, many of the Jews did believe in Jesus.

That implies also that some didn't. And here in verses 55 to 57, they're looking for Jesus. Do you think he'll show up? A number of these people who haven't gone as far as putting their trust in Jesus, I want to call the Jesus fan club.

people who stood at a distance perhaps, they're intrigued at Jesus, perhaps attracted to what he was doing, but they hadn't yet put their trust in him.

And again, we see them again towards the end of the passage. The Jesus fan club is alive and well today. The Jesus fan club is made up with people who perhaps get excited by the miraculous, but don't move beyond this to putting their trust in Jesus.

They have their own agenda for Jesus as the crowds often did as you read through John. Jesus can heal me. Jesus can give me inner peace. Jesus can make me feel good about myself.

[19:39] Jesus can help me to lose weight. It's like Jesus complained about those who were on the receiving end of the feeding miracle in John 6, the feeding of the 5,000.

He said of them that they weren't looking for him after this because they had seen a great sign, but because they'd had their bellies filled. What we've learned in the gospel is that what Jesus wants to give us, wants to be for us, is far greater than what we want him to be for us.

He comes to us on his terms, not ours. We must look in the direction that his signs were pointing to who he was and what he came to do, to the forgiveness and life that he offered us through faith in him.

But in the middle of all of these accounts of different responses to Jesus comes this amazing event. Remember Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, they put on a dinner party for Jesus in Lazarus' hometown in Bethany.

They're reclining at table, which is amazing enough in itself, if you remember where Lazarus was a short time ago. And we read these amazing words in verse 3.

[21 : 03] Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. This was expensive stuff.

As we read on into Judas' response, rather, it could have been sold for the equivalent of about a year's wages for your average labourer's pay, 300 denarii.

It's an extravagant action then, isn't it? It's over the top. But it's also a humble action. She pours it on his feet. Only the humblest servant would go anywhere near the feet in this hot, dusty climate. Not only that, she wipes the perfume from his feet with her hair. In the other accounts of this, in Mark 14 and Matthew 26, I think it's the same account that's been referred to, at least in those chapters.

We learn that his head was anointed as well. So, we're focusing in on the feet here in our account, but it's even bigger if you look at the wider story.

[22 : 21] No wonder perhaps we read that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. What's Mary doing here? Well, she's giving glory to Jesus, I think.

Now, I know you respect your vicar, the Reverend Dr. Paul Barker, but if at the next parish dinner somebody came up and did this to Paul, and like Jesus, he praised the person for doing it, I think you'd be looking for a new vicar.

I hope you'd be looking for a new vicar. Such an act would be inappropriate for anybody except the Lord. But it's right for Jesus to accept this glory.

Indeed, this is God's goal for him. Indeed, this is God's goal for creation. The goal of the plan of the Father sending the Son to die in our place, the goal of our sins being forgiven, was that Jesus might be glorified in the heavens and in the earth.

That's God's big picture goal. That's why he sent the Son. Wouldn't it be great if our church, our lives were filled with the aroma of the worship of Jesus in spirit and in truth.

[23 : 40] What a great anticipation of heaven because of course, this is the hymn of heaven, isn't it? Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

And a bit later, to the one seated on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever. Revelation chapter 5 verses 12 and 13.

Now you might say this is obvious, we're Christians, this is what we do, we glorify Jesus, we worship Jesus. Well it wasn't so obvious to Judas, verse 4, Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, the one who was about to betray him said, why was this perfume not sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor?

This is a bit over the top, isn't it? This is, it's a waste, it's not practical. It's even more sinister than that though, for we learn that Judas wasn't actually concerned for the poor, he had more concern for his own bank balance which he'd been building up from the common purse of Jesus and his disciples, an ominous sign of his future betrayal of Jesus for money.

But Jesus is not embarrassed by it, he praises Mary for this act of devotion. I think this is how we'd understand verse 8 there. It's not that the poor are unimportant, not worthy of our care, but it is a radical point that Jesus is making and again if anybody else made it, we might rightly ask questions.

[25 : 26] What is Jesus saying? Glorifying Jesus takes precedence. Now I mentioned before that Caiaphas said more than he knew.

Perhaps we can see here and verse heaven, verse 7, gives us a hint here that this might be so, that Mary did more than she knew.

It literally reads, leave her alone, let her keep it, or perhaps that she might keep it for the day of my embalming, that is the preparation for his burial.

What does Jesus mean here? Well it seems that Jesus' words point to what Mary has just done. I don't think it means that she kept a bit of the perfume for the actual day of his burial.

The way that it's lavished around, the way that Judas is upset that it all could have been sold for 300 denarii, I think points to the fact that she used it all at that point.

[26 : 33] So what's she saying? It's not the actual day of his burial then, is it? But it's pointing to the day of his burial. Her action anticipates Jesus' death.

Mary was perhaps unwittingly pointing to Jesus' death, that for which we glorify him. It's not only that Jesus is to be at the centre of our worship, is it?

But that his death in our place is to be the centre of our worship. That is, we worship the lamb that was slain. The hour that Jesus refers to, when he'll be lifted up, when he'll be glorified, is the moment of his death.

This is what this whole passage is about. Remember Caiaphas' words, one man for the nation. Remember, it's Passover time. What did that festival celebrate?

The redemption of God's people through the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb. Jesus' death is not how his name will be forever stamped out, whatever they think.

[27 : 42] It's not an unfortunate interruption to an otherwise exciting ministry. No, it is the very climax of God's plan of drawing to himself his people, as we've seen, from every nation, for the glory of his name.

glory of God's glory of glory of Jesus. If glorifying Jesus in this way was at least embarrassing and perhaps even improper for Judas, and in the other accounts we see the disciples found this hard for different reasons, well there are many today, even within the church, who would agree with them. I realise this the very first time I preached a few years ago. I guess I was a little naive. I was excited about the gospel. I didn't think my talk would be very controversial.

I was just looking at Philippians 2. After the talk an older and wiser Christian was encouraged. He said to me, keep preaching Christ. I thought, well, that's good advice, but it's a bit obvious, isn't it? What else would you preach? That's what the Bible is all about. I taped the talk, or the talk was taped, my grandma wanted to borrow it, probably to show it off to her friends.

[28 : 57] She actually wanted to lend it to a friend who she thought was struggling in her faith. She got surprised at the reaction of her friend too. Her friend came back very agitated, angry actually.

She said it was all about Jesus. It didn't focus on God enough. It should have been less about Jesus and more about God. God. The advice of the older and wiser Christian still rings in my ears as I find myself under constant pressure not to preach Christ and him crucified, to take Jesus out of the centre of my worship, to make the message less exclusive perhaps, and so less offensive in some way.

You know this yourself in your own lives, don't you? You don't need me to tell you this. It's politically correct to have a vague notion of the divine, however we define that.

But if you're at a dinner party and you move from beyond the divine or God with a small g to talking about Jesus, of his claims for himself, of his claims on our lives, of the worship that we owe him, that's when it starts to get a little bit uncomfortable.

People start to squirm. That's when the party turns from polite conversation perhaps to embarrass silence. God confronts us in Christ.

[30 : 30] Jesus remains counter-cultural. He will not be domesticated. He will not be relegated to a list of wise people who taught about God.

He's not just another rabbi. As the Jews in Jesus' time had to learn, as his own disciples had to learn, as we have to learn, Jesus is saviour. Jesus is Lord.

And he is deserving of our worship. Well, in this passage we learn about Jesus who refused to be made into an idol, a first century pop star, or a keeper of the religious status quo.

We learn about Jesus who was no mere victim of circumstance, but was determined to do the work that the Father had sent him to do. We learn about Jesus who was not ashamed to accept the glory he was deserving as our saviour and Lord.

Lord, in the final few verses here of our section, at least in chapter 12, verses 9 to 11, we're back to Lazarus. Again, Lazarus pops up again.

[31 : 42] We learn by his example that there is a cost to following this Jesus. We, like Lazarus, who have received mercy at Jesus' hand, will stand out.

The Jews didn't like that people were turning to Jesus because of the witness of Lazarus' life. And we see there that there was a plot to kill Lazarus also.

Our message will not always be the popular one. It may alienate us, cause us embarrassment. It may one day, as it already is for many of God's children throughout the world, be the reason that people want us dead.

Just before Jesus' death, Jesus warned the disciples that as the world has hated him, they'll hate them also. They don't belong to the world in that sense. John 15.

But we dare not back away from this gospel, from this Jesus, or water him down. We dare not deny the world the opportunity to hear about Jesus and become part of God's great multinational family, forgiven and given eternal life.

[32 : 55] life. We know that whatever others might say, this is God's goal for creation, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.