**The Thing You Most Value**
**John 11:45-57**

We're looking at John's gospel and, today, at the fall-out of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. But as we start, I want you to consider two scenarios, and I want you to think about *why* they might happen. The first involves a friend of yours. Someone you've always looked up to as a person of integrity. But you get news that they have done something that you could never have imagined them doing. It might be financial, or relational, or sexual, or academic - and it's whether it's illegal or not it's certainly immoral and seems to go against everything this person has ever stood for. And you're left reeling.

Or take the second scenario. And you witness someone - maybe a colleague, or a friend, could even be yourself, react to something that's said or done and the reaction is out of all proportion to what's happened - it's almost violent in its emotion.

And in both situations you are left thinking, why? Why would someone behave in ways that go directly against what they say they believe and why react so violently? And of course, one reason why you should ask 'why?' is - you don't want either case to be you, do you? You want to live a life of integrity and you *don't* want to be a living, breathing volcano. You don't want to constantly be getting angry, or cutting people down with your words.

Look at v45-46, 'Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary [Lazarus' sister] and had seen what he [Jesus] did, believed in him, *but some*…'

So among the crowd who witness Jesus calling Lazarus out of the tomb, many believed in him. But not everyone. And as we'll see, others who hear about it, also don't trust Jesus. In fact, for some of their reaction, and subsequent behaviour, runs straight against what they say they believe, and for still others it's violent. Same Jesus. Same event. But very different reactions. And this passage helps explain why.

So, we're going to look at three things. Firstly, **what you most value**; secondly, **the consequences of getting that wrong**; and thirdly, **what you should most value and why**.

**What You Most Value**
Look at v45-46 again: 'Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees.'

So, as we saw last week, the crowd hears Jesus' command for death to loose it's grip on Lazarus and for Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and Lazarus does just that and many of them believe. They realise something of who Jesus really is and they trust him. But others go off to the Pharisees and v46, tell them 'what Jesus had done.'

I don't know if you saw the obituary last week of Andrée Dumon who recently died at the age of 102. She was Belgian, and in 1941, at the age of 17, she joined the resistance against the Nazi occupation and through her work saved the lives of dozens of allied airmen who had been shot down. Because it was her job to accompany them, using false papers, on the underground escape route to Paris, getting them through checkpoints, and past Gestapo checks, until she could hand them on to another courier for the onward journey to Spain.

But in 1942 she was betrayed, by an informant, and along with her father she was arrested and sent to the concentration camps, where her father died but she, somehow, survived.

But why would someone betray her and her colleagues? Was it fear that their work might get others - the betrayer, his or her family, into trouble? Was it out of loyalty or sympathy for the Nazi cause? She never knew.

But we can ask the same questions here, can't we? Why witness this incredible event, a beloved brother being raised from the dead, and rather than hang around and share in the joy of the family, pick up your stuff, head to the exit, and go find the guys who have set themselves against Jesus?

Maybe they want to try change and change the Pharisees minds: 'come on guys, Jesus is a good guy, he's one of us, you've got to drop your opposition.'

Except, John's contrasting the two responses, isn't he. Many believe, *but some, but others*… and the implication is, *don't.* And back in chapter 9 we saw these same Pharisees excommunicate a man from the synagogue, a man who had been born blind and who Jesus had healed. And the reason for his excommunication? He refused to side with them against Jesus.

So maybe these people are feeling the social pressure. Maybe they realise that like that blind man, they've been caught up in another of Jesus' miracles and they don't want what happened to him to happen to them. Or maybe their loyalty really does lie with the Pharisees.

Ok, but think about your own situation, your own heart.

Maybe you're not yet a Christian, but you've been coming to church, or reading the Bible and you've seen something of Jesus' power. Or, like someone I was talking to last week, you've seen the impact Christ has had on your friend's life. But you're holding out on him. Sure you're not running off to the Pharisees, but neither are you committing yourself to him. And could one reason for that be that you're concerned about what others might think if you did? You feel the social pressure - that in some way it might cost you?

Or maybe you are a Christian, but at work, or with friends, you too feel the pressure not to side with Jesus. And sometimes you find yourself saying things or doing things you shouldn't, or not saying or doing things you should.

Why can social pressure effect us like that? Well, it's about what matters most to us, isn't it? And whether just in that moment, or long term, the approval, or admiration of others, or the desire for self-preservation, or just comfort - to not feel awkward, seems more valuable than Christ. And so we deny the thing we say we value above all… because something else has that place.

Ok, but what about the Pharisees themselves? Look at v47, 'So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said "What are we to do?"

Does anything about that strike you as odd? That when the Pharisees hear what Jesus has done, their response is to team up with the chief priests and call the council, the Sanhedrin, together?

You see the Pharisees were the cultural and theological conservatives of the day. But the chief priests were Sadducees, the liberals and progressives of the day. So not for the last time, those on the right join hands with those on the left, conservative and progressive come together, and their

common enemy is Christ. And might that be that, whatever they say, their theological beliefs, or their opinions on culture, are not in fact what matters most to them - but that something else has that place?

But look at their question 'What are we to do?' Guys we have got a problem - and we need to redouble our efforts to fix it. We need to manage this. We need to manage this man Jesus. But you can't manage Christ, can you? He's unmanageable. He's untameable.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher used to criticise people who tried to defend the Bible. 'Defend the Bible! I would as soon defend a lion! Unchain it, let it out of its cage, and it will defend itself.' But Christ is the same. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children ask Mr and Mrs Beaver whether Aslan the Lion - who is a picture of Christ - is safe. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." In fact, Mr. Tumnus, the faun, says, "He's wild."

But maybe you're trying to manage Christ. Maybe you think you can have one foot in both camps, a bit of the world and a bit of the church. Maybe you hope to keep Christ contained. Maybe you want to restrict his access to your life. After all, you don't want a lion prowling around your house.

But ask yourself, why do they want to restrict him and cage him? Verses 47-48, "For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, *and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation*."

So if some in the crowd, consciously or subconsciously, felt threatened by the Pharisees, the Pharisees and the Sadducees feel threatened by Jesus, *and* by the Romans. Because if Jesus gains a following, and those followers start talking of him as the messiah, the king, this could end up in a full-blown revolt against Rome. And if that happens there will be only one victor. And 'our place' - the Temple, and our nation will be lost.

So they see Jesus as a threat to civil order and religious freedom and national identity. All of which are valid concerns. Or are they? Or at least, is that really what's bothering these leaders? You see notice how they phrase their concern: 'The Romans will come and take away *our* place and *our* nation.' And in Greek that *our* is in the emphatic position. We need to act because what *we* stand to lose if we don't. *Our* place and *our* nation. Our position, our prestige, our identity as leaders.

And it's that that they most value, it's that they most love. And it's being threatened by Jesus. And they may cloak it in a concern for the public good, but in reality, they're concerned for themselves.

So think again about that scenario of someone reacting out of all proportion to what's been said, or done. And ask yourself, what is it that they love that they think is being threatened? Is it their pride? Or their reputation? Their control? Or their identity?

Because there's always going to be something that we value above all. Something we worship. Something we're looking to for our security, or worth or sense that we're good, that we've made it. And when that's threatened, it's like our very self is bring threatened, and we notice it.

It's why David Foster Wallace, the American writer, who was not a Christian, said, “In the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships.” Because we’ve been made to.

So if you find yourself holding out on Jesus in your life or in some area of your life, ask yourself, what’s he threatening? Is it your freedom - to do as you want? But if you worship freedom it’s going to become your slave master, and you’ll never have any meaningful relationships, because true love always nails us down and curtails our freedom. Is it being in control, and you don’t want to cede control of your life to Christ? But value control over everything else and you’re going to see not just Jesus as a threat but everyone else. And like a child who thinks there’s a monster behind every tree, you’ll see the actions of colleagues or coworkers as attempts to take you down. You’ll always live on a paranoid edge.

You see, it’s what you most value that determines what you fear. But it’s what you most fear and most value that determine how you live.

**The Consequences of Getting it Wrong**

Now as you watch these leaders react to and discuss the news of Lazarus being raised - don’t you think something’s missing? They say, v47, ‘this man performs many signs’ - so they’re not disputing or denying the facts of what’s happened. But what do they do with those facts? Do they allow them to challenge their negative views about Jesus, or reframe their thinking?

And the answer is no. Their love of position and prestige and power has blunted their critical faculties. It’s clouded their reason. So they don’t or won’t re-examine the evidence or reconsider their worldview.

But of course, think how that can happen today. And not just because of position or prestige. Maybe the thing that most matters to you is your leisure time, travel and adventure, or having a great time. So when we do have time - time to think - actually we don’t think. Leisure or entertainment is what occupies our thinking. And the superficial squeezes other stuff out. And the danger is we exist in the shallows. And we never quite get round to thinking about the big issues of life and death and who Jesus really is.

Or, if your career and furthering it is what matters most to you, then in all likelihood you won’t have much time or patience for thinking deeply on the claims of Christ on your life. You may hear the truth about Jesus, you may even acknowledge it as true, but you don’t follow through on it, because there’s always another project to grasp, another paper to write, because something else has your heart. And you see life and live life through that lens.

But think about the Pharisees in particular. You see, one of the things that set them apart from the Sadducees in the first place was that the Pharisees believed in the resurrection. That the day would come when God would raise the dead and establish his kingdom. And here, they get news that a dead man has been raised, and that the resurrection at the end of time has broken into time, and the kingdom of God is being proclaimed, and that the thing they said they believed in and longed for was coming to pass. And do they rejoice at that? No. Why not? Because if you value power and prestige, or wealth or freedom or control or any number of things more than God, you won’t live true to what you believe. You’ll always be in danger of jettisoning what you say is the most important for you for what really is the most important.

And that's what lies behind our scenario of the person you admired behaving in ways that seemingly totally contradict what they believed in. How did that happen? And the answer is, some value higher than their professed belief, some idol of the heart, happened. You see, it's not what we say we believe that determines how we live, it's what we love.

Ok, but do the Sadducees do any better? And the answer, again, is no! You see they did not believe in the idea of resurrection, and they hear of Jesus raising a dead man, and do they reconsider the way they see the world and life and death? No. Because ultimately, the pursuit of truth and thinking rightly about God is not what they most love.

And yet, if the Pharisees act contrary to their beliefs, the Sadducees, or at least Caiaphas their spokesman, live true to theirs. Because as Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, says, it wasn't just that the Sadducces did not believe in resurrection, they also believed there was no afterlife, or final judgment, or eternal rewards or punishment. This life was it and death is the end.

But what's the impact of believing that? Of living true to that? Well, look what Caiaphas says, v49-50: "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."

So Jesus is expendable. And it is to our gain if we throw him under the bus or at least the donkey cart. To kill him is a price worth paying.

But listen, if there is no final judgment, and life is about getting what you want, then what's to stop you behaving like that if you can get away with it?

Make power and position and maintaining those your ultimate and you'll use people and then cast them aside when they're of no further use. Or make wealth and beauty your ultimate and you'll scorn the poor and the ugly. Make comfort your thing and you'll want nothing to do with anyone who disturbs your comfort, who makes claims on you. Make anything other than God your god and you will look down on the image bearers of God.

And when it comes to Christ, make romance, boyfriend, girlfriend, career, freedom, whatever your ultimate and, when push comes to shove, you'll cast Christ aside like Caiaphas.

But of course, what John makes clear is that Caiaphas speaks better than he knows. Caiaphas says, 'It's Jesus or us. Either he dies or we die. Which is it going to be?' And John says, v51-52, 'He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only.'

**What *Should* Be of Supreme Value**

You see, if you and I are not to live in fear of what others think of us, or be at risk of compromising our beliefs, or of using people or seeing them as expendable, we need an ultimate in our lives that is not of this created order. We need God. *The* God. A supreme value who is the supreme value. A supreme power who is the supreme power. A supreme beauty who is beauty and love itself.

So look again at what John says of Jesus: that 'Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.' (V51-52). And these

leaders are worried about their position, their place. But Jesus gave up the ultimate place. And they're worried about their prestige but Jesus gave up his glory. And they're worried about their power, but Jesus humbled himself and emptied himself. And he doesn't use you - he dies for you. And he does not cast you aside - instead, he is cast aside to gather you in.

And here is Caiaphas, the high priest, saying we should sacrifice Jesus; and Jesus, the true high priest, comes and says to us, I will sacrifice myself for you. The consequences and penalty of wrong values and wrong choices is death, but I will be your substitute. I will take your place. And I will gather all of you, Jew and Gentile, into the one new people of God.

And when your eyes are opened to his life-laying down love for you, when you see how *he* leads, and how he gives himself, your love for him will grow and it will inevitably change you.

Love position and prestige and you'll put others down. But be taken by Christ's sacrificial love for you and you'll give yourself to see others flourish.

Think there is no final judgment and you'll have no moral basis for justice. But see Christ taking your punishment, and you'll know final judgment is real, and you'll work for justice - justice shot through with mercy, because Christ has been merciful to you.

And in v55-56, John tells us that in the face of these leaders' threats, Jesus withdraws. But as he does, pilgrims start arriving: 'Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus.' And it was at the Passover feast that the Passover lamb was sacrificed. As a remembrance of the first Passover, and another substitute, when the lamb's life was given for the people's.

And the pilgrims are coming to purify themselves before the feast, and the implication John's making is that it's in Jesus - the one they're looking for - that true purification can be found.

A friend recently told me that she recognises that when she feels guilty for her failure to live up to her own standards, she looks for others to blame. She looks for a scapegoat. But think how we all do that. We're angry with ourselves but we need someone else to carry our sin. Someone else to take the blame. And how in our cultural moment, that blame shifting and victimhood lies beneath so many of our divisions.

So more than ever, we need a better substitute and a better cleansing. Make your sense of personal worth the ultimate and you'll either beat yourself up, or take it out on others, or both. But look to Christ taking your place, carrying your guilt, being your substitute and your sacrifice and you will know a cleansing that truly sets you free. Free from the fear of others. Free from the idols of the heart. And free to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.