

# All Saints Day

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

## Introduction

What are your grievances against God?

It can seem a strange formation, this question, the idea that people have any grievances against God. Yet in the courageous tradition in the Hebrew — and then carried into the Christian narratives — we find individuals whose circumstances lead them to speak to God with the conviction of their sorrow. They are unapologetic, and honest, with raw grief, and no apology for their accusation.

‘You are to me a deceptive stream,’ the prophet Jeremiah shouted to God; and ‘I curse the day that I was born’. ‘What about ten good men?’ Abraham asked, and now, in this week’s text we hear Mary’s lament and reprimand. ‘If you had been here my brother would not have died.’ It’s a powerful indication of sainthood: this capacity to speak to God with the pointed truth of the limited heart. But it’s a truth that might save us.

Prayer, sometimes/often, locates itself at the heart of our grievances and conflicts. It can be tempting to only use language of perspective in our prayer, but we see in many biblical narratives the particularity of circumstance in prayer. Prayer is not just for the healing times, but for the breaking times too. Such courage to put language on the experience of destruction, on the times when it feels like the city is burning, and like even God has abandoned us has that crossover between lament and comfort. Lament is painful; yet to name lament — even when the lament continues — can provide a strange kind of comfort.

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## Text

John 11:32–44

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

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## Comment

This family of Bethany is a very particular one. They seem to be close friends of Jesus. They send word to him when there is a sudden shock in the family. We hear of the sisters Mary and Martha in another gospel too — in Luke — and it is clear that they are women who share hosting and responsibility in the household. Lazarus seems to be a secondary character, and he doesn't even have words in his mouth, just a gravesmell on his body.

In John's lengthy description of their grief we hear of each sister's individual grief, and their personalities come through. Mary, clear with her disappointment, comes to Jesus and speaks openly: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died". In the fuller text, we hear John's typical sequence: someone comes with a particular question, and then in the voice of Jesus, it becomes a question with doctrinal overtones, and misunderstandings, and ways in which Jesus then brings the audience to a point of understanding by a 'sign', after which he issues an 'I am...' statement.

Up until now there have been six of these engagements, and the scene at the grave of Lazarus is the seventh, final — and most audacious — of these scenes.

Jesus has delayed going to the grave. It's easy to think that he does so simply to prove a point about his powers, but many scholars assert that the surprise is not that he went to the grave late, but that he went at all. Tension about him has been rising in Jerusalem, and it could almost seem like news of Lazarus' illness is a trick to tempt him back to Jerusalem so he could be arrested and tried and executed. Thomas' word "Let us go too and die with you" seem like ironic hyperbole from this one called the doubter; Thomas, in this context, is a seer. He perceives accurately what kind of scenario they are walking towards.

When they get there, they realise that indeed Lazarus' death was not a trap (although had he been deliberately poisoned? Friendship is a strong theme in John's gospel — are we seeing here that people poisoned Lazarus knowing that Jesus' political astuteness would not keep him away from a suffering friend?) and Jesus is now at the place of the dead, faced with a question of what he'll do.

Jesus calls out to Lazarus, and when Lazarus leaves the cave, the writer has Jesus speak the obvious. John has written this gospel with an 'I am...' statement accompanying each sign, and so now, about to show Jesus' power over the living and the dead, John has had Jesus say 'I am ... the resurrection and the life'. Echoing the *ego eimi* statements of Isaiah's text, Jesus is portrayed here as declaring his divine status, a blasphemous statement if there ever was one. He accompanies this statement with a demonstration of life and almost immediately the plot to execute him reaches its zenith. No wonder he cried at the grave: he knew that to respond to the grief of his friends would imprison him.

Conflict abounds in this text: Mary's conflict with Jesus; Jesus' conflict about returning to a location so close to the politically charged Jerusalem; the conflict between Jesus and some of his compatriots; the conflict between the disciples about whether they should or shouldn't go to the grave. In this depiction, we do not see Jesus who is frightened of conflict, or who seeks to reduce it. We see Jesus who walks into conflict, with an inner disposition to be guided by friendship and love, even when it means his own safety will be put in harm's way. Not all conflicts are to be resolved peacefully, this strange text seems to say, some of them are worth going into, with the vulnerability of the open heart; the accusatory prayer; the love of a friend — all with lament, honesty and tears.

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## Response

*What are the prayers that you censor?*

Mary's words to Jesus, here, demonstrate full truthfulness in the particularity of her situation. She is not seeking to rise out of her circumstances, she is entirely embodied within her circumstances and her prayer is full of truth and pain. What is the impact of such prayerful remonstrance of her beloved friend? Where in your life have you prayed with such truthfulness and accusation? Has it helped? What was it like? What do you think now?

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As another reflection on this extraordinary text, read Marie Howe's poem "For Three Days" (from *What The Living Do*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

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## Prayer

Jesus of many friends,

You loved this family of Bethany, and they loved you,

and — caught up in a story of politics and complication —

you disappointed them by your delay.

May we turn to you in all our disappointments:

with our accusations and remonstrations;

with our limited perspectives; and our heartfelt conflicts.

Because this is part of the truth of being human,

and you did not consider humanity

beneath you.

Amen.

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey