

When God seems silent

There are times in our lives when we find ourselves facing difficulties or trials that threaten to overwhelm us. We turn to God and experience, in some way or other, 'help in time of need.' However, there are also times when we are floundering in a morass of something that we can't cope with, and God seems to be absent.

We may realize that the reason we are getting no response to some of our prayers is because they are self-centred. There are other reasons, too. Perhaps we can see that we're being a bit childish and are expecting God to clear up some mess we've created, when we could actually do something towards it ourselves. But we do experience occasions when we can see no reason why God wouldn't help us - yet we appear to be on our own.

It can be even more puzzling when we make requests for what we see as the urgent needs of others. Everything we understand about God gives us confidence that he will act - but he doesn't.

Why are there times God doesn't seem to help? After all, he is our Father and tells us he cares for us. Jesus said we are his friends, but we could be tempted to ask, "Aren't friends supposed to there for each other?"

I wondered whether Martha and Mary might have asked the same question. Remember when their brother Lazarus was dying and the two sisters sent a message to Jesus, asking for help? He seemed in no hurry to respond. He waited two days before he set out and when he arrived Lazarus was dead and buried.

If we had been in Martha and Mary's shoes - honestly - how would we feel? They knew Jesus healed the sick and cared about those in distress. They knew he loved their brother. But when they really needed him, he looked as if he wasn't there for them.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in a most spectacular miracle. But still, the question remains: why did Lazarus have to die, and Martha and Mary suffer the pain of bereavement and bewilderment?

Well, it certainly established the great power and glory of Jesus. Earlier in his ministry he had given life back to a young girl who had just died, Mark 5:35-42. He had also restored an only son to his widowed mother as she took his body to be buried, Luke 7:11-15. But the girl had only just died and Jewish custom meant that the son was being taken to the grave within a day of his death so perhaps some sceptic might have said that neither was really dead. There seems also to have been a belief amongst the

Jews that the dead person's spirit stayed around their body for three days, which were days of intense mourning. But this was the fourth day, Lazarus' flesh was decomposing and, as Martha bluntly put it, his decaying body stank. There was no doubt that he was dead! So now there could be no question either that Jesus of Nazareth had absolute authority over life and death, John 11:1-45.

Then look at the number of people who came to believe that Jesus was their Saviour. John tells us that many people who had come to comfort the sisters believed in him after seeing such an astonishing miracle. And, what's more, they took the news back with them to Jerusalem. Because it was Passover, the city was swollen to bursting point with visitors from home and abroad. There could have been over two million extra people in the region. So a little later, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, a huge crowd of people acknowledged him as the Messiah. They packed the roads, shouting "Blessed is the King of Israel that comes in the name of the Lord, John 12:13.

So it makes sense that Jesus held back from coming to Lazarus' aid immediately, because God was glorified, Jesus' glory was made manifest, the disciples' belief was deepened, the good news was spread far and wide, and many came to faith in Christ.

Surely here is a clue to understanding and a peace of mind. Jesus knew Lazarus was dying. He didn't ignore him. But he had other things to accomplish, which took precedent over his friends' needs.

Jesus suffered though his life and in his death, for the glory of God and the benefit of all. As followers of Jesus, Lazarus and his two sisters suffered for a while. So as we too follow him, perhaps we should not be surprised to find that there are times when the relief we seek for ourselves or for others is delayed for some greater good. In this life we may never see how or why. It may be for God's glory. Maybe it's for the sake of those who are already believers, or for those who do not yet know their Saviour. Either way, we know Jesus was his brothers' keeper and he still is today.

When we become part of the body of Christ, we cease to be independent. Our bond to one another becomes reality as we enter a world where God's priorities mean that the eternal salvation of others may come before our individual physical well-being. To be our brother's keeper sometimes demands a price from us, and our own needs may be subject to the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Alas, so often we would like God to do things in our way and in our time. As we grapple with the calamities that life can throw at us and wait on God, he hears our prayers and watches over us as we grow up. Though it may appear otherwise, he will do us good. But from what we read, he may do it in his time and his way so that it will bring glory to himself and be of the everlasting benefit to others as well as to ourselves.