

John Docherty, 6 April, 2014

“Let us also go, that we may die with him”

I’ve mentioned before that when I’m grappling with a piece of Scripture I typically ask myself whether there’s anything in the text that stirs me. Is there anything that confuses me? Is there anything that raises questions for me? Is there anything that disturbs me? Is there anything that inspires me?

I ask myself these questions because it’s difficult for me to work on a message if I don’t feel any passion about the text. I need to feel like I have something to share, and I don’t usually feel I have something to share if the text doesn’t speak to me on a personal level. But I also ask myself these questions because I assume that others reading the text might be asking themselves the same thing.

So in some ways, I was glad that the lectionary readings for today include the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. At the same time, I was less glad it’s included. It’s one of those Scriptures that captures my imagination on a number of levels. And that’s been true for years.

It’s a curious event. It pushes all of my buttons : it confuses me; it raises questions for me; it disturbs me; and, in one part of the story at least, it inspires me.

It’s got it all.

First, the confusion and questions.

To begin with, it’s not mentioned in any of the other Gospels, and I’ve got to ask myself “Why?”. We’re told about all kinds of other miracles in the other three Gospels : healing the sick, healing blind people, healing lepers, multiplying bread and fish to feed huge crowds, exorcising people possessed of demons. We’re even told of some very minor miracles like causing a fig tree to shrivel up.

The other evangelists even relate other instances when Jesus brought people back to life : the son of the widow of Nain; the daughter of the leader of the synagogue.

Mind you, the other cases of bringing people back from the dead are perhaps open to a little more scrutiny. The people who have died in those cases are “freshly” dead. By the customs and laws of the time, dead bodies should be buried within 24

hours of the death. So in the case of the widow's son and the synagogue leader's daughter, some might argue that they may in fact not have been *quite* dead yet, (a bit like the scene with the old man in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" : "I'm not dead yet!") and that Jesus only really brought them back to life in the sense that he simply roused them from a stupor or coma of some kind. For those skeptical of Jesus' divinity or his power to perform miracles, these other 'resurrections' might seem a bit questionable.

But Lazarus ... well, that's a different kettle of fish altogether. He's been dead for four days by the time Jesus shows up, and his already decomposing body has already been laid in a tomb. When Jesus calls for the stone to be taken away from the opening of the cave where he's been laid, Martha says "Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days".

There's a refreshing earthiness to this response from Martha. This is no sanitized funeral home viewing of an embalmed cadaver surrounded by flowers and bright colours and gentle soothing music. This is death without any euphemism to soften it. There doesn't seem to be much doubt regarding *his* death. He is dead.

So why don't the other evangelists mention this event? Surely *this* miracle is worth noting alongside the other minor miracles Jesus has performed.

Some commentators suggest this might be explained if Peter wasn't present among the twelve at this particular point in Jesus' ministry. The thinking is that the other Gospels are based primarily on the traditions as related by Peter, meaning, I suppose, that Peter had some kind of direct or indirect editorial influence on what was included in the Gospels. If Peter had no first-hand knowledge of the events at Bethany, he couldn't vouch for them, and so in a "better safe than sorry" kind of attitude, this event is ignored.

Another possible explanation offered is that the other evangelists wrote their Gospels after Lazarus' resurrection at a time when Lazarus was still alive. The thinking here is that they didn't want to put his life in jeopardy, given the antagonism toward this new Christian movement.

John, I suppose, includes it, then, because he *was* present, and could vouch for its veracity. And, given his own solid status within the Christian community, could

offer his recounting as a reliable history of what he had himself witnessed. And, since he is presumed to have died himself at a fairly advanced age, he may have written his Gospel after Lazarus had died (for the second time), so was unconcerned about any risks to Lazarus or those close to him.

But this question is one of textual reliability. Did the event happen? Did it happen in the way John describes it? Is it, as some scholars suggest, a melting together of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man with other resurrection stories?

I'm content to leave this one to the scholars, but I'm also happy to note that the scholars recognize it as a question worth resolving.

But whether the event did happen or not, the story is there, and it is clearly included for a reason. One assumes it is included as another example of Jesus' power, his divine identity, and another step in the progression of acts that set him against the political and religious leaders and ultimately leads to his crucifixion. Jesus is quoted by John as telling his disciples that what happened "is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."

So what could possibly disturb me about this event?

Well, instead of racing to be with the people we are told he loves, he lingers for 2 more days before going to Bethany. He clearly expects to find Lazarus dead, yet does nothing to prevent it. On a human level, there seems to be a callous cruelty in Jesus' decision not to go to Bethany as soon as he hears that Lazarus is ill. He must know the grief and suffering Mary and Martha will experience as they watch Lazarus breathe his last.

They've called out for his help and he has responded with something that approximates a yawn.

And what about Lazarus? Yes, he will be raised from the dead, but he *will* die. He will close his eyes and hand over his spirit. What kind of twisted sense of drama would be needed to manipulate the people Jesus loves in this way?

I'm very troubled by this image of Jesus casually standing by as the people he loves are in absolute agony. It seems like a harsh and unfeeling way of making a point.

And I suppose that if the story ended with "... and Jesus arrived in Bethany, gathered a crowd in front of the tomb and called Lazarus forth, astounding all who were present ..." I might have reason to be troubled, even angry.

If this were presented as a spectacle meant to give Jesus a chance to strut about and dazzle the masses, trivializing pain and grief in the face of death, I might find it deeply offensive.

But it's not presented like that. Jesus doesn't stroll into Bethany and wave a magic wand in front of an audience. We're told that he wept. We're told that he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; twice. We're presented with an event that clearly touches Jesus deeply, however cavalier his behaviour may seem up to this point. Is there a hint of regret here? A pang of conscience regarding the impact of his delay in coming?

There is one overarching element to this story that allows me to read it with hope, and that provides me with something to chew on as I struggle to lead a faithful life.

And that is that, from my perspective at least, the story addresses death and mortality in a way that not even the Easter resurrection does. At Easter, Jesus rises and breaks the power of death, yes. But in this event you can almost get the feeling that Jesus realises that his own resurrection may seem a little abstract to some of us.

Yes, the Son of God has power over death, but the rest of us all die, all the same.

Yes we are promised eternal life, but we are still largely defined, here and now, by our mortality.

For all of us, without exception, there is a threshold that needs to be crossed. Death looms large, in spite of Easter.

And death looms large in this story of Lazarus. In fact, I might even argue that Lazarus' death may not be at the centre of this story, but death certainly is. Death, with a capital "D".

There is clearly an increasing sense of tension around Jesus' ministry in the lead up to this event with Lazarus. He is in danger by going back to Judea. For some time now, the religious leaders in the area have been increasingly antagonistic toward

Jesus and his ministry and in the previous chapter in John's Gospel they've tried to stone him. The disciples have every expectation that things will go terribly wrong if they go to Bethany.

Death, or the threat of it, is everywhere.

Thomas makes that patently clear in his encouragement to the other disciples in verse 16 : "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He seems convinced that this is it. This will be the end.

I know Thomas gets a bit of a hard time as the "doubting Thomas" of chapter 20 when he insists that he won't believe Jesus has risen until he can put his hand in his side and put his finger in the mark of the nails. But I think this declaration of his is perhaps the most poignant expression of love and faithfulness we get from any of the disciples, at any time during Jesus' ministry. And this is the one element that inspires me in this story.

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."

I like this man, and this is the piece that pulls me into the story. "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas, along with the others, is convinced that Jesus is walking into the jaws of death. He is convinced that this man they have been following, this Messiah, is about to end his life.

There's no hint here that he expects this end to be glorious; to be triumphant; to be the moment that ushers in a new age for Israel. There's a level of trepidation here, alongside a calm conviction that if Jesus is going to die, well, then he will be there when it happens, and he will share in that end.

One of the commentators I read in preparing this meditation has this to say about Thomas : "The character of Thomas comes out ... clearly in the Fourth Gospel ... Thomas always looks at the dark side of things, and is a pessimist by disposition, while entirely loyal to his convictions and ready to act on them at all cost ... Here Thomas foresaw only too clearly that Jesus was going to His death, and he realised that to enter Judaea as His disciple was to risk the same fate. But Jesus was his Master, and he would not draw back when he found that Jesus was resolved to go back to Judaea."

Now I should mention that this particular commentator was an Irish Archbishop, and that the commentary was published by T. & T. Clark, based in Edinburgh. So maybe it shouldn't come as any surprise that a dour pessimist who always looks at the dark side of things comes off as a bit of a hero.

But I think this is a fair portrayal of Thomas. A man who sees the writing on the wall, takes a deep breath, and resolves to carry things through to the end.

Now let me say that I frankly don't think the disciples ever truly looked at Jesus the way we look at Jesus. Certainly not before his resurrection.

I don't think any of them ever truly understood fully who Jesus was.

I doubt very much that Thomas thought of Jesus as anything more than a prophet, or a messiah, who would turn things around for Israel. When he says "Let us also go, that we may die with him", it's not a defiant challenge to the authorities. It feels much more like a quiet acceptance that the mission has failed. The authorities will finally win, and he's prepared to share Jesus' fate. Jesus' death, and their death with him, will be the final curtain on a beautiful, three year surge of hope.

And yet, even apparently in the face of failure and destruction, there is something about Jesus and his message that compels Thomas, and the others who accompanied him. Even if they haven't fully understood what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God, or the Son of Man, or any of his cryptic "I am" statements, there is still something about Jesus that pulls them along.

Even if death is the ultimate end of all of this, they are willing to go.

And I'm left wondering, when Jesus, in verse 15, says, "I'm glad that I wasn't there (to prevent Lazarus' death) so that you may believe" : believe what?

Certainly, in part, to believe that he is the One who has been sent by God.

Certainly, in part, to believe that life is possible through him.

But I wonder, when he hears Thomas' resigned acceptance of death as the final failure;

when he sees the anguished tears of those who grieve for Lazarus and we're told that "... he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled";

when he hears the comments of some asking "... couldn't he have kept this man from dying ..." and we're told again that he was deeply moved;

Is it possible that when we're told in verse 35, the shortest verse in the Bible : "Jesus wept", that his own tears are not just for Lazarus, but for the hold that death has on humanity? For the fear that it instills in so many of us? For the hold it has even on these Jewish followers who already believe that Lazarus will be resurrected at the end of time?

Is it possible that this miracle isn't intended to demonstrate Jesus' power, so much as demonstrate that we are not ultimately defined by our mortality? That we are mortal, yes, but that we are much more than that?

Is it possible that raising Lazarus is Jesus' way of showing Thomas, and the rest of us, that following him is not a path to death? That the things we are called to be and do set us firmly on a path to life? That even if death is inevitably present at the end, that death is not, as I've said elsewhere, the final word on the matter?

I wonder how often I've been truly faithful to this path of life; to this path of peace and reconciliation that Jesus calls us to.

How often have I compromised because I didn't have the courage of my convictions?

How often have I found it too hard to go against the stream?

How often have I fallen short of the model that Thomas offers?

"Let us also go, that we may die with him."