

2nd of Easter: Searching for the truth in John's Gospel and Bosnia Herzegovina

In John chapter 20 there are four resurrection appearances. The first is to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, the next two are to disciples gathered fearfully in a house in Jerusalem, behind locked doors and the last is to a group of the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias after a fishing trip. The resurrection appearances are, of course, a very important strand of the scriptural evidence for Jesus being raised from the dead. They sit alongside the evidence of the *empty tomb* and the *testimony of disciples* as the three pieces of evidence provided by the gospels.

The account of the two appearances in the locked room in our gospel reading for today is dominated by the apostle Thomas. It begins with Jesus passing through locked doors and bringing his peace to the assembled company; "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'. After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." (John 20 verses 19&20) The evidence of Jesus' hands and feet, and Mary's earlier testimony that, "I have seen the Lord!", and perhaps Jesus' voice, (for his sheep hear his voice and they know him), is sufficient for the disciples present to be convinced and rejoice. When these disciples relay all this to Thomas, however, saying, as one, "we have seen the Lord!", he is not yet convinced. He wants to witness what they have witnessed. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." And so it is that a week later Jesus appears again, passing through shut doors (probably implying locked doors) with Thomas now present. When he is challenged by Jesus to see his hands and his side and to reach out and touch the scars, Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!".... Jesus concludes the encounter with the rejoinder, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

As we ponder the story of Thomas, especially in the wider context of John's gospel, it presses us to ask, what is the connection between the evidence, and discovering or knowing the truth about Jesus? Usually evidence leads us to the truth. We say, "the evidence is mounting", or "the weight of the evidence is in so

and so's favour", or "the evidence is incontrovertible". We come to the truth via the evidence..... In John's gospel, Jesus is described as the way, the truth and the life, and Jesus as the truth is very important. What we discover is that Jesus is the one who 'tells the truth', "my words are truth", he says, who 'is the truth', and who through the Holy Spirit 'leads disciples into the truth'. He stands in stark contrast to 'the evil one' (Satan) who is the 'father of lies'. The truth, therefore, is both something *about Jesus*, about who he is, and something which is disclosed through him. And John declares the truth about Jesus very openly: that on the one hand he is the Son of God and on the other that he holds out the gift of eternal life. Crucially, however, in John's gospel, the truth is grasped not intellectually or based on evidence in the strict objective sense, but by means of that other great gift of the 4th gospel, 'belief'!... this is the quality or gift that allows a disciple to make a connection between the person and his truth!... And this is demonstrated classically in the encounter with Thomas, because important as it is to Thomas that he should have an objective experience of the risen Lord, what is far more important to Jesus is that he Thomas, and other people after him, should believe *not on the strength of what has been seen or witnessed* but through inner conviction, described as "believing on his name" and so receive the gift of eternal life. And so it is that two verses after Jesus speaks to Thomas, the gospel writer summarises, saying, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples.... But these are written so that you may come to know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, *and through believing you may have life in his name.*" Every new hearer of the gospel is challenged to receive the truth – not through evidence, but through belief!

As we stand back from this little inquiry into John Ch 20, we can see that whilst, yes, the resurrection appearances give some level of evidence about Jesus raised from the dead – though we might wonder at how well it would withstand scrutiny – really, more than anything else, the appearances are opportunities *to grasp the truth about Jesus at another level*, which all along has been available in the events and encounters of the incarnate life, but which now is being manifest with an intensity and power that is going to carry disciples, and all of us, into a future without his physical presence, yet full of promise and potential.

This will be about being led by him, dwelling in him and he in us, abiding in him and being encouraged and empowered through the gift of the advocate and comforter, the Holy Spirit.... It is, I think, very significant that in the final resurrection appearance, when Jesus says to them, "Come and have breakfast", "none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord"!! The truth by this point has been internalised! It has been received and internalised, and now they know! This is how it should be!

In John's gospel the relationship between the evidence and the truth is profoundly theological. And the gospel hangs and falls on making the leap of faith that grasps the truth and lives by it. When I was in Bosnia recently, one of the things that impressed itself on me most forcefully was *the importance of the truth* – principally the truth about the genocide and crimes against humanity in the Bosnian War of 1993-95. Over nearly 21 years, forgetfulness, avoidance, half-truths and outright denials have hampered attempts at achieving healing and justice and reconstruction and reconciliation. In the recent publicity surrounding the conviction of Radovan Karadic, it has been apparent that a shared narrative about the truth of what took place during the war is still far from established among the different national groups within Bosnia, i.e. between Serbs and Muslim Bosniaks and Croats. The failure to convict on one count of genocide has led many Muslim Bosniaks, who suffered terribly in these events, to consider the trials deeply flawed and unsound. That the final verdict fell short of 'life' has also been a huge disappointment, especially to many of the mothers whose sons and husbands were murdered. On the other hand many Serbs are said to view the legal process as largely political and grossly unfair from their perspective: an attempt by western powers in Europe and the USA to assuage their guilt at not having intervened when they could have done so, and now there must be culprits. Over and above these reactions and counter-reactions, it can be said legitimately, that conviction of Karadic for complicity in the genocide of Srebrenica, and guilty verdicts on ten counts in total, have nonetheless shone a bright ray of truth into the narrative of pain and disillusion. There are grounds for hoping that what has been established will carry some genuine authority in the search for a future society based on justice. Much, however, remains to be achieved.... This has of course been demonstrated in the last few days by the reaction of the Croatian Prime Minister to the failure to convict another defendant in the Hague on another charge of genocide.

One very significant vehicle of truth in Bosnia has been the work since 1995 of the International Commission on Missing Persons. During my stay, we visited two of the 15 installations across Bosnia where the ICMP is doing its work. In essence, it is the painstaking work of identifying the bodies of the dead that were buried in mass graves at the time of the genocide, and need to be restored to families who grieve. Across 20 years, nearly 7000 out of a total of 8372 bodies have been identified, handed over to families and buried. Most are buried at the large memorial graveyard at Potocari near Srebrenica. This means that still, after all this time, some 1300 families have no body, and therefore not even this small opportunity for resolution. The process of identification has been made especially difficult because of the cynical removal of bodies from primary sites to be buried in secondary or tertiary graves in an attempt to evade detection. This has meant that many bodies are distributed across multiple sites and families have had to wait for bones from different locations to be found, identified and brought together. This is both a very demanding exercise logistically and very distressing for relatives. The decision to bury a body has to be taken often with only part of a body recovered. Exhumations and additional burials are quite common. Most burials take place once a year in a collective ceremony at Potocari where families have the benefit of solidarity with others as they convey their loved ones to the earth. One great technical advance in the process of identification across the 20 years has been DNA testing. The matching of DNA from family blood samples and DNA that can be extracted from bones has meant that identification can be to an accuracy of 99.9%.

We can perhaps appreciate that the work of the Commission has played a hugely important role in achieving some form of closure and relief of distress for families. It has also contributed significantly to the telling of the truth. Against the backdrop of denial and amnesia, the recovery of bodies, the annual burials and the publishing of accumulating statistics speak loudly about what took place. The massive graveyard of identical-looking white graves at Potocari is also a visual testimony to crimes that defy any human explanation. The harrowing work of the ICMP is not over however. Last December another mass grave was discovered and many bodies remain to be recovered. Some will have perished in the woods and mountains and their bodies may never be found.

The work of the ICMP has not of course been the only vehicle for uncovering the truth in Bosnia. There have been many truth-tellers and witnesses. One other important initiative was the 'EC Investigative Mission into the Treatment of Muslim Women in the Former Yugoslavia' which was undertaken by Dame Anne Warburton, a former British diplomat and the then President of Lucy Cavendish College – and I am very grateful to Eve Kirby for supplying this information. The connection is particularly notable since Dame Anne, who died last summer, was Eve's cousin. One of the very significant fruits of her work, which involved interviewing a very large number of Bosnian women, was that rape become recognised for the first time as a weapon of war.

My experience of listening to the narrative of truth-telling in Bosnia was to notice just how much the truth matters when so much is at stake. Jesus says in John Ch 8, in a discourse on the truth, that, "the truth will make you free". In what he says he speaks theologically; "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." My instinct, however, is that Jesus' words are more than theological, for we know at a very fundamental level that *the truth liberates!* Yet it can only liberate if it takes root deeply! For to be told the truth is arguably only neutral. It can so easily be dismissed as an idle tale: as it often is. But to come to know the truth, as it is grasped, received, internalised and lived out is altogether different. It is to be hoped, surely, that through the continuing trials of the International Criminal Court of the former Yugoslavia in the Hague and the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons in Bosnia itself, that enough of the truth is established and owned, that people can discover new sources of hope and freedom for the future: that the truth can indeed set people free.

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