

## Lent 5 Passion Sunday: Salvation through Good Friday or Easter Day?

It is striking that on this Passion Sunday we have a gospel about resurrection, the story of the raising of Lazarus! This poses the interesting question – which may be one some of us ask ourselves from time to time – ‘to what extent do we see the heart of salvation to stem more from Good Friday or from Easter Day?’ As good Anglicans it is of course usually a matter of both/and rather than either/or, but the question is there nonetheless. On Good Friday itself, we will be very conscious of the quotation from Isaiah 52 “by his wounds we are healed”; that it is through the symbolic, sacrificial death (of Jesus) that somehow a gateway is opened to release and freedom. And we will dwell on this more fully on the day. One of the things I have done during recovery, has been to read a very interesting book by the Methodist theologian Margaret Barker, “Temple Theology”, which sets out a very compelling argument that links the meaning and significance of Jesus’ death, to the very ancient role of the High Priest in the period of the first temple on the Day of Atonement. We will see that the words of Isaiah, “he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases.... upon him was the punishment that made us whole”, will resonate profoundly with the actions performed by the high priest in carrying away the sins of the people in a ceremony of the renewal of the covenant. She argues that this is most likely to be the prevailing lens through which many of the first Christians understood Jesus’ saving actions and his identity as Son of God. For now we note that deep within us we carry a conviction that Jesus’ death is a saving death. One of my chief guides in such matters, the theologian EP Sanders, in his little book ‘Paul’, makes the very accurate observation that “Christians agree that Christ saves in some way or other, but not necessarily on how he does it”. How very true, and if only we could be at peace with our differences on this.... Sanders develops this thought by identifying how Paul places emphasis both on the death in and of itself, especially in taking away or erasing transgressions, and on the combination of the death and resurrection together, whereby the believer, through unity with Christ, achieves freedom from enslavement to sin. Paul describes this also as freedom in the Spirit rather than bondage to the flesh. And in our reading from Romans Ch 8 of this morning, we get a clear signal of the impact of the death and resurrection – “But if Christ is in you – (i.e. if you are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, I think we can say) – though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness”.... what good news this is! And quietly we ask ourselves, which matters more to us, the lifting of the burden of our

sense of transgression or the promise of life in the Spirit? Do we lean more towards Good Friday or Easter Day? I expect we will go on thinking about this for a long time.

Today of course we are given the story of Jesus, Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and the villagers of Bethany. It is interesting that in this account, over against the story of Mary and Martha in Luke Ch 12, Martha gets precedence over Mary. The story of the raising of Lazarus is the last of what are thought of as the 'signs' in John's gospel – pointers to the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. When Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life,... *do you believe this?*", her answer is to identify him as precisely the one; "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." In saying this, she demonstrates that signs engender belief. She stands out as the gospel's most forthright and confident witness to Jesus' identity. She is ahead of Thomas, who says, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief"; and she is alongside Peter, who following the earlier sign of the feeding of 5000, says, "Lord to whom can we go, you have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." And she is at one with the author of the gospel who writes in Ch 20, "these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." ... In the fourth gospel Martha is arguably first among the disciples in recognising who Jesus is and being able to articulate this unreservedly! She can also be thought of as the first witness to the resurrection standing alongside Mary Magdalen.

The raising of Lazarus is manifestly, also, a kind of proto-resurrection account that points to the forthcoming resurrection of Jesus himself. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life" we are transported immediately to the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. If we were to ask which gospel of the four most conveys the impact and force of Jesus' resurrection, I think many of us would go for John. This is probably because there are four resurrection appearances as compared to none in Mark and one each in Matthew and Luke. And the story of Mary and the gardener stands out as the most vivid and compelling among all the accounts of what took place at the tomb. As we have observed, the fact that John's gospel includes the raising of Lazarus, Jesus' declaration that he is the resurrection and the life and Martha's proclamation that he is the Messiah, the Son of God lends to John a unity of expression around the theme of resurrection. These combining factors arguably make John the outstanding gospel of resurrection. What

is interesting in connection with our initial question about Good Friday and Easter Day, is that many commentators identify the primary emphasis in John's gospel not to be on its treatment of the resurrection, but on the death of Jesus. We may understand this when we think back to the great themes that build up in John's gospel of Jesus' pre-existence as the Word, his unity with the Father (I and the Father are one), and the attention paid to his ultimate exaltation on the cross, that "the Son of man will be lifted up on the cross and draw all people to himself". In John, Jesus' divine being is expressed through this high Christology centred on the cross. And yet the meaning of who Jesus was and is that is conveyed to us through this theology is arguably still incomplete without the witness of the resurrection, when Jesus breathes the Spirit on disciples and their belief is re-affirmed, especially by Thomas and Peter, all of which links us back to Lazarus, Martha and Jesus' own words "I am the resurrection and the life".

This little exploration tells us I think very clearly that there is indeed no definitive answer as to which takes precedence, Good Friday or Easter Day, or to the question, 'how does Jesus save?' The beauty of it is that we have many different voices speaking to us through the scripture. The Johannine voice, Paul, Mark and the other gospel writers and the letter to the Hebrews. Each one gives us something new to ponder and assimilate. Only slowly and gently do we form a satisfying individual (or even corporate) synthesis of what makes sense of the mysterious and wonderful promise of life that comes from Christ and is new every morning. For many of us it is a quite a tortuous journey of finding our own truth that comes from Christ as we weigh the many propositions and affirmations of scripture. The journey is of course not simply an intellectual one either. It's a matter of growing conviction and the experience of the renewal of faith.

This brings me to one final thought which I can't resist and probably shouldn't leave out! It takes me to the valley of the dry bones! As you will appreciate, the irony of our first reading is not lost on me. Having had my dry bones re-fashioned, thanks to the skill of one of our local heroes (well he's my hero!), Dr Ronan Treacy, I find I am re-reading this story in an enhanced way! I will pass over the details of how flesh was put back onto re-fashioned bones, but I have to say that I now see new meaning in this thrilling description of how the exiles are to envisage themselves being re-made by the Lord. It is likely that the breathing of the Spirit on the bones is an evocation of the action of the Spirit on the first day of creation that moved over the waters and brought the first echoes of life. Following a lead

from Margaret Barker, it is also likely that, remembering that Ezekiel was a priest and that the prophetic book in his name also belongs to the priestly collection, the reference to the first day of creation is a reference to the practice of the high priest at the renewal of the covenant to recall the creative actions of God in the seven days of creation in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. Thus the Spirit coming upon the dry bones isn't just a sign of hope for the exiles but an invitation to be re-born and become regenerate. What I take from this, especially as one who is in the process of being re-made following some remarkable surgery – a procedure described by another member of this community as 'transformational' – is that this 'life in the Spirit' that Paul refers to, that lies at the heart of John's gospel and in the Johannine experience of resurrection, is perhaps the bible's key motif for expressing what it is to be changed through encounter with the divine. Let us rejoice that as Paul says in Roman 8 v.11, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies." Let us receive this life joyfully.

1736 words

Reverend Julian Francis

2.4.2017.