

3 November 2018

**With All the Saints** (John 11: 38-44)

*All Saints Day*

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It is sometimes a challenge to see what the compilers of the lectionary have in mind in their selection of readings for a particular occasion – in this case the Feast of All Saints. This process often requires some lateral thinking, but I do enjoy the challenge.

The story of the Raising of Lazarus appears only in John's gospel (Chapter 11). Yet it has so much to offer on so many levels. To begin with, we may recognise ourselves and our experience in the human drama. Most of us will find ourselves, at one time or other, in a painful place, waiting for help to arrive. At such times, we might find ourselves saying or shouting to some significant other or to God – or if not saying, at least thinking –: 'Where were you when I needed you?' 'If you had only been here, then things would have been different.' When disaster strikes, people may say, 'Where was God when that happened?'

The story is also rich from both literary and theological perspectives. And it raises some disturbing questions – some voiced by participants in the story, and some by successive generations of readers who have continued to engage with it since.

In tonight's reading we have heard the final stage of the story. To appreciate what is happening here, it is probably helpful to revisit what has gone before. At the beginning of the chapter we learn that Lazarus of Bethany, brother of Mary and Martha, had fallen ill. It was natural that the sisters should send for Jesus in their distress because the gospels suggest that he was a regular visitor to their home. Yet for some undisclosed reason, Jesus decided not to come. We are just told that, although he loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus delayed saying, 'This illness doesn't lead to death. Rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it'. When he did decide to set out two days later, Lazarus was already dead. Again, those bracing words to his disciples: 'For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe' (v.15).

When Martha came to meet Jesus – Mary choosing to stay at home – she said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Jesus replied, 'Your brother will live again.' There follows a mini dialogue/discourse on the resurrection, culminating in those

familiar words, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (John 11: 25, 26a).

The meeting between Jesus and Mary develops very differently. At Jesus' request, Martha had gone to tell Mary that Jesus was asking for her. When she arrived, accompanied by friends and neighbours, Mary's opening words, like Martha's, were: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. This time Jesus was not moved to theological discourse. Instead, we are told that he was 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' when he saw Mary, and those with her, weeping.

'Where have you laid him?' This is no theological abstraction, but involves a particular individual who has undergone particular burial rites. And it is when those gathered said, 'Come and see', that Jesus began to weep. This is one of two occasions in the gospel in which Jesus is said to have wept.

'Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. (Surely the inclusion of this detail reminds us of the parallels between this incident and his own resurrection.) When Jesus said, 'Take away the stone', Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord there is a stench because he has been dead four days.' Some commentators have commented that this sort of detail was important to establishing that this was to be a bona fide resurrection rather than a resuscitation.

Jesus' response to Martha, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?', somehow strikes a different note from his earlier conversation with her which had sounded like a theological discourse. The authority is there, but now tempered with something else – his grief and compassion that have flowed in response to the grief of others.

Then, once more, he seems to move from the local and personal to the larger significance of the occasion. He proceeded to pray aloud so that those present would understand that this miracle meant that he had been sent by God. After crying out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus come out', he told those there to 'unbind him and let him go'.

Traditionally, the raising of Lazarus has been cited as proof of Jesus' divinity. It also clearly anticipates Jesus' own resurrection. And there is evidence in the text that that was the writer's intention. Indeed, it is hard at times to avoid the sense that the whole episode has been orchestrated to make the most of a learning opportunity – the initial delay; Jesus'

response to Martha's grief with a theological discourse on resurrection; the preface to his prayer to make sure the bystanders 'got' the significance of the occasion, and so on. Some of us may find such 'orchestration' disturbing – at least at first.

Yet there are other times in the narrative where Jesus' compassion and humanity come through – times when he is obviously very affected by their grief, as we have seen. It seems that his focus moves back and forth from the personal and local story to the larger story of divine redemption. He seems to hold both these perspectives in tension. And we are invited to do the same.

What are we to make of these two contrasting representations of Jesus in this chapter? Alexander Shaia (*The Hidden Power of the Gospels*, 2010) suggests that we often make the mistake of thinking that Christ is a sort of surname for Jesus, rather than thinking of him as Jesus the Christ – in other words, both Jesus and Christ. Jesus, he says, is the 'individual human manifestation [in place and time] of an eternal reality':

*If we grasp the depth of the Prologue [to John's gospel], we open ourselves to a new understanding. Jesus the Christ is a divine and unified reality that presents two faces to us: one that is loving and familiar and another that is vast and mysterious.... Jesus and the Christ are two expressions of a great and creative process, which we are invited to enter and make our own (pp. 166-7).*

Written from the perspective of several decades of post-resurrection experience and practice, not to mention familiarity with much of Paul's teaching, John's gospel encompasses both these dimensions. The question remains: How much did Jesus understand of his identity at the time these events were happening? Was it a case of growing awareness of the grief that lay ahead of them all as his own passion drew near? Certainly any 'divine' perspective didn't protect him from experiencing the real human pain we have witnessed in the story of Lazarus.

Returning to Alexander Shaia's words quoted earlier: 'Jesus and the Christ are two expressions of a great and creative process, which we are invited to enter and make our own'. These words take us beyond reading these texts *just* as proof of the divinity of Christ, or *just* as some sort of underpinning for his own resurrection. We are invited to participate in that same reality that Jesus lived, by reflecting deeply on our lived experience. One way to do this is through *lectio divina*, or through entering imaginatively into the imagery of the narrative. For those who do this, Shaia suggests,

*The story of Lazarus serves as a reminder: his dead corpse is like our old ways of thinking and the self we are leaving behind – bound up, stinking ... blocked, as though hidden behind a rock in a dark cave (p. 191)*

Such readings of the text take us beyond seeing resurrection as *just* referring to Jesus' resurrection or the possibility of life after death for us. They help us to see the possibilities of healing and liberation – for ourselves and others – from what binds us in our lives in the here-and-now.

So, what light do the other readings for All Saints Day – Isaiah 25: 6-9 and Revelation 21:1-6 – throw on these themes? Both texts offer consolation to groups undergoing suffering in by promises of deliverance, restoration, and most importantly, divine presence. Isaiah addresses a people in exile and captivity with promises of a paradisaal 'feast for all peoples'. At that time, the Lord would 'wipe away all tears from all faces and take away all disgrace' (v8), having 'swallowed up death forever' (v.7). The unitary vision of a new heaven and a new earth presented in Revelation 21:1-6 promises restoration to a church undergoing persecution. Again, consolation is promised in terms of God's presence with them. Again, there are references to wiping every tear from their eyes, and the final overthrow of death (v.4). The clear message of both readings is that God had not abandoned them.

Somehow these readings remind me of Julian of Norwich's reassurance in her *Revelation of Divine Love*: 'All will be well. All manner of thing will be well.' Her unifying vision gathers all into the transforming reality of divine love. Like the prophetic readings from Isaiah and Revelation, these words are not just pointing to some future time, but to a deep reality hidden below the surface of our lives. This is not to say that God's love protects us from life's contingencies, but as James Finley (*The Divine Ambush*) says, 'it unexplainably sustains us in all things'. And part of our sustenance comes from that great cloud of witnesses – all the saints, past and present, whose lives have encouraged, and will continue to encourage us by their commitment to that deeper reality. To conclude, we might like to pause to remember those who have blessed us in this way. ... Then we might like to remember those whose lives we touch...