

March 9, 2008

Over the last few weeks we've heard a number of stories from John's gospel, in each of which we've watched as different characters have bumped into Jesus, and made their responses. We met Nicodemus, who was confounded by Jesus' talk of a heavenly re-birth. There was the Samaritan woman by the well who struggled to understand his offer of living water. Last week we met both a man healed from blindness he had had since his birth, and the religious leaders who took offence at Jesus' activity on the day of rest. Today we've met two sisters, friends of Jesus, who grieve for their dead brother. Though there are the two, we'll focus particularly on Martha, simply because she has more to say than her sister.

Like the healed man from last week's reading, we easily identify with Martha. We know what it is like to lose someone we've loved. Perhaps we also know that pathos-filled longing: if only Jesus/God/whoever had been here, this might not have happened... We know, if we are believers, what it is like to have the religious words but for those words not to make a lot of sense in the context of loss and grief. And yet, as also with the blind man from last week, we are also limited in our ability to identify with Martha because of what is given to her and rarely, if ever, is given to us. Grieving for a dead brother as we might, she receives him back!

We are probably in the right should we wonder whether in fact it's all been a bit too easy for Martha. Although she doesn't even seem to think that she could have her brother back again, let alone ask for him back, nevertheless he is raised. At most she gets a rap on the knuckles in Jesus' reproving question, "Did I not tell you that, if you believed, you would see the glory of God? If we do take the story as a reliable account of what happened then we may be pleased for Martha, but we can't identify with her past that point. Like us, Martha made her confessions of faith. In particular, she speaks of her belief in the resurrection on the last day and in Jesus as "Son of God", "Messiah" and "the one coming into the world". There's a piteous edge to Martha's statements of what she believes in the face of what she's experienced – as if she knows what she should say to Jesus *because he is Jesus*, but also knows that it doesn't really hang together. But unlike us, for her these words become real in her being able to embrace her brother again.

If this is how it happened, then we may rejoice

for Martha, but our situation and ability to believe is not made any easier. We have similar doctrines to those Martha confesses which, as mere words, have about them an air of unreality. It is easy to parrot a creed without it having much significance for us. But while we also have those doctrines, we now also have added to them the apparent invitation to believe what happened to Martha – at least on one important understanding of why the story of the raising of Lazarus is told. What was doubtless a marvellous thing for Martha's faith becomes, for us, just another thing we have to believe. Good news which is *someone else's* good news is not really all that good for us! And so when we hear a story like that of Martha another desire arises: that we might experience God and his gifts as she did.

And yet, at the risk of sounding a little more absurd than usual, it seems to me that there is, in one way of looking at it, nothing particularly marvellous about the raising of Lazarus. Yes, it would be a surprising and remarkable thing to happen – of course! And yet, Lazarus will die again; indeed a plot by the religious leaders against Lazarus' life is recounted in the next few verses. Grief has given way to joy, but only until a later, opportune time. As remarkable as the raising of a dead man would be, what is it but the putting off of the inevitable? Martha or Mary or some other will again stand outside Lazarus' tomb and grieve.

That Jesus raised Lazarus is not something for us to "believe" as a sheer fact about a past event. Those extraordinary words, "Lazarus, come out", are the same words which were spoken last week to the man healed of his blindness: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (9.35). They are the same words spoken the week before that to the woman by the well: "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (4.14). They are the same words spoke the week before *that* to Nicodemus: "You must be born from above" (3.6). But there's a difference here, in that while Jesus is turned towards the stinking tomb, he speaks as much to Martha as he does to the dead man.

Last week's epistle reading ended with a quote, possibly deriving from Isaiah 60.1:

*"Sleeper, awake,
rise from the dead*

and Christ will shine on you"

Jesus' words to the dead man, "Lazarus come out" are just these words again, and yet they are also what Martha needs to hear: "Awaken, rise, and Jesus will shine upon you as the Christ". More important than that a man who lived and died might live a little longer is that life might be breathed into those dead who are still breathing. Martha is such and one, and Mary, and we. We are distracted by the reported miracle of the raising of Lazarus; just as miraculous is the possibility that faith might be resurrected in Martha. As Lazarus is roused from "sleep" (v.11f) so also is Martha called to faith. The story told *not* to suggest that we will believe all the more strongly in Jesus if he should raise one of our dead. The point is that we are dead with Lazarus, and Jesus would raise us.

We need to note one further thing. Lazarus comes forth, not as a *basis* of Martha's faith, not as a *reason* for her belief, but as the sign of what it means to come to confess Jesus as "Messiah", and "Son of God", and "the one coming into the world", as she did earlier in the story (v.27). Or to put it differently, the point of the story is not that Jesus proves Martha's doctrines about him to be true in the raising of Lazarus.¹ If that *were* the point then the point would be pointless(!), for it leaves us with nothing but a story about what happened to someone else, and suggests that *we* couldn't come to belief a without similar spectacle.

It is interesting – and even surprising – that, despite the lament of Martha and her sister, we don't actually hear of their response to the raising of Lazarus. Perhaps it is obvious. Yet the whole exchange has not been about grief and joy, not about loss and restoration, but about unbelief and belief. Jesus rebukes Martha when she protests at the opening of the tomb: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" There is doubtless a promise made here to the faithful – "believing is seeing".

But we should push this a step further: to believe is not simply to see, but more significantly to *become*, the glory of God. The human person unbound by the bonds of death's exorable march

¹ It's worth noting that immediately following the undisputed "fact" of the raising of Lazarus there is not only belief but also unbelief which results in a renewed vigor in the plot to kill Jesus. At the same time, v.46 goes on to speak of "many of the Jews" who saw what happened subsequently coming to faith. The miracle *is* apparently the catalyst of their believing. Nevertheless, the miracle which is offered to *us* today is not the event which might stand behind this story but faith in the declaration that Jesus rouses life in the living dead.

through our lives – whether our own or the death of those we love – such a person is "the glory of God". This is what Jesus means when he declares, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die (11.25f)". The hearts of such faithful ones will one day stop beating, but such death is as nothing(...) to those who are truly alive. It is the same Jesus who challenges Martha as calls out to Lazarus, and these are effectively the same call – Sleeper, awake; rise from the dead, for Christ shines upon you. Lazarus, as it were, becomes the archetypal man of faith by making the faithful response to the call of God in Christ, awakening from his "sleep" (vv.10-12) His faithful response to Christ's command models what should be Martha's, and ours: to rise, to shine, to bask in the glory of the God who called us forth, and to *become* that glory in a world which cries out desperately, "Lord, if you had been here, he, she, I ... would not have died."

By the *grace* of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may his people indeed become, and rejoice in, the *glory* of the God which is Christ alive, dead and alive again. Amen.