

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“Lazarus, Come Forth!”

The various Gospel miracles may each make a special appeal to us at one time or another in our lives. When someone we love suffers a painful illness, we may find a healing miracle a source of consolation. When we are passing through a time of depression and darkness, the story of Jesus opening the eyes of the blind may speak to us eloquently. But the miracle which is the culmination of Jesus' ministry in the Fourth Gospel is of final and quite universal meaning. In this story Jesus confronts my forthcoming death.

My Forthcoming Death

I suppose that sounds as if I know when it will be, which isn't the case. But I know that it isn't likely to be far away. My father died when he was five years older than I am now. It wouldn't, therefore, be surprising if I have four or five more helpings of apple-blossom to look forward to: not many. When it happens, it won't be just one particular body that is swept up and tidied into a hole in the ground: it will be a vast system of mind and heart experiences, memories, judgments and understanding: likes and dislikes, loves and fears, affection and amusement: enjoyments and happiness given and received, wounds and sorrows given and endured. Some bits won't be missed, like the over-long sermons and the old-fashioned looks; but maybe one or two people will miss the inspiring holidays and the celebrated Prawn Risotto. What is interesting is the totality of the erasure: in earthly terms, to become a memory overnight is a most disconcerting happening. No amount of thought-taking can really prepare me for that, or help me to think of a world carrying on without my being in it. Yet it is totally real, and it is inexorably approaching.

Jesus With The Bereaved

Jesus shows an extraordinary attitude to the death of Lazarus, who is something more than a friend. *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* What did that mean, on a page written by “the disciple Jesus loved”? To be singled out by the love of Jesus of Nazareth must have been an awesome experience. We all treasure the regard and affection of friends; our closest friends are the ministers of life to us, irreplaceable in their familiarity; but there is, in the best of these friendships, a measure of the dysfunctional, the presence of faults and

failures in sympathy. We are, as we charitably say, *only human*. To share that kind of intimacy with the incarnate Son of God: what was that like? What did it do to the little family of Bethany, calm Mary, loud and rambunctious Martha, and the almost undescribed, yet beloved, figure of Lazarus, for whose illness Jesus would not come, until it had done its very worst to him, and to all who loved him? Where did Jesus meet them? It is a walk away from Jerusalem: surely he can only have met Lazarus at first, in a society which habitually secluded women from the city conversations of men. How was he invited, why did he come? Lazarus must have wanted him in his home, to meet his sisters. Did he tempt him with Martha's cooking, or hint that Jesus would enjoy talking to Mary? Did Jesus listen to his description of the sisters at home, and glimpse something of the love between them? How did Lazarus tell them about his new friend? Martha, it seems, went into huge overdrive in the kitchen; and their love for one another grew and flourished. *To those who accepted him, he gave power to be children of God;* and it is there that his strange behaviour in today's Gospel must be understood. He stayed away, until his coming could be seen as the bringing of a new life.

Healing Isn't Enough

It is lovely to be cured and repaired, to rest after turmoil in convalescent peace. But that is still a holding-operation. Just as suffering speaks to us of death, so does convalescence. We escape for a time; the power that showed its hand briefly will still return with a stronger suit. Jesus, finally, is not here for signs and wonders, but to offer us an ultimate safety, or, as we say, salvation. Until we know him in that rôle our friendship will be another of the lovely things that death will tear from us: something which was only for a time, only for this passing world. There is a sense, I believe, in which Jesus *stays away* until our tomb is sealed. So Lazarus goes to the tomb, and Jesus stands before it, and burns with a divine rage against what death does to loving human hearts. If anything about Jesus has the power to make our hearts burn within us, surely this does. When our hearts are in the right place, it seems, his heart is there with us, alight with the power that can raise the dead.

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