

5 Lent A: 10 April 2011

For several weeks now we've been bouncing around in the Gospel of John, eavesdropping on Jesus in conversation with seekers and the marginalized, watching as he heals the blind and now raises the dead. It is a powerful portrayal, and yet, somehow, I don't find it very engaging.

Sometimes I am not even sure that I like John's Jesus very much. He's frequently very talky, very preachy, a kind of one-dimensional cardboard figure. And however close he was to *John*, the so-called beloved disciple, his first response to the men and women he encounters is rarely very sensitive or people oriented. For example, take today's situation: what kind of savior lets one friend die and others grieve just so he can demonstrate his own power? This is love? It's not a pretty picture.

Now I could just write this off as the evangelist's problem, chalk it up to his particular brand of formal storytelling one that puts message before personalities. But we are asked over and over again in this gospel to make a personal connection with Jesus, to believe in him. It's hard for me to believe in the seemingly indifferent, even callous God depicted here.

Even in the meeting with Martha the picture we get is the same distanced, didactic Jesus. There is nothing warm or comforting about this guy—he's like those clueless people at funerals spouting platitudes. "Your brother will rise again." What good is that? And then he does this coy little question-and-answer bit! For once in this gospel the Jews, who are doing their best to console the two sisters, come off looking like the good guys.

I find the story taking a redemptive turn only when I look at Jesus' encounter with Mary. Let me read a piece of it again:
"When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb."

How should we read this passage;
what interpretation should we give it?

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

The traditional reading is to see Jesus as deeply compassionate, suffering with Martha and Mary in their loss. It is supposed to show his deep humanity. Says one commentator: "It is terribly important to us to know that Jesus wept. He cries with us; he cries for the anguish of the whole world. We are told that God will dry every tear... good news that is much more believable because we know that God has wept those tears with us."

Now I believe with all my heart that when we suffer, God suffers with us and weeps for our pain. It is a cornerstone of my theological outlook. But I don't think that's what is happening here. To put that gloss on this particular passage is to "prettify" things. Nothing we know of Jesus so far would lead to such a sudden display of human tenderness. To read the story this way may, on the surface, be comforting, but it means that we miss making an even deeper connection that shows us the true humanity of Jesus.

Where am I going?
Well, I will admit I'm a little out on a limb here. I can't point to eminent scholars to back me up or centuries of tradition. All I'm going on is gut feeling. But isn't that what I suggested we do last week? So here's what it is.
The Greek words behind Jesus' emotional outbursts are somewhat open to interpretation. They can be rendered as they are today, that he was "...greatly disturbed and deeply moved..." or equally legitimately they could be translated to say that his "...spirit groaned within him and troubled him...". Not surprisingly, given my negative response so far to John's portrayal of Jesus, I want to opt for this latter reading. I want to believe that brought face to face with the very real pain and suffering of those he is supposed to love—suffering to which *he* has contributed, mind you, Jesus is ashamed of himself. That for a moment John drops the perfect-man-perfect-God pose he has had Jesus hold for so long and shows us a real, conscious-stricken, humbled hero. True, before today's passage is finished the author has Jesus revert to being the same impossibly pious prig he was before, but right now he is shatteringly real.

Interpreted this way, Jesus' weeps with Mary and Martha and for Lazarus, but also at his own blindness. One more growth step for the savior-in-training, down off his pedestal and into the muddy waters of real life. In this reading, it is not only Lazarus who suddenly comes to life.

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Such a change of heart for Jesus is akin to passages in the Hebrew Scriptures like this from Exodus, which is one of my favorite examples among several like it: “And God repented of the evil that God had planned to bring upon the people.” Now, even if the translation is closer to “God changed God’s mind,” it is still clear that God has reconsidered the divine behavior and is sorry for it. For me, such instances are indeed Good News made more believable. And they give me hope. Hope because now this is a God I can believe in. Hope because here is a savior with whom I, in all my frailties, can identify: one who truly shares our human nature, who lives and dies as one of us. It is terribly important to me to know that even God can change, that even Jesus made mistakes. If Jesus can surmount his brokenness and learn compassion so that he may better serve others, then so can I, with his help.

And so I see the underlying message of the story of Lazarus as one that challenges me to truly be present to those around me. To see them where they stand, in all the details of their circumstances, and not turn away. Above all, to offer their pain real solidarity, not just lip service, even if all I can do is sit and hold their hand, seemingly helpless. It is tempting, you know, when you’re positioned where I am, to offer people some small assistance—bus fare or groceries or gas—and feel smugly self-satisfied that you are doing good works. But this is indeed temptation, a test. And if all I do is offer a band-aid for a heart’s wound, I have failed.

This is the human predicament, isn’t it? How do we live as people truly open to one another, vulnerable even to the strangers in our lives? When we talk of the resurrection power of Jesus, of transformation and new life, how can we ground it in the real stuff of this world instead of pie-in-the-sky? What social and political action must we take in order that God’s kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven? And where must we turn our lives around that we may live the words we pray?

This is the human predicament.
How freeing to know that Jesus has been there before us.

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