

## Reflection for Lent 5 2020

John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus in seven great works of wonder or signs. Each one greater than the one before. They begin with the changing of water into wine. They end with the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

They often end with someone believing. The Wedding of Cana, with the disciples believing, and this story with the Jews who had come with Mary believing.

John also includes in his Gospel the seven great **I am** sayings. This story contains the sixth of them: I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die shall live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die".

And one of the central moments in the three other Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke is the moment when Jesus' disciples recognise him as the Messiah. In those gospels the disciple is Peter. The confession happens at Caesarea Philippi.

The story of Lazarus contains John's moment of recognition. John tells us that his gospel is written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God".

**John** 6:5-14.

Here in John's Gospel, Jesus makes the decision to return to Bethany when he knows that the Jews are seeking to stone him. Thomas and the others believe they are going to die with him.

And in this story the disciple who makes this act of recognition is Martha. Jesus asks her directly after his declaration about the resurrection: "Do you believe this?" Martha replies: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world".

Jesus comes to Bethany. Martha comes to meet him first and makes her act of recognition. She returns and calls her sister Mary who also comes out to meet Jesus.

When Mary comes where Jesus is and sees him, she kneels at his feet and says to him, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died". And then:

"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, "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."

"Weeping...weeping...greatly disturbed....deeply moved....weep....greatly disturbed". Greatly disturbed can be better translated as agitated.

This is the place in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus reveals his deepest emotions. For Christians through the ages this is the image of Jesus we cling to in times of crisis and suffering.

There is compassion here for Mary and Martha in their grief and for Lazarus in his suffering and also, I think frustration with suffering and death too. In this way the reading

is a very appropriate for us today. God with us in the suffering, demonstrated in the Gospel reading, and so we can dare to hope, because he is with us. We can have courage to hope because he participates with us. Not a feeble feeling of hope against hope, but a choice to hope because he suffers with us. Courage to hope.

The early church worshipped on the Sunday each week - the day Jesus rose. They saw as not the first day of the week, but the eighth day, the day of the New Creation in Christ.

In the story of Lazarus we have the foretaste of the greatest sign of all - some scholars call it the eighth sign - the death and resurrection of Jesus and the promise of renewed life now and continued life with Him .

As Jesus decides to go to Bethany and Lazarus, he knows that he is setting in motion his own death. The Leaders in Jerusalem will not tolerate someone doing the works of the Messiah. They have seen how this worked out before - ending with a savage crackdown by the Roman authorities. So better for one man to die for the good of the community.

The disciples recognise the danger. Thomas responds with bravado - *let us go and die with him too*. But Jesus chooses to go in full knowledge of the consequences. He chooses courage.

In the face of this serious threat to our lives we need to choose courage too. Not bravado, like Thomas, but the courage to endure and to choose hope.

This is not the time for quirky individualism but for acting for the good of the community, because in a very real sense we are responsible for each other's health and wellbeing. Ensuring the health of the community is ensuring our own health and safety.

Courage to do what is right for our community and nation - you know the drill to do what is compassionate for the health and safety of others. Time to stay at home, follow the hygiene regime.

Time to choose courage and hope in the One who lived and died and rose again for us.

A prayer from the Archbishop of Canterbury:

Keep us, good Lord,  
under the shadow of your mercy.  
Sustain and support the anxious,  
be with those who care for the sick,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may find comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Dean Phillip Saunders

*The idea for this reflection was inspired by a paper by Bishop Steven Croft of Oxford*