

## Session 3 Encountering Jesus in John

### The way, the truth and the life

Jesus has washed their feet. Judas has gone out into the night. Jesus has predicted that Peter will betray him three times before the cock crows, and the narrative moves on at many levels of understanding and irony. Jesus expounds the passion - ‘...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going’ Thomas, with earthy realism protests ‘We don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?’ and Jesus replies ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’. (14:4-6)

The passage is ripe with Johannine images and tropes – belief, dwelling and abiding, coming and going, knowing, way, truth, life. They are just some of the themes that make up the spiritual scaffolding of the gospel.

Let’s start with ‘way’. The adverbs *pou* and *hupou* (where) are important in John. They are found 14 and 30x respectively. In the opening chapter Jesus turns to the two disciples who left John the Baptist to follow him and asks them, what are you looking for? And they reply, ‘Rabbi, where are you staying?’. Later as the conflicts of the public ministry are traced, we see that the principal difference between Jesus and his enemies is that he knows where he is from and where he is going and they do not (8:14). His enemies can’t go where he goes (7:34, 36; 8:21-2) but as he reveals in the farewell discourse, his disciples can and will (14:3; 17:24). Whilst he is with them he is the Light of the World and they walk in his light (9:5). In the darkness of the passion they will not know where he has gone, or how to follow, despite the farewell discourse. At the tomb, Mary voices the question of them all – ‘Where is the Lord?’ and the answer is given as she encounters the risen, glorified Christ. The language of space and roads and ways turns out to be about relationships – between Jesus and God and Jesus and the disciples. Jesus departs to primordial glory and returns to initiate the disciples into that glory.<sup>1</sup>

The group of words ‘true, truth, truly’ flow through the gospel. We hear in the prologue that the Word is ‘the true light which enlightens everyone’, and the contrast is made with John the Baptist who was not himself the light but came to testify to the light. Later, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that true worshippers will worship God in spirit and truth (4:24). Then we encounter the ‘true bread from heaven’ (6:32), the true vine (15:1) and finally ‘the only true God’ (17:3), and of course the testimony of the beloved disciple which is ‘true’ (19:35). ‘True’ in John means ‘real, genuine, authentic’<sup>2</sup> And according to John, when Jesus was before Pilate, Jesus sums up his work as ‘...to testify to the truth’, and Pilate, the voice of the weary world, asks ‘What is truth?’

There are 34 uses of the word for ‘life’ (*zoe*) in John. The Word, the poetry of the prologue suggests, gives birth to life, for all things are made through the Word, and ‘in him was life’. That’s a theme we’ll return to in a few minutes. The whole message of the gospel is that Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneiders *Written that you may believe: encountering Jesus in the fourth gospel* (New York, Crossroads 1999) p 191

<sup>2</sup> C.K. Barrett *The gospel according to John: an introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text* (London, SPCK 1955) p. 134

is the life-giver, bringing divine life in all its fulness to those who believe in him. The conversation with Nicodemus rises to the dizzy theological heights of 3:16 which reveals the loving purpose of the incarnation and the gift of eternal life. The 'living water' which Jesus offers the Samaritan woman will gush up to 'eternal life' (4:14). Those who hear and heed Christ's word pass from death to eternal life (5:24). In the eucharistic discourse John's Jesus says that those who '...eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life' (6:54). Those who walk with the Light of the World will never walk in darkness again, '...but will have the light of life' (8:12). The good shepherd comes that the sheep might have life and have it abundantly (10:10) – 'I give them eternal life and they will never perish', and in one of the great set pieces of the gospel, as Martha confesses her faith and weeps over poor dead Lazarus, Jesus proclaims himself '...the resurrection and the life' (11:24). As Book 1 of the gospel comes to an end as chapter 12 Jesus teaches that the commandment of God 'is eternal life. What I speak therefore, I speak just as the Father told me' (12:50). And of course, he who is the way and the truth is also the life (14:6). Eternal life, according to the High Priestly prayer is '...that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' (17:3)

This is a piece of writing which is beautifully textured, as complex and delightful to behold as Celtic calligraphy. Prologues are often written last, once a book is complete. There is needless to say a scholarly industry working on the prologue to John's gospel. We've no idea if it was written last, but there are hints that part of it might have been a pre-existing hymn. I want to leave that debate to one side this morning, and just comment on John's theological daring. Its that little word '*logos*' which has such a range of allusive power.

First of all it takes us into the Graeco-Roman world where *logos* was a familiar word in both low and high culture. From words, pure and simple, to the ways in which Stoics and Platonists sought to explain the forces behind the universe, *logos* was a familiar term. From chapter 1 verse 1 John's theology is outward facing, eager to engage with cultures. Listen to the poet Kathleen Raine, a poet more interested in Platonism than Christianity, as she explores the *logos* in cosmic largeness and atomic smallness:

Word traced in water of lakes, and light on water,  
Light on still water, moving water, waterfall  
And water colours of cloud, of dew, of spectral rain,

Word inscribed on stone, mountain range upon range of stone,  
Word that is fire of the sun and fire within  
Order of atoms, crystalline symmetry,

Grammar of five-fold rose and six-fold lily,  
Spiral of leaves on a bough, helix of shells,  
Rotation of twining plants on axes of darkness and light,

Instinctive wisdom of fish and lion and ram,  
Rhythm of generation in flagellate and fern,  
Flash of fin, beat of wing, heartbeat, beat of the dance...

All things come into being through the *logos* and John is eager to make the connections, to engage with all the intelligent, vivacious thought that is out there.

Secondly, *logos* was familiar to his readers and hearers from the Greek translations of Jewish writings, particularly the LXX. God literally speaks the cosmos into existence in Genesis. The word of the Lord is spoken through the prophets, and of course there is Lady Wisdom, *Sophia*, who in Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon becomes an obvious source for *logos* theology:

‘She is a breath of the power of God,  
Pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;  
Hence nothing impure can find a way into her.  
She is a reflection of the eternal light,  
Untarnished mirror of God’s active power,  
Image of his goodness.  
Although alone, she can do all;  
Herself unchanging, she makes all things new.’ (Wisdom 7:24-7 JB)

In the Wisdom literature wisdom roams the earth and takes up dwelling in Israel, she provides living water and nourishment and bread from heaven (Prov 9). The resonances with John are obvious.

There is a lively debate within the professional guild of NT scholars about John’s intention in using wisdom imagery in his Christology. Some think this was a way of recovering feminine principles about God, others that he had no such intent. I think what is important for us nearly two millennia on, is to at least appreciate the wisdom tradition itself because it has been such a minor theme in theology until recently, and to note how at ease it is with feminine imagery. God is not some abstracted monad, but as and through Divine Wisdom, self-communicating, self-giving, self-opening, even to the extreme vulnerability of incarnation. So, Greek thought, Jewish theology and a deep insight into the very being of the Trinity, are all captured in the prologue. What happens in the life of Jesus from Nazareth cannot be understood without an appreciation of what is happening, as it were, outside time, in the heavenly realm, with the relationship between the Word and the Father before worlds began. And that is where John begins.

The incarnation of the Word introduces a new factor into that relationship, which is easily missed. We are, as it were, in new theological territory. There hasn’t been an incarnation before, and so we are at the limits of language, doing new things. John has to work out how to talk about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, his Incarnate Son. He chooses the language of love, which is gendered, but he is careful in his prologue (1:14) to stress that this is analogous language (‘the glory *as of* a father’s only son). He knows that he cannot explain the inner workings of the Godhead – nobody can. But the language of love will bring him close.

If we are to appreciate the way, the truth and the life, we need to begin here in the prologue, for in the Word is life, in the Word is the true light, in the Word God makes a path towards us and for us.

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.’ (14:2-3)

In his wonderful *Readings in St John’s gospel*, written whilst he was Archbishop of York in 1938, William Temple (in very 1930s imagery) talks about these ‘dwelling places’ (*monai*) – literally ‘places to stay’ or ‘inns’ as ‘wayside caravanserais’. He tells us that it was common when travelling in the East for travellers ‘...to send a dragoman forward to make preparation in the next of those resting places along the road, so that when they came they might find in it comfort as well as shelter’, and he continues – ‘Here the Lord presents Himself as our spiritual dragoman, who treads the way of faith before us...’<sup>3</sup>

And all of this journey is within ‘the Father’s house’. The last time Jesus used that phrase was as he cleansed the Temple (2:16). What he is telling us is that the Temple is being recast, because once more in John spatial language is relational language. This travelling along the way is about being with the one who is the Way, and discovering that he is truth and life:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a Way as gives us breath:  
Such a Truth as ends all strife:  
Such a Life as killeth death.<sup>4</sup>

So, of course, George Herbert. Herbert often worked in miniature, and this is a fine example. It’s a serenade to Jesus, and he’s borrowing the secular love poet’s genre to explore spirituality. Each of the three nouns in the first line is then given its own line. The first verse takes the words of John’s Jesus – as a Way Jesus gives breath and air, his Truth does not create strife like so many of the world’s political and social ‘truths’ but ends it, crafting peace and concord, his life is the very stuff of eternity, as John explores in the raising of Lazarus.

Come my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a Light as shows a feast:  
Such a Feast, as mends in length:  
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

The second verse moves from the Bible to the dining room. This is about the courtesy shown to a guest at a feast – the light that reveals it, the feast that heals and improves the longer it continues, the strength of purpose which makes the sinner welcome. It is unmistakably eucharistic.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy as none can move;  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joys in love.

And in the third voice we arrive at the heart of things, human emotions and the movement of the soul. Christ brings a deep, abiding joy, a love that cannot be broken, even by death, and

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3 William Temple *Readings in St John’s gospel* (London, MacMillan 1955) p 226

4 George Herbert ‘The Call’ Helen Gardner (ed) *The poems of George Herbert* (London, OUP 1961) p 147

the result, as Herbert cleverly moves ‘joy’ from a noun to a verb, a believer’s heart that delights in loving service.<sup>5</sup>

Herbert, in the simplest of language, juxtaposes as John does transcendent wonder and earthly reality, just as the footwashing plumbs the profoundest depths of ministry and community with the simplest of tools – a water bowl and a towel. As he does so he helps us understand how John expects this discourse to be understood. It is the antithesis of the imperialism with which the church inflicted the words ‘No-one comes to the Father except through me’.

All things came into being through Jesus the Word, the light enlightens everyone, God left none bereft. The Word was in the Hebrew prophets, in the thought of Socrates, in the sages of ancient India and China, the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Jean Vanier reflects thoughtfully from his ecumenical and interfaith experience in L’Arche,

When the Word become flesh, Jesus brought to fulfilment  
All those different paths to God.  
He does not destroy them: the Word is in each of these paths.  
But the Word-made-flesh becomes a new path for human beings  
Precisely because Jesus has become one of us, the first born,  
And thus the treasure of creation.  
He is the beloved brother of every man and every woman of all times.<sup>6</sup>

That is the answer to Thomas’s heart-felt question, ‘How can we know the way?’ John bears witness to a reality that was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles – ‘the Word became flesh’. There is no way around that, no denying it, no escaping from the scandal in John, but we always need to remember that the one who was and is the Word took a towel and a bowl of water and washed feet. Excommunication, forced baptisms, conversion at the point of a sword are foreign to his economy. Would that they had been in the history of the church.

And that brings us neatly to mission, the ‘way’ that Jesus walks that the disciples have to follow. Let’s return for a moment to the ‘true vine’ – ‘...those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.’ (15:5) It is premature to jump, as some commentators do, from ‘fruit’ to ‘mission.’ John doesn’t do that. He doesn’t tell us what the fruit is. Jesus simply says ‘My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples’ (15:9). We do John a mis-service if we assume that somehow the being of God can be separated from the love of God, or the fruit from the vine, or doctrine from ethics. John’s God is, as the first epistle of John reminds us, ‘love’ (1 John 4:8, 16). Being part of the vine is relational, it is about love for God and love for each other, it is about *being* love, not simply doing it. That is what it means to share the life of Jesus. And the result, says Jesus, is joy (Jn 15:11).

The themes of peace and rest are minor melodies that run through the Farewell Discourse. Jesus tells us that our hearts are not to be troubled (14:1). He says we should not be afraid (14:27). He tells us that in him we may have peace (16:33). John is unabashed about suggesting that discipleship leads to well-being. This is the gospel in which the waters of

<sup>5</sup> John Drury *Music at midnight: the life and poetry of George Herbert* (London, Allen Lane 2013) pp 347/8  
<sup>6</sup> Vanier *op cit* p 255/6

ritual purification are turned into wine for a wedding – which Origen suggests, might lead those who first heard the story to remember the psalmist praising God’s gift of wine ‘to gladden the human heart’ (Ps 105:15).

‘I have said these things to you’, says Jesus, ‘so that my joy may be in you and your joy complete’ (Jn 15:12). The fruit of the vine is abiding in the love of Jesus, just as Jesus abides in the love of the Father, and that brings joy. It brings joy and rest because its not our work, but that of the vinedresser. Fruit here then, isn’t missional language, it is primarily language about the relationship between God in Christ and those who believe through the Paraclete-Spirit. Some have suggested that this focus makes John ethically deficient<sup>7</sup>. Those judgements are over hasty – after all, this is the gospel which replaces the last supper with footwashing, which shows Jesus weeping over Lazarus, and scandalising the pious by asking a Samaritan woman to give him a drink. In other words they reveal more about the theological presuppositions of our age than about John. John reminds us that the heart of the gospel and the meaning of life is ‘abiding’ in the very life of the Trinity. Ethics will undoubtedly flow from that, but the starting point for Christian living, and the *raison d’etre* of the church, is that ‘abiding’ and its fruits of peace and joy. John is not concerned with manning the barricades of the kingdom of God. To borrow a Pauline phrase, justification is not by good works, although love by its very nature will produce them. David Ford has suggested that John’s disciples are called to improvise love – this is mission in jazz mode – but it is jazz that arises from abiding.<sup>8</sup>

There are two consequences for mission in John’s way of thinking. There is no Nazareth manifesto in John, no command from the Lord to go and baptise all nations. What we have rather are examples of improvisation – as I’ve washed your feet, so you must wash one another’s feet, love one another as I have loved you, go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. Not feed the hungry, set the prisoner less, liberate the oppressed. There is no schema, no plan, no policy statement. I want to step out of my comfort zone and talk about music, and in particular jazz. One musicologist who studied and played jazz, David Sudnow, talks about his journey and practice, ‘I began to see that...note choices could be made anywhere, that there was no need to lunge, that usable notes for any chord lay just at hand, that there was no need to find a path, image one up ahead to get ready in advance for a blurting out...Good notes were everywhere at hand, right beneath the fingers...’<sup>9</sup>

What if abiding in Christ, living in his company were the music and the reality was that mission, loving as he loved us, washing one another’s feet, was the same as a jazz musician’s relation to music, would we not find that that the ‘good notes’ are everywhere at hand, right under our noses and beneath our fingers?

Jeremy Begbie, theologian and musician comments – ‘By being given in Christ the firm stability of divine grace, the ‘gentle rhythm’ to be learned and endlessly re-learned, we are freed from having ‘to make it happen’, from that ‘convulsive clutching’ at ‘getting it right’

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7 J.L. Houlden acidly notes ‘for John the believer has no duties towards ‘the world’; J.T Sanders speaks of the ‘weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics’ – both quoted in Richard B Hays *The moral vision of the New Testament: community, cross, new creation: a contemporary introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, Harper Collins 1996) p. 139

8 David Ford lecture

9 Quoted in Jeremy Begbie *Theology, music and time* (Cambridge, CUP 2000) p. 227

which prevents us from throwing everything into the air, freed from having to fabricate authentic human being.<sup>10</sup>

The second consequence is that John takes the unity of Christians seriously as an end in itself, almost a converting 'ordinance'. As we saw yesterday 'oneness' is a significant motif in the gospel and it has missiological implications. 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me....I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and love them even as you have loved me' (17:22-24) What makes the world believe is the unity of the community, its transparency to the abiding Christ.

### Discussion Groups

- What are the implications of John's appreciation of the *Logos* for the ways in which the church should witness?
- What can we learn from John's understanding of 'mission' for our ministries? How might we improvise on the themes of 'love' and 'abiding' ?

Loving improvisation in a community united by its abiding in Christ – that is part of the legacy of Johannine Christianity. Eternal life, as we have discovered in the high priestly prayer is to '...know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent...' (17:3) And that is made possible by Jesus's glorification, his crucifixion. It is as if John looks at this and realises that it means this (Dali's Christ of St John).

Dali's famous picture, *The Christ of St John of the Cross* is based on a sketch that St John of the Cross saw of the crucifixion as he saw it in a vision in the sixteenth century. But Dali is very different. He looks down, as it were from God's perspective, just as in the original, but gone is the tortured body, and the gruesome nails that are so prominent in St John's sketch. Replaced by a beautiful body, perhaps based on a Hollywood stuntman. It was greeted with outrage when it was first seen in 1951, but since has become deeply loved. It seems to me, whether Dali meant it to be or not, a profound meditation on John's gospel and his account of the passion.

Many commentators have noted how John's Jesus seems in charge of the passion, how the cross becomes a throne, its inscription 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' in Hebrew, Latin and Greek at Pilate's insistence, the yielding up of the Spirit, and the ambiguous last word – *testelestai*, it is finished, or rather, it is accomplished, completed, the work done. Dali exemplifies that for me.

We see the initial results of that work in three encounters.

Mary of Magdala has the most exalted of roles in John's gospel. She receives the first Christophany, and becomes the first apostle of resurrection, or as the early fathers called her, 'the apostle to the apostles'. What is remarkable is that this is her first appearance in his gospel. We learn from Luke that from the first 'Mary, called Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out' was amongst the little group of independently funded women who

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<sup>10</sup> Begbie *op cit* p.10

travelled with Jesus and his male disciples (Luke 8:2), and the synoptic gospels include her in their accounts of the women who looked on from afar at the cross and later gathered at the tomb. Later Christian tradition reveals her to have been a leader in the early church - a 2nd century *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* survives in fragments - and that ascription suggests that her memory was honoured in some of the Christian communities of the ancient East. The 3rd century gnostic *Gospel of Philip* even tells us that Jesus 'loved her' more than all the other disciples. Which, of course, is where Dan Brown got his idea for the *Da Vinci Code*, the marriage of Jesus and Mary and the establishment of his lineage.

But few Christian leaders have been so maligned and spun as poor Mary of Magdala. Unlike the Eastern church the Western church conflated the three stories of Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus prior to his passion, the woman who washed Jesus's feet with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee and Luke's account of Mary of Magdala having been possessed by seven demons to produce the original composite picture of the tart with the heart of gold - a synthesis given papal approval in Gregory the Great's famous sermon series on the Magdalen in the sixth century. It was, scholars suggest, part of the suppression of the leadership of women in the Western church. Rarely has an extraordinary leader been so maligned and spun.

In the meantime, back at the tomb, the men have arrived. Between them they join up the dots, do the theology and go back home - and they miss Jesus. Miss him because the heart of it isn't the theologising, but the relationship. Or more accurately the relationship determines the theology. As dawn touches the garden, Mary's tears flow. She blurts out her pain and loss first to the angels, and again to a man she assumes to be the gardener. Then, in his voice, her name, named, known, loved 'Mary'. The American novelist Marilynne Robinson muses, 'It is beautiful to think what the sound of one's own name would be, when the inflection of it would carry the meaning that Mary heard in the unmistakable, familiar, and utterly unexpected voice of her friend and teacher.'<sup>11</sup>

It is to Mary, this most remarkable of disciples, Jesus gives his message, 'Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father...' Mary, who loved him, not unnaturally wanted to throw her arms around him. Don't cling, he tells her, its different now. The world has changed in ways you will eventually understand. I won't be walking the hills of Galilee in the same way, there won't be any shared meals any more, and I won't be as I was. Something has changed at the deepest heart of things. Up to this point in the gospel Jesus has spoken of God as 'the' father' or 'my' father, and his followers have been called 'disciples' or 'servants' or 'friends'. But Jesus changes all that in the message he gives to Mary the apostle - 'Go and say to my brothers, I am going up to my father and *your* father, to my God and *your* God.' Jesus has come back. Resurrection has happened. There is a hole in history where there should have been a body. And death has been defeated. Jesus has been there, and three days on he stands in the garden and says, simply, 'Mary'. Praise God that the church has re-discovered the apostolate of women.

On that first Easter morning as the dawn rose, Jesus himself became the place and the space in which Mary understood not only who she was, but from which she could understand the landscape of the universe properly - and if Mary first, soon the apostles, and Thomas who was not there, and then all those who did not see him, but believed in his word. Rightly

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<sup>11</sup> Marilynne Robinson 'Wondrous love' in *When I was a child I read books* (London, Little Brown 2012 digital edition)



understood, Jesus is the place that the church occupies, and its task is to become more Jesus-like, to become so immersed in Jesus that it sees the world as Jesus sees the world.

Thomas's experience was different, because he wasn't there, for whatever reason. Out shopping, gone for a long walk, visiting relatives – not there. And when they gathered round, chattering ten to a dozen - 'He's risen! He was here! It was him, we saw the wounds. We heard his voice. He breathed the Spirit on us.' - Thomas gave them a look which made them suspect that he thought they'd been at the whisky or something stronger and said, flatly, bluntly, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' (Jn 20:25)

A week goes by in a narrative sentence, and then, suddenly, Jesus is in their midst again, and this time Thomas is there. 'Put your finger here', says Jesus; 'Reach out your hand and put it into my side'. The scene is a gift to that most dramatic and earthy of artists, Caravaggio. Caravaggio epitomises the popular, visual piety of the Catholic Reformation. His formative years were spent in Milan during the reforming years of its great bishop, Charles Borromeo (1564-84). Borromeo laid down rules for artists, rejecting the rational, mannerist, almost humanist exuberance of renaissance masters like Michaelangelo – this is the era when fig leaves were chastely added to the nudes of the Sistine Chapel. Borromeo's *Instructiones* for artists laid down rules that Biblical scenes should be painted - for example, no dogs unless they were specifically mentioned in the Biblical text being illustrated. Poor old Tintoretto would have been for the high jump! What mattered now, in the next generation, was the visualisation of the scene, Ignatius's spiritual exercises on canvas as it were.<sup>12</sup>

It was a gift to Caravaggio who loved working in small, dramatic, intense spaces – there is very little outdoors in Caravaggio – and that is epitomised by this picture. Look how it is constructed – a semi-circular arch of figure with the light falling on Thomas's face. Jesus draws aside his shroud, and gently guides Thomas's finger to his side. Thomas, shaven headed, wrinkled, the shoulder of his tunic unstitched is the epitome of a poor peasant, the dirt still under his thumb nail, his hands rough, his face intense furrowed concentration as his mind does somersaults. As the art historian Helen Langdon points out, it is a profoundly Catholic work, Thomas's hand guided to the wound, echoing the medieval tradition of encountering Christ's divinity through his woundedness – the *Anima Christi* – 'Soul of Christ, sanctify me,/ Body of Christ, save me./ Water from the side of Christ, wash me. / Hide me within your wounds..<sup>13</sup>

But Caravaggio has gone a step beyond John. John doesn't tell us that Thomas actually reached out his hand like that. John tells us that Thomas responded with what might have been the earliest of creeds, 'My Lord, *and my God*'. In other words, 'seeing is believing' and 'doubting Thomas' is far too simple a response.

As the resurrection bursts normality apart, everyone in the story is caught up in a saga of seeing and believing. Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple arrive at the tomb. Mary assumes that the body has been taken somewhere else, the beloved disciple sees the empty grave clothes. So does Peter, and (John tells us) he believed – but *what* does he believe, because John immediately tells us that they didn't yet understand the Scriptures that he must rise again. Even Mary, after that exquisite encounter in the garden, was caught in the natural

12 Andrew Graham-Dixon *Caravaggio: a life sacred and profane* (London, Allen Lane 2010) pp. 34-35

13 Graham-Dixon *op cit* pp. 238-40; Helen Langdon *Caravaggio: a life* (London, Pimlico 1999) pp. 235-6.

processes of seeing and believing. He had come back to life. He was himself. She could hold him again, and Jesus has to warn her 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father' (v 17). This isn't a restoration of the old order of cause and effect, this is a radically new creation.

What makes Thomas unique then, is not the evidential cycle of seeing and believing, it is his remarkable confession of faith. 'My Lord', yes *kurios* was a normal mode of address to a teacher, one they were accustomed to using, but not 'my God'. John reserves the climax of his gospel for Thomas the doubter. Unlike the rest of them, he gets it. At the very beginning of his gospel we read that the Word was with God and was God, that the Word became flesh, '...yet the world did not know him'; until now. Thomas knows, and Thomas believes.

Do not doubt, says Jesus, but believe. The Greek is odd. It could mean that Jesus is identifying Thomas as caught between belief and unbelief, and is urging him to believe. What Thomas does is make a conceptual leap into a new universe. For a Jew to proclaim even the greatest teacher as God was inconceivable, but for Thomas the penny has dropped. He gets it. He understands. Generations of theologians will unpack the genetic code of incarnation with forensic carefulness, but Thomas just knows. That is what was going on. Incarnation. Suddenly it all fell into a new shape. As his own discipleship flashed before his eyes, he must have smiled. When Jesus had insisted on returning to volatile, dangerous Judea when Lazarus was ill, what had he unwittingly said, 'Let's go that we may die with him.' What had he said when Jesus was teaching them about his Father's house – 'Lord, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?' Now he knew. We don't die with him, he dies for us. Now he knows that the way is that cross, the tomb, redemption's highway, the truth, God's will before the foundation of the world played out before his eyes, the life – this wasn't Lazarus raised to die again, this was the universe re-ordered, mortality put in its place, the impossible comedy, the resurrection dance.

Mary and Thomas are now part of a transformed community, which came into being as Jesus was glorified on the cross.

In his book *Living the Hours* Anthony Grimley writes movingly and lovingly of his wife's concern for him and her children as she lay dying of a stroke – '...all she could do was make sure the children and I were safe and well'.<sup>14</sup> As he neared death Jesus must have had a similar concern for his mother. The NT scholar Mary Coloe argues that the climax of the Johannine passion narrative is when Jesus sees his mother and the beloved disciple standing near the cross and he says, 'Woman, here is your son' and to the disciple 'Here is your mother' and he takes her into his own house. (Jn 19:26). Only after he has done that do we read that 'Jesus knew that all was now finished', he thirsts, and then says '*tetelestai*' – 'It is accomplished / finished'. What Jesus has done is remarkable, but there is more going on here than a dying man's concern for his mother.

He has changed the relationship between his mother and the beloved disciple. She becomes his mother, he her son. By becoming her son, he becomes a brother of Jesus, a child of God, and this is the moment at which discipleship becomes divine filiation.<sup>15</sup> John's gospel began with the Word becoming flesh. He came to his own (*eis ta idia*) but they did not receive him'

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14. Anthony Grimley and Jonathan Wooding *Living the hours: monastic spirituality in everyday life* (Norwich, Canterbury Press 2010) p 169

15 Mary Coloe *op cit* p 55

(1:11), but now the beloved disciple takes Mary to his own home (*eis ta idia*). The rhetorical device of *inclusio* is clear. This, for John, is the moment at which the new household of God, the new Temple, comes into being. And it is this community, formed by the laying down of his life, that his friends join, united by the love that binds Father and Son.

At the foot of the cross, through what is happening on the cross, the fruits of salvation are budding on the tree. Barriers crossed, new relationships forged, the new humanity in Christ, the fellowship of the family, lovers and friends of Jesus born. Unity is born at the moment of greatest desolation – the dying Christ, a grieving mother and a desolate disciple – yet that moment of pure vulnerability and passivity is stronger than Pilate and Caesar and all who wield the weapons of Empire, for that new relationship, that new filiation is the fruit of God's work of redemption, the new creation.

The new humanity, born at the foot of the cross in the embrace of Mary and John, is real – 'I am the vine, you are the branches...' (Jn 15:5). But this new humanity is different because Christ gathers Mary and John and all of us who follow into the love, the abiding space, the unity, that he shares by right with the Father. That unity is the fundamental reality of being in Christ, of being part of the lovers of Jesus who are part of his new family that began as John took Mary into his home.

It was over, God had indeed so loved the world that it is redeemed, yet as John's fragile little community knew well, it was an ambiguous place in which to live as friends of Jesus. As we noted yesterday there's a real tension in John between his deep and profound appreciation that all has been accomplished and the world transformed completely by the cross and resurrection, and a sense of the '*kosmos*' (the world) as a shorthand description for all that hated God, hated Jesus, hates the church and embodies opposition to God's intentions.

Standing as John did in the time between the cross and the final accomplishment of God's will, we understand, yet nearly two millennia on we also need to stand back, to hear again the deceptively simple plot – God so loved the *kosmos* that he sent Jesus, and Jesus accomplished what he set out to do. The new humanity is born, the new creation of redemption is the true reality. Jesus became what the world is and has transformed it. It is, truly, no longer what it was.

At the heart of discipleship then is a profound ambivalence, almost a dual citizenship – part of the new humanity, yet citizens of the *kosmos* which is a long time a-dying. Its not just John who recognises that of course. In the early Christian centuries in the East icons of Jesus' baptism showed him up to his neck in water with the old river gods still clearly visible below the surface – a riff on that other Biblical story of the Spirit's victory of the chaos waters of creation.<sup>16</sup> And that's about right. If we are where Jesus is, caught up into his abiding with the Father, we're going to be at that intersection between unimaginable blessing and heartbreaking sin and chaos. Living that ambiguity is who we are. Its our Christian vocation, for the world is simultaneously God's good creation and John's *kosmos*.

One thing we can be sure of, if we heed John, is that unity and oneness belong to the new creation and division and hatred to the old. What we should not be is naïve about unity and oneness. Just as John thinks of Christ as the eternal Word through whom the world's astonishing diversity was wrought, so the Epistle to the Ephesians writes of all things being

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16 Rowan Williams *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London, SPCK 2014) p 2

gathered up into Christ as head – all things – Marxism and capitalism, nuclear fission and fossil fuel, Buddhism and Islam – to say nothing of the stability of universal mathematics and the instability of the quantum world. There is nothing simple or obvious about unity in Christ.

John's witness is that Christ's unity and oneness touched the earth and as Mary and John embraced, a new united Christian reality was born. And that in itself is sacramental, and a converting ordinance: 'I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me...' (Jn 17:23)

One of the deepest insights of Chiara Lubich, the remarkable Italian woman who founded the Focolare Movement, was that unity could only be born at the cross. It is precisely in Christ's forsakenness that we see the depths of his love for us. If Christ was willing to endure forsakenness, that feeling of separation from God which Matthew catches in the cry of dereliction, to make himself our neighbour, our brother, our friend and reunite us with the Father, then this is the source of unity. It is in that moment that Christ is the fashioner of unity, and the result can only be that nascent church, 'Woman, here is your son... Here is your mother'. God has reconciled the world to himself. Unity is, because of Jesus, not an abstract ideal, but an historic reality. He has created it on the cross, and therefore all things become possible. And it is the world that has been reconciled, so the unity which becomes possible in Christ isn't just the ecclesiastical chess that we sometimes clumsily pass off as ecumenism, but the breaking down of barriers between neighbours, nations, interests, cultures. Chiara put it like this, 'One thing was clear in our hearts: what God wanted for us was unity. We live with the sole aim of being one with him, one with each other, and one with everyone. This marvellous vocation linked us to heaven and immersed us in the one human family. What purpose in life could be greater?'<sup>17</sup>

That, it seems to me, is very Johannine.

Prayer

He is the Way.  
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.'<sup>18</sup>

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17 Chiara Lubich *Essential Writings: spirituality, dialogue, culture* (London, New City 2007) p. 17

18 W.H. Auden 'For the time being: a Christmas Oratorio' *Collected Longer Poems* (London, Faber 1968) pp 196-7