

LAZARUS

In scene after scene, John's Jesus has baffled or appalled his interlocutors. Nicodemus was thoroughly confused. No wonder.

“In God's truth I tell you,” Jesus tells him, “unless people are born again from above, they cannot see the kingdom of God... This is the judgement: that the light has come into the world, and people preferred the darkness to the light; for their deeds were wicked.”

(John 3.3, 19)

The Samaritan woman is bemused in her turn; but sees sooner and more clearly than the disciples who and what Jesus is (4.1-30).

Jesus then heals a cripple on the Sabbath. The story itself is quickly told (5.1-9). The Jews, with horror, come close to seeing what Jesus claims for himself. He is making himself equal to God. Jesus confirms that God has given him two powers that are God's alone: the powers of life and judgement. So Jesus can say,

“In God's truth I tell you,
all those who hear my word and believe in him who sent me
have the new aeon's life and do not come to judgement,
but have passed from death to life.
In God's truth I tell you,
the hour is coming and now is
when the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God,
and those who hear shall live” (5.24-5).

Next Jesus feeds the crowd. They recognise him as “the one due to come into the world”. They follow him. He insists, they are coming after him not because they have understood the “sign”, but simply because they have eaten and been filled (6.26). His

demand that his followers eat his flesh and drink his blood is so stark that many of his own followers will abandon him (6.53-66):

“In God’s truth I tell you,
Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have the life of the new aeon,
and I will raise them up on the Last Day” (6.53).

Then the blind man is brought to sight, and to a simple insight: whoever the Jesus was that healed him, this Jesus cannot simply be condemned (9.1-34)

And so to Lazarus. The prelude to this story pits Martha’s faith against her sister’s inconsolable despair. They are confronted with the death of one they love; and here are the most natural responses to such loss. Yet again John confronts a traditional belief with its transformation at Jesus’ hands.

Martha said, “Sir, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now, I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.”

“Your brother,” says Jesus, “will rise again.”

“I know that he will rise again on the Last Day.”

Yes: but with an extraordinary twist. Martha must see in Jesus himself the Last Day on which she knows that Lazarus will rise again. Jesus does not contradict Martha; he shows her the truth of what she believes. He answers:

“I am the rising and the life:
all who believe in me, even if they die, shall live;
and all who live and believe in me shall not die, not for all ages.
Do you believe this?”

Martha gives a full answer. All the story’s characters have asked, Who is this Jesus? They have looked for an answer in old titles and old expectations. Jesus’ first followers ascribed to him, right at the gospel’s start, the titles of Israel’s ancient

hopes: the Christ (John 1.41), the one foretold by the prophets (1.45), the Son of God (1.49). But titles are only helpful when first the claims they make are agreed and understood. At issue are not just the titles chosen for Jesus, but the new weight that any such title must bear. The readers are ready now, after John's whole story so far, to confirm, to say for themselves and to *understand* the great confession of faith with which Martha responds to Jesus's question.

“Yes, sir. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, the one due to come into the world.”

The sisters speak for themselves; and they speak for their dead brother too. Mary has little to say. She falls at Jesus' feet and repeats just the first words of her sister: words almost of reproach. “Sir,” she says, “if you had been here my brother would not have died.” Martha's belief and Mary's despair: one will lead to life, the other to self-condemnation. Jesus is as humane here as in any story of the gospels. It is Martha's voice that he hears: the voice of sorrow, incomprehension and trust. For Jesus too loved Lazarus. And at the sight of the sister's tears and of those crying around her, Jesus is deeply moved. He weeps. These are not the tears of mere humanity, breaking through the defences of the divine; at this most human of all moments, Jesus most clearly reveals the nature and the love of God.

Who are Mary, Martha and Lazarus? Friends of Jesus at Bethany. Yes. But again, who are they? They are us, all of them in each one of us. They are *us*. Lazarus is locked in a tomb, as we are locked in the dead darkness of our own guilt and shame, hiding ourselves from ourselves and from the knowledge of others. The living sisters speak for the dead Lazarus about the release he longs for, as we long for release too. With their hope and despair they give voice to his, and to ours.

Nicodemus had been bemused: “People can hardly go into their mother's womb a second time and be born!” But Jesus had pressed on:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son,
so that all who believe in him should not die,
but should have the life of the new aeon.”

Lazarus needs rebirth; but not from his mother's womb. A rock has been used to close the mouth of the tomb. It is rolled away.

“All those,” Jesus had said, “who hear my word and believe in him who sent me have the new aeon's life and do not come to judgement,
but have passed from death to life.

In God's truth I tell you, the hour is coming and now is
when the dead shall hear the voice of the son of God,
and those who hear shall live.”

Once there was darkness. The Word was spoken, and there was light. Once there was chaos; the breath of God moved over the tumult, brooded and gave birth to life.

A shaft of light enters Lazarus' tomb – *our* tomb. A gust of warm air stirs the dust.

Who is Lazarus? The friend of Jesus. Yes, but who is Lazarus? You and me. We have heard the cripple ordered to walk, the blind man to wash; we have been ordered to walk and wash, ourselves. We have been given new health, brought to new sight.

Now Lazarus sees the light outside the tomb. Darkness or light, death or life lie before him. Which shall he choose? Both lie before us, guilty, ashamed and frightened as we are. Which shall *we* choose?

“This is the judgement:

that the light has come into the world,
and people preferred the darkness to the light;
for their deeds were wicked.

All who do wrong hate the light, and avoid the light,
so that their deeds might not be open to scrutiny.

But all who do the truth come to the light,
so that their deeds might be seen to be done in God.”

“The dead shall hear the voice of the son of God.” The voice echoes down the years. We too are buried in darkness, can see the light of day outside, feel the air on our faces and hear beyond our tomb’s doorway the voice of the son of God. We are being invited here and now out of the tomb, to pass from death through a new birth from above into the Christ-given life of the new aeon.

Jesus calls to his friend. And with these words he calls *to us*. “Lazarus, come forth.”

PALM SUNDAY

Jerusalem, around A.D 30: before the Festival of Passover. There was excitement in the air. Yet another group of pilgrims, men, women and children, surged through the gates into the city's winding alleyways. For the next two weeks Jerusalem, a city of 25,000 people, would be full to overflowing: 300,000 or more might cram into the city: in hotels, in synagogues providing for particular groups, in homes with rooms to spare.

Above the city towered the Temple and its vast Herodian esplanade. At the Temple's heart, up flights of steps, past barriers and walls, was the Courtyard of the Priests, immediately outside the sanctuary. In the sanctuary itself, veiled from the sun and from all profane sight, were the Holy Place with its incense-burner and menorah, and the Holy of Holies itself, an empty cube, the home of God in the world of his own creation, the intersection of heaven and earth, time and eternity. The sanctuary was decorated with the trees and fruits of paradise; for here was a glimpse of that once and future Eden where God and humankind would be at one. Priests entered the Holy Place twice a day; only the High Priest ever entered the Holy of Holies, and only on the Day of Atonement.

The great Praise Psalms would be sung in the Temple in the week of Passover:

Open for me the gates of righteousness,
That I may enter through them and give thanks unto the Lord.
This is the gate of righteousness, through which the just may enter.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

(Psalm 118.17)

Jerusalem was in every way the centre of the world: in present history, in God's final victory over Israel's enemies, in his judgement on all humankind. Here is the setting of all the events that will inaugurate and mark God's undisputed rule. "Do not fear, Jerusalem," said Zephaniah, as he thought of God's reign: "the God of Israel is in your midst; you have no more evil to fear" (Zephaniah 3.16).

Yet more pilgrims were approaching the city. Many came, of course, from the neighbouring villages. Others walked for a week, to cover the eighty miles or so from Galilee. But far more flocked to the holy city than just local families. Along the great trade-route from Babylonia came large caravans of pilgrims. They brought with them their contribution to the Temple's treasury, and armed guards to protect it from the robbers who well knew those wagons' value. From Asia Minor and North Africa, by land and sea, pilgrims travelled for the great feasts; above all, for Passover. However they had travelled, their entry to the city itself would be on foot. To ride into the holy city, it was said, was to be a king: on a colt to signal peace, or caparisoned on a horse for war.

Jerusalem was filling. And not just with people. Every family had brought or purchased a lamb for the festival; up to 30,000 lambs would be killed in the Temple area on a single afternoon, in shift after shift of priests and families. The carcass was then brought back to the lodgings or camp, roasted and eaten that night with ceremonial and partying. Everyone must have a mouthful. For on this night, hundreds of years ago, God had ordered the Jews in Egypt to kill and eat a lamb in haste, and to sprinkle the gateposts of their houses with its blood. Vengeance had threatened the Egyptians, who would not set Israel free: in every house unmarked with blood the first-born son would be killed that night. Even the king of Egypt would then at last let his Jewish captives go.

As before, so again: at Passover, it was said, God would once more free his people. "In every generation," the people were urged, "a man must think as if he came out of Egypt himself. For it is written, 'You shall tell your son in that day: We do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt'" (Exodus 13.8).

Camps were springing up on the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from the city. Pilgrims had to spend the night of Passover in Jerusalem itself; to ensure space for all the visitors, the Mount was declared part of Greater Jerusalem for the festival. Talk will have turned to this prophet from Galilee, this Jesus or 'Godsave'; his name was a version of 'Joshua', the name of Moses' successor who had finally led the Jews into their Promised Land. What was this Jesus planning? What was he going to do?

Forty years before, there had been a turbulent Passover; when the crowds reassembled fifty days later at Pentecost, two Syrian legions had to be brought into Jerusalem to quell the riots; 2,000 pilgrims were crucified around the city. At one Passover a Roman soldier on guard on the battlements over the Temple, with a view right into the sacrificial area, turned his back on the priests and the holy place and deliberately broke wind; in the following riots, it is said, 20,000 pilgrims were killed.

The Romans were nervous at Passover. The Governor would come up to Jerusalem from his capital at Caesarea and take up occupancy in the Antonia Fort, connected with and overlooking the Temple. The Jewish priests themselves kept things on an even keel; they had to. They were compromised; of course they were. They were colluding with Rome; of course they were. But what else could they do? There was no alternative in the face of Roman power.

And now Jesus, this prophet from Galilee, on his way into Jerusalem for Passover. There could be trouble here.

Within Jesus' closest band of followers were the two *sons of Thunder*. They sound vehement, even violent. There was Simon *Cananaios*; that does not mean from Canaan, it means a knife-man, a zealot. And *Iscariot*, Judas Iscariot? The name might well be a corruption of the Latin *sicarius* or knife-man, once more a term for the zealots, political subversives agitating for freedom from Roman rule. Jesus was surrounded, it must have seemed, by some dark and dangerous characters.

Jesus rides in kingly style into the city. He makes his way to the Temple, to its outer court where sacrifices took place. He disrupts those very sacrifices ordained by God. What authority can this Jesus be claiming? How dare he do this? What will he do next?

On balance it was safer for everyone to have him out of the way. And even the crowds greeting him with hosannas on Sunday, will be baying for his blood on Friday.

Everyone played their part and we, had we been there, would have played ours. How many, if any, saw in this drama what was really happening? Jesus the new Moses of the new Israel, the utterly faithful, trusting and obedient servant of God, was sealing in his own blood the new Passover of a new covenant. He was creating a new people of God defined wholly by Jesus' own laws, Jesus' promises, Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and the conviction that Jesus would be the judge in God's assize of all humankind. If and when we imagine that judgment, we do so with awe and with fear and so we should. What is more fearsome, than to stand before our creator and to render account for our whole life as his creation?

But before Jesus summons us to that judgment, he offers us an invitation to live within his new covenant, to define ourselves by his own laws and promises and by our membership of his people. It is an invitation repeated every year at Easter, every Sunday here, every sunrise of every new born day, to open wide the gates of our muddled anxious lives, warrens of love and loss, of joys and sorrows of pride, regret, shame and fears, to welcome in the lowly, loving, merciful king and judge of all.

At the last judgment, according to the Prophet Zechariah, God will come in untrammelled, dazzling power to Jerusalem, his own city and the capital of his world dominions. Jesus, if we will only ask, will ride humbly into the Jerusalem of our own lives through its winding streets towards its centre. Our Great High Priest, our Temple will bring himself to be the sacrifice of the everlasting atonement to be offered there. He will no doubt upset on his way some deep presumptions, interrupt some treasured habits of thought and life, yes he will; but he is simply clearing his way thereby to the darkened innermost sanctuary of our hearts, into which we ourselves so rarely enter, where we will find that we and he alike can be at home.

Hosanna to the son of David.

Blessed is he that comes in the name of the lord.

GOOD FRIDAY

On the Sixth Day God created the human in God's own image, and with that God finished the heavens and earth and finished all his work in them (Genesis 2.1-2). Here on earth Jesus himself is as fully human as we are ourselves, and he is that God who creates and sustains everything from first to last. And here on earth among us he is offering to recreate us, to make us new, to restore in us, to its intended glory, the image of God which we, you and I, have dented, tarnished and sullied but were created to bear.

On the sixth day the condemned Jesus, scourged and tortured and already weakened, carried the cross beam of his own cross to the place of execution, some 8ft long, stained from old use with old blood. Around his neck was hung the inscription giving the charge for which he died: his claim to be King of the Jews. They passed through the crowds gathered for Passover. There was a frisson of danger here, of expectation of God's irruption in the world's affairs. It was a hope that, in the Romans' minds, this execution must be used to quell once more.

So where were *we*? Not perhaps baying for blood, just, well, just indifferent really. We don't want to get involved. He must, it is true, be a good man and there is undoubtedly something in what he said and he did a lot of good and he did nothing wrong, no, but really we can't make it our business, in fact it could do us quite a lot of harm to get involved. It is a pity, but the world is just like that.

And so the small, sad procession trudges by and we get back to our own daily concerns.

Can't we see? Are we still so inextricably bound into the vast systems of the world's woe, that we cannot see their power being broken for ever by the man broken today on the cross, cannot see that there is now nothing to fear? How hard it is to see, to credit, to *trust* this transformation of the world.

The condemned man was tied to the crossbar or pierced at the wrists and so secured to it. The vertical posts were permanently installed close to a road; *this* is what happened

to those who defied the much vaunted peace of Rome. There was a notch on top of the vertical beam. The victim was secured on the ground to the crossbeam, the crossbeam and victim together were raised on poles forked at the top, and the crossbeam's centre slotted into the notch on the vertical post. Then the victim's feet too would be tied or pierced.

Where are we now? Perhaps now we are at the foot of the cross. Watching our leader, our guide our inspiration and our friend, of all innocent men the most innocent of all, of all who loved and cared for us and for the world the most loving and caring of all, killed by fears, resentments, political calculations, and we quite powerless to prevent it.

There would often be a seat, a small ledge installed on the vertical post on which the victim of the crucifixion could sit. This would revive his blood-flow and prevent the weight of his own body from suffocating him and so would prolong his suffering for hours, sometimes even for days.

Jesus' life ebbs away. Where are we? We are, in the end, on the cross as well. God willing, we live fruitful and fulfilled lives, but we have pains and losses too and the knowledge of death to come. He in his love for us is where we ourselves have been and may indeed be now, and one day without doubt will be. And however honourable our lives may be, there are prides and angers and resentments and selfishness that we cannot expunge. These too, if we have the courage and the will to hang them there, can come on this cross to their end. He will without flinching or condemnation or scorn bear them all. He will take them from our shoulders, put them on his own and in his dying see them dead and buried too.

All this is about us. Where is *God* in all this? Surely his glory is clouded over and occluded. Darkness has, even if just for this one poignant moment, surely overcome the light.

Oh no, it hasn't. As Christ dies in love of us today, for our sakes, to bring our new selves to birth in the new world of God's new creation, the whole nature, plan, purpose, love and glory of God are revealed. The veil that has hidden God's love

from humankind is torn from top to bottom. The Holy of Holies is revealed, *there*, on the cross, today and for evermore. Today's darkness is the dazzling of a brilliance too bright for human eyes or mind to bear. We are invited by his outstretched arms to see it, acknowledge it, *trust* it and in that very trust to be made new.

Jesus is the God who has created everything from the beginning and who is on the cross creating everything anew. On the afternoon of the Sixth Day, Jesus, God perfectly disclosed in perfect humanity, says "It is finished!"; and giving life to the heavens and earth and all God's work in them, he dies.

EASTER DAY

“In the beginning,” we read in Genesis, “God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was invisible and unformed; and darkness was over the deep.” God launches Creation with a word: “Let there be light” (Genesis 1.1, 3). So the work of the first day, Day One, is under way.

God made the Human, and planted a garden in Eden. He put the Human in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it (2.8-9, 15). But the Human was alone. God decided to make a helper for him. So God formed every beast and every bird, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them. And whatever the Human called every living creature, that was its name; and so the creation of each creature was complete at last. But there was no creature suitable as a mate for the Human; so God created Eve. Adam and Eve were in Eden; but not for long; the serpent deceived them, and they were expelled.

From one garden to another. A man and woman meet again in a garden in the Song of Songs. The garden of creation becomes the garden of love, the bower of Solomon rich with spices. At one point the woman loses her beloved.

Woman: On my bed at night I sought the man that I love with all my soul.

I sought but could not find him.

When I found him that I love with all my soul,

I clasped him and would not let him go,

Not till I had brought him to my mother’s house,

To the room where she conceived me!

(Song of Solomon, from 3.1-4)

On Easter Morning we are in a garden once more, where a Man and a woman meet. And who is this woman? *John’s reader*, the reader who wanted at the story’s start to see where Jesus was staying and was invited, “Come and see;” who was baffled with Nicodemus, brought to new sight with the blind man and raised to new life with Lazarus. Now reborn from above and among Jesus’ followers, the reader was present

at Jesus' last evening with his disciples and then beside his mother and Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene is the reader: she is you and me.

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Jesus is killed late on Friday afternoon, as Day Six of creation comes to its end. He is buried – as John alone tells us – in a garden. On Day Seven he rests, as God rested on the seventh Day. But Jesus is *dead*. What strange horror is here: a world whose creator, at the moment of his work's end, is killed by his own creation?

The new week begins. On Day One of the week, very early, while it is still dark, Mary Magdalene comes to the garden; she finds the tomb empty. She runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple. They come to the tomb. They see the grave-clothes. The Beloved Disciple believes: that the tomb is empty, as Mary had told them. And from this, nothing follows. The disciples simply go home.

The garden of love has become the garden of death. The spices now heavy in the air are the spices brought in huge quantities by Nicodemus to honour the corpse of Jesus.

Mary stood outside the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she stooped down facing the tomb. And she sees two angels, in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one where his head had been and one where his feet. And they say to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She says to them: "Because they have taken my lord, and I do not know where they have put him."

The woman is at the tomb of the man she revered and loved; she loved him so much that she wants only to care for his broken body. But the body has been taken away. Has it been stolen? Or just removed from this grand tomb and discarded?

And who are these angels, at each end of Jesus' resting place? They are the cherubim of the Holy of Holies, who wingtip-to-wingtip flanked the mercy-seat where dwelt the Lord of hosts (Exodus 25.22, etc). This tomb is the new Holy of Holies. This is surely

too terrible to contemplate. God's home on earth, the ultimate place of life has been made a place of death. Death's victory is surely complete; darkness has surely extinguished the Light; and with it all light is quenched for ever. But why, in that case, are the angels here? What a strange, uncanny place this is, this spring-time garden in the mist of dawn.

Mary turns round and sees Jesus standing there, and does not know that it is Jesus. "Woman," says Jesus, "why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" She thinks he is the gardener and says, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him and I will take him away."

She thinks he is the *gardener*, set to work this garden and keep it. Yes, and indeed he is, the gardener like no other for this Eden, this paradisiac Holy of Holies. The mercy-seat is empty; but it is not, after all, death that has taken the Lord of hosts away.

Jesus says to her, "Mary."

"*Mary.*" He has called her by her name; and her re-creation is complete.

She turns and says to him, in Hebrew, "Rabbouni" (which means "Teacher").

Jesus says to her, "Do not go on touching me; for I am not yet ascended to the father. But go to my brothers and tell them: I am going to my father and your father, to my God and your God."

Mary knows Jesus at last; and longs to have him as the human presence that she loves and misses. She reaches out for him. For like the lover in the Song of Songs she has found the one that she loves with all her soul; she takes hold of him and will not let him go. The scene is deeply sensuous. But this is not the love that Mary must have for Jesus. He refuses her touch: "Do not go on touching me."

Who are these two, this man and this woman, in a spring-time garden as the light rises on Day One? He is the very image of God (2 Cor. 4.4), the creator incarnate on earth,

“Adam” as Adam himself could never be; and she is his Eve. They are together again in Paradise, the garden of Eden. God and humankind are once more at one.

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Jesus’s closest disciples have seen the empty tomb, “believed” and gone home; how very sensible, rational, orderly and male. Left behind and disregarded is a woman, inconsolably weeping. She gets everything wrong. She has misunderstood the empty tomb, she looks still for Jesus’s body, she fails to know him when he stands before her, she longs for an earthly love and a human touch. But it is not to those knowing disciples that Jesus first appears. It is to Mary. For in her weeping is the voice of love.

By Jesus’ tomb, in the grey half-light, Mary Magdalene speaks for the readers of John who have undergone his story as John hoped they would: and for readers who, themselves, have simply cried for those they have loved and lost.

Mary’s tears are the readers’ tears. When Jesus calls Mary by her name, he calls the readers as well by theirs.

“Set me as a seal upon your heart”, sings the Song of Songs,

“as a seal upon your arm.

For love is strong as death.

Many waters cannot quench love,

neither can the floods drown it.”

(Song of Songs 8.6-7)

Mary Magdalene has found her beloved. So have John’s readers. The light of Day One is rising in Paradise. All creation is made new.

THE EASTER GARDEN:

Titian's *Noli me Tangere*, 1510-11 (National Gallery, London)

Jesus said, "Do not go on holding me."

Titian's *Noli me Tangere* ("Do not go on holding me") is among the most famous of all paintings to show Jesus and Mary Magdalene on Easter morning. Dawn's light rises above the horizon. Behind Jesus is flock of sheep, the care of the great Shepherd; under his feet the grasses spring to life. He carries a mattock, sign of the gardener which Mary took him to be. Mary kneels before him; her left hand rests on the jar of ointment she has brought with her to anoint his body, her right hand reaches out towards his loincloth. Jesus draws back, holding his shroud to him. But even as he avoids her touch, he leans over her in the gentlest gesture of protection and love. He looks down at her tenderly.

Jesus is almost bare, a classical figure which represented the perfection of human beauty. Mary is richly clothed in scarlet and white; a scarlet woman was, already in

the sixteenth century, a woman of ill repute. He stands higher than she, but is off balance and leans on his staff. She is crouching and earthbound, but therefore able to stretch out to him. Earthly beauty is reaching out for the beauty of the divine.

Between Jesus and Mary is the shaft of the mattock he holds. It divides their figures. But her arm reaches across it, longing to touch and uncover her beloved. Between them too is Jesus' white shroud, for they are separated by his death. Her hand ventures past this too, but to no avail; the divine cannot be grasped or unveiled by such a touch as this. So near and yet so far; so far and yet so poignantly near.

As Jesus stands above Mary's figure, so the tree behind him rises far above the shrub behind Mary. But Mary is at the centre of the painting. The tree, which echoes Jesus' figure and mirrors the angle of his mattock, reinforces too the figure of Mary: it extends the line of her body and head upwards to the top of the painting, Jesus' head intersects with the tree-trunk, his arm crosses it. On the picture-plane, where visual links are the links which matter, Jesus and Mary are bound together by that tree: she is part of his space and he is part of hers.

So we watch the curve starting at the hem of Mary's dress, running almost flat along her body and then turning steeply upwards through the tree to heaven; and we watch the second curve, starting at Jesus' feet and rising almost vertical up his flank, turning with the lean of his body and flattening out to follow the line of the hill beyond to the town. The earthly Mary is at the base of a curve which soars to heaven; the heavenly figure bends the curve of his figure towards earth and the people that live here. Even that tiny figure with his dog, coming down the hill, is embraced by his care.

Titian has painted an utterly sensuous scene. This Mary Magdalene can so easily be seen as the prostitute who still longs for a physical touch, for an earthly love and an earthly lover. But we diminish the glory of this painting, if we fail to see – as Titian saw – in Jesus' classical figure the divine beauty which Mary is right to long for.

Human and divine love, sensuous and spiritual love: the churches have tried for 2,000 years to define and distinguish them. But Titian will have no such distinction; his Mary, by her longing for Jesus, rises to heaven; Jesus, avoiding her touch, leans over

Mary herself with utter tenderness and extends his love towards that sleepy town beyond. Mary must not cling to the Jesus who has not yet ascended to heaven; but it is Mary who rises to heaven here; her Jesus gives himself to earth.

For this is Easter, when heaven is wedded to earth, death is undone and all creation is made new.

THE WALK TO EMMAUS

Darkness falling. Perhaps on ourselves or on those we love: the darkness of illness, infirmity or age, darkness deepening even to death. Perhaps on hopes we have harboured for ourselves, our family, our work, our city or our country: hopes which have informed and animated our lives, and which are dissolving before us into the darkness.

Some such darkness is frightening: we do not know what will happen next in it, how or why. Some is oppressive: we feel weighed down, hemmed in by despair, anger, our inability to change things we care about, to rescue someone we love. Some is more gentle, rounding off the long and restless day.

Some seems to enfold only ourselves, to be wholly personal; but we know that its causes are among the myriad convoluted causes at work in our world. Some, we readily acknowledge, is caused by the larger nature of things, by forces wholly impersonal – but how these forces hurt and confuse us, when we ourselves and those we love are caught up in the inexorable machinery of nature and the world.

Adam and Eve ate the forbidden meal, their eyes were opened. Our eyes are open too: to a fallen world whose deep faults we have inherited and – often all unwittingly – have deepened. Open to the sorrow that surrounds us, to the shame we should feel for our part in it. Ours is a glorious world of beauty and of love; but it is as well a terrible world, home of fear and hatred, pride and greed, suffering and death. Our eyes are open; but sometimes we are looking only into the darkness of night falling.

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Two disciples walked on the evening of Easter Day towards Emmaus. Site of the first great victory of the Maccabean heroes. Before the battle, Judas spoke to the men that were with him,

“Fear ye not their multitude, neither be ye afraid of their assault. Let us cry unto heaven, if peradventure the Lord will have mercy upon us, and remember the

covenant of our fathers, and destroy this host before our face this day: That so all the heathen may know that there is one who redeemeth and saveth Israel” (1 Maccabees 4.10).

Victory was theirs. “After this they went home, and sung a song of thanksgiving, and praised the Lord in heaven. Thus Israel had a great salvation that day” (1 Maccabees 4.24-5).

The disciples were going back to the site of a great victory, won in a generation gone by: the victory they thought Jesus himself would win for his own.

A stranger joins them in the twilight. They tell of the hopes they had invested in Jesus, hopes raised and crushed, that he was the one due to redeem Israel. They tell of their new confusion, at the story told them by the women who had found the tomb empty and had been given a vision of angels.

The stranger starts speaking. He tells how it has been, from the very first dawn of things; and how it must be, for that dawn to rise again and to shine on earth. The disciples had looked for the redemption of Israel; far more than just Israel must be redeemed, restored and brought back to the light.

The three of them reach Emmaus; the disciples ask the stranger to join them – as much for his welfare as for their own comfort. “Stay with us, for the day is far gone.”

They sit for their meal, the three of them. Jesus says a blessing, breaks the bread, and hands it out to the disciples. Their eyes are opened. As the eyes of Adam and Eve had been opened before. But this is no forbidden meal; there is nothing furtive here. They do not see around them a world marred by their own shame and guilt – but a world redeemed and restored by the man sitting with them who invited them to the meal forbidden to their first forebears. On this first day of the new creation, in the cool of the evening, these disciples have walked and talked with their God.

Not that the night passed the more quickly for it. The disciples must stumble back to Jerusalem, through the darkness and the danger, to tell their companions the news.

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Darkness still falls. Sometimes frightening, sometime oppressive, sometimes gentle. And in the twilight a stranger walks with us still, offering to hear of our sorrows and to tell us how things have been from the very first dawn of things, and how it had to be, for that dawn to rise again and to shine on earth.

For as long as we invite him in, he will join us. And we, who have thought him our guest, will find in him our host. For we have been walking and talking with our God.

And here this morning, in this calm and lovely place, gathered as his family around his table, in the morning light of a spring day, we too can know him in the breaking of bread.

