

the vision from the cave

a sermon preached on the feast of

All Saints

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The Lections: Isaiah 25:6-9, Psalm 24, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

We can all feel the very personal, heart-rending drama in today's gospel, summed up in Mary's cry to Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died".¹ The reader knows that Jesus deliberately stayed away from Bethany, for an extra two days after hearing news of Lazarus' illness.² And he tells his disciples: "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe".³

It is *necessary* for Lazarus to die – since Lazarus' death is a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus which is to come, *the necessary death*. And his death is necessary because death is the precursor to life. That, in a nutshell, is the Christian *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion* – the good news of God in Christ.

Before exploring that further, something has to be said about the elephant in the Christian 'necessary death' room. Ever since Anselm of Canterbury, in particular, Christianity has been somewhat toxically obsessed with the theory that Christ's death pays the legal satisfaction for sin. Christ had to die because humankind is sinful, and so on. But this is not only an unprovable theory – worse, it has led the church into psychologically dangerous, even lethal avenues. It's a theory that tends to make Christians moralising, legalistic, hard-hearted, and self-righteous, at times deadly. It's no coincidence that wherever this theory is in the ascendant, its adherents tend to either puritanical zeal or infantile irresponsibility. There is in fact no good news here!

Returning, then, to the story of Lazarus, let us pay attention to the story itself. Lazarus' death is *necessary*: but notice that Jesus makes no mention of sinfulness, justification, punishment, satisfaction, and so on. Death is necessary, rather, because it's the precursor to 'believing' in life. In the synoptic gospels this takes the well-known formulation "those who lose their life will find it".⁴ Shortly after today's episode, Jesus in Jerusalem will tell followers: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth (*γην* *gēn*)⁵ and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit".⁶

The grain of wheat falls into the *earth*. Lazarus is buried in the *earth* – a cave being a hidden, dark receptacle in the feminine earth. Life, then, emerges from the cave – from the earth, from the womb of the great Mother, in fact.

The image of the cave is of tremendous importance in Christian spirituality. Contrary to modern sentimentalising of wooden animal feeding troughs on schmaltzy cards, in fact Christian tradition from the earliest of times reckoned the place of Jesus' birth to be a cave. When the emperor Constantine ordered the construction of a church at the place of Jesus' birth the exact location was determined by the well-known network of underground caves in Bethlehem – long considered to be the place.⁷ Moreover, it has also been reckoned that when Christ taught the Lord's Prayer to disciples he did so in a cave; that Mary the Mother of Jesus was buried in a cave; that the Revelation to John came to him in a cave on the island of Patmos.⁸

The Jewish audiences and disciples listening to Jesus would certainly have remembered the various caves in their religious tradition – especially perhaps Joseph's being 'left for dead' in a 'pit', a kind of cave;⁹ Elijah's encounter with God in the sheer absence of sound while in a cave on Mount Horeb;¹⁰ and Daniel left for dead in the lion's den.¹¹

Above all, we can hardly fail to notice that most significant and central of all cave images in Christian tradition – the cave in which Jesus is buried. When we hear the voice of Jesus in today's gospel

¹ John 11:32

² John 11:5-6

³ John 11:15

⁴ Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24

⁵ Earth is feminine in Greek, recognizable in the English word gynaecology.

⁶ John 12:24

⁷ See Raymond E Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, New York: Doubleday, 1979, pp399-401.

⁸ John A Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New York: Crossroad, 1993, pp225-226.

⁹ Genesis 37:23-24

¹⁰ 1 Kings 18:8-13

¹¹ Daniel 6:16

story – “Lazarus, come out!”¹² – we are hearing a foreshadowing of the Divine voice who will call out to the entombed and bandaged Jesus. Falling into the earth – being buried in a cave – is ‘necessary’ because death is the precursor to life. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”.¹³

This is the vision of the new creation seen by Jesus from the depths of his cave in the earth. This is the “new heaven and the new earth”¹⁴ seen by John the Divine from his cave. This is the meaning of the Christian vision of All Saints: that transcending the limits of our mechanistic, rationalistic, materialistic narrowness, there is the immensity of Life which emerges from what appears to us to be no more than the cave of death.

Such a vision is only possible as encounter, with the numinous – with what Rudolph Otto termed ‘the *Mysterium Tremendum*’. ‘Belief’ in Jesus and in his resurrection is not a thought process – but an encounter in such a cave.

However, honesty compels us to acknowledge that everything in our culture resists this good news. Religious people are inclined to pray in the same manner as Mary: prevent this death! Most of our lives are lived not according to the gospel – but according to the assumptions and claims of a materialistic-mechanistic culture, which insists that life is what you and I make of it, that everything can be secured and possessed, everything bought and sold, that living is about manipulating others and the world’s resources in order to fashion our little worlds after our image. It is no coincidence that ‘security’ is such a boom industry in our time!

So for each of us – for each and every one of the ‘saints’, for every person who would follow in the way of the Christ – there is something that has to die, that must be buried in the cave. This burial is *necessary*. In fact, we must undergo a lifetime of burials – a litany of big and small deaths – preparing us for the ultimate death-into-life.

Every experience in the cave brings us, with Lazarus, to life. For the earth is the great maternal womb of all life – from which the Divine Spirit brings forth the new creation. This is the way of resurrection: the way to all spiritual growth, the way of Christ, the way for all the saints, the way for all who would eat his Body and drink his Blood.

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¹² John 11:43

¹³ John 11:25-26

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1