

GOOD FRIDAY 19.04.19 (John Jackson)

JOHN, THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

Reading: John 19.26-30

(26) When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved, he said to his mother: "Here is your son!" (27) and to the disciple: "Here is your mother!" And at that point the disciple took her into his home. (28) Jesus now knew that everything had been accomplished, and in fulfilment of the text of scripture he said: "I am thirsty." (29) There was a container there, full of sour wine. A sponge was soaked with the wine, placed on a stick and brought to his lips. (30) Jesus received the wine and said: "It is accomplished." He bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Setting: The year is AD 90. Some Christians from Jerusalem, who have heard that the disciple John is still alive, have travelled to Ephesus, where he has been living for many years, to ask him to share with them what he remembers about Jesus' crucifixion. Here is John's imagined reply:

Welcome to Ephesus! I deeply appreciate your making this long journey to visit me. Poor Jerusalem! I haven't been there for years, but I imagine it's looking forlorn after what Titus and his troops did to it 20 years ago. Some of my friends (fellow-Jews) say that Titus' early death was God's punishment for what he did to our city and our nation. I'm not surprised that that's how they feel. But vindictiveness is something which I rejected when Jesus rose from the dead and my heart was opened to a new way of living. Yet it was not always so with me. I was with Jesus when a community in Samaria rejected him. I was so angry, that I asked Jesus to bring down fire from heaven and destroy them. I may have been described as "the beloved disciple", but this was one of the occasions when I received a rebuke from Jesus, and rightly so. I still cringe that I could have said that!

...But still, what was done to Jerusalem was appalling.

Ephesus, as you can see, is looking better than Jerusalem. There's an air of prosperity about this place. There's plenty of elegance, but plenty of vulgarity too. For many people here the main purpose of living seems to be to make lots of money. No doubt on your way to my home you were pestered by people wanting to sell you small images of pagan gods and goddesses at not such a small price.

But – strange though this may sound – there's also a sense of fragility about Ephesus, especially if you know something of its history. It is vulnerable to the power of nature, above all earthquakes and a river that floods and silts up. And so, several times Ephesus has had to move to another site. It has also suffered from the deliberate actions of human beings: not only conquerors, as one would expect, but

also ordinary people. The fact that someone saw himself as too ordinary, was precisely the problem. Did you see the temple of Artemis? Can't miss it: it's one of the biggest temples ever built. What you saw replaces a temple that was burnt down on the day that Alexander the Great was born. The arsonist was caught, and when asked why he'd done this, he was disarmingly honest. He said: "There's nothing I'm any good at, but I was desperate to do something – **anything** – so that people would remember me."

The temple was restored to more than its former glory, and the cult of Artemis has remained strong, and is a major source of revenue for this city. Everyone seems to know about the gigantic statue of her in the temple, her body weirdly covered by symbols of fertility. And of course visitors can buy copies of this statue – a lot smaller, of course – but in a wide variety of materials at a corresponding variety of prices.

So, you may be thinking, that can't be good news for the followers of Jesus in this place. Actually the church here is doing quite well. Christians are growing in number, and taking their faith seriously. We did have a problem some years ago when we were joined by people who claimed that they were apostles. Yet their lifestyle and behaviour suggested that they were not. An inquiry was held, and it turned out that they had lied about being apostles. They were expelled. I thought this decision reflected well on the value that the church leaders were placing on the faith. However the church here has also been criticised for being obsessed with rules and regulations, but deficient in love. Alas, I think there is some truth in that!

Perhaps we have become a little complacent here because we have mostly escaped the persecutions that have taken place elsewhere, most horribly in Rome (a generation ago) when crazy Nero was emperor. Here the Roman authorities don't go out of their way to search for people who practise what they call "Galilean superstition". And that seems generally to be so throughout their empire. As long as someone offers sacrifices to the emperor and taxes are paid, they seem to be happy. And among the local people some (mostly Greeks) are interested in our new, wacky religion. Far from insisting that they're right and we're wrong, they often find areas of belief that we and they have in common, and they get excited about this. What is more – and this may sound rather startling – some of these Greeks have included elements of the story of Jesus in their own religion. As you may know, Mary the mother of Jesus spent her last years in Ephesus – with me, actually. Among those here who made her feel welcome were not only followers of Jesus, but some from outside our faith, who connected her with the goddess Artemis, and through Artemis with the great mother goddess Cybele. And now, even more so

since her death, some people actually venerate her as a goddess. If at any stage people start making images of Mary, I hope she is not made to look like Artemis.

But I'm rambling on, as we oldies tend to do. It's time to focus on why you are here. I understand that you would like me to share my memories of Jesus' crucifixion. When Jesus was speaking to us, his disciples, just after his resurrection, he seemed to predict that I would have a long life. That has turned out to be true. I am 80 years old, and am probably the only person still alive who witnessed the death of Jesus.

No need to dwell on the obvious disadvantages of old age. I'm lucky to be coping well, but there are mainly two things that I find troublesome. One is that I move more slowly now. In my time I could run fast. So, on that amazing day when Peter and I heard that the tomb of Jesus was empty, we raced there. I beat him! Peter was a competitive chap, and for a moment he didn't seem very happy about this. But my "victory" amounted to nothing, because he was the first into the tomb anyway. And now, as I look back, I must admit that I was also competitive, and – what is even worse – status-driven, as on the occasion when my brother James and I asked Jesus which of us (in the next life) was going to sit on his right and on his left. In more ways than one we were then put in our places. That's another memory at which I cringe! That Jesus continued to love me even when I said things like that, amazes me to this day!

The other troublesome thing I find about being old is that my short-term memory is isn't as good as I'd like it to be. Earlier today I went out to get some provisions – bread, olive oil, wine – and ...something else. But for the life of me I couldn't and still can't remember what that is!

Yet I have found that there are advantages in being old. Although my memories of the distant past are patchy, some of them are extremely vivid. This applies to how I remember the crucifixion of Jesus. A few things have faded a bit: for example the eclipse and the earthquake – perhaps because in my long life I've experienced these things several times. And (oddly, it may seem) my memories of exactly what Jesus looked like on the cross have become hazy. But it is with great intensity that I remember my own astonishment that one who was in such great pain could be so concerned about the needs of others, in particular his mother. And the words that he spoke as (in effect) he asked me to look after Mary, I can virtually hear at this very moment. (Yes, I did look after Mary – actually we looked after each other – for many years here in Ephesus.) And I can still hear him saying: "I am thirsty.", although I didn't actually see the sponge being brought to his lips or look at him as he died, since my focus was on Mary, whom I was trying to comfort as we were setting out for my home. But I heard him say: "It is accomplished." And that utterance has continued to resound in my head for the last 60 years. What exactly had been

“accomplished”, I had no idea at the time. And in fact my last powerful memory of that Friday is of how utterly confused and empty I felt.

So my memories of Jesus’ death are more what I heard and felt than what I saw, but they are no less real for that.

Yet my memories of **seeing** the **risen** Jesus are very powerful indeed. I have never ceased to admire the faith of those who didn’t encounter him physically after he had risen. And so, when there was a discussion about whether Paul should be allowed to join the apostles, I had no hesitation in saying that he should. When I encountered the risen Jesus, suddenly many things made sense: Jesus’ death wasn’t some meaningless obliteration. I could understand that death had been necessary for there to be life. I had been with Jesus when he told the parable, to some inquisitive Greeks, about the grain of wheat, but at the time I couldn’t see the relevance to **human beings** of how that seed had to die for there to be new life.

Even so, I can’t claim that the moment I saw the risen Jesus, I absolutely “knew it all”. Gaining deeper understanding of his words has taken me some time – 60 years I suppose. And I still don’t “know it **all**”, and shan’t, at least in this mortal life. But another advantage I’ve discovered in being allowed to grow old, is that I don’t take things as literally as before, and I have become steadily better at making connections for myself and understanding the connections that Jesus made in his teaching. Over the years I’ve thought more and more about how Jesus often linked himself, and sometimes even identified himself, with the basic elements of life, for example:

“I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never be hungry.”(6.32)

“I am the true vine ... and you are the branches.” (15.1-3)

“If any are thirsty, let them come to me and drink.” (7.37)

Now **that** saying of his did have some impact on me at the time, partly perhaps because it’s so dry where Jesus did his teaching. And when Jesus was on the cross, it was cruel and heart-breaking that the “source of water” should himself be thirsty, and that the “true vine” should be given wine that was not fit to drink.

Another powerful saying of his involves something we can’t touch but which exerts huge power over us, light:

“I am the light of the world.” (8.1)

For me his most powerful saying is:

“I am the way, the truth and the life.” (14.1)

All these words of his are very simple, and that is one of the reasons that I delight in them. Is this evidence that I am simple-minded and senile? I hope not! As I have grown older, I have realised that simple words aren't necessarily silly or meaningless. On the contrary, I have found that with Jesus' teaching, the simpler the words, the deeper the meaning and message. And for me, those of his words which sound simplest but are hardest to put into practice, involve love:

"Love one another as I have loved you." (13.31)

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (14.15)

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (15.13)

No-one has shown **that** more convincingly than Jesus himself.

I have been thinking about writing an account of Jesus' life. So much could be written about him that the world couldn't contain all the scrolls that would be produced. Even with my imperfect memory, I am going to have to be selective. But I think I can do a better job now than I would have done 50 or 60 years ago. I'm going to start today!

...Yes, yes! Now I remember what I needed to buy: a stylus and writing tablets. Of course!

For reasons that don't need explaining, the sooner I start, the better. If, when I die, the account is still in draft form, someone else can put it together. But I am confident that I'll live long enough to do that myself. Isn't that a good reason to stay alive? I already have a clear idea of what I'd like to share, and how I'd like to present it.

Where shall I start? There is in circulation a wonderful account of Jesus' birth, with angels and shepherds and wise men, by someone who is such a brilliant narrator that he rivals the Greek historian Herodotus. I shan't even try to improve on that. Shall I trace Jesus's ancestry back to Abraham? To Adam? No, I want to go back even further!

You must be thinking: "Now this old boy has seriously lost it!" Well, maybe, but let me explain: 600 years ago – long before your time, and even before mine – the philosopher Heraclitus lived here. Many people in Ephesus still get excited when his name comes up in conversation, which it often does. He had this idea that everything is driven by a power which he called Logos – literally "word", but it's more than that: it's utterance, communication, reason ... really a whole principle of reality. I think he was right. And I hope the church leaders in Ephesus don't expel me for agreeing with a pagan! The only problem with Heraclitus' theory is that it's incomplete. I am convinced that **Jesus** is that Logos, and that he (as Logos) and God

have in some way been together since the beginning of time. Jesus didn't quite spell out that idea during his lifetime, but I realise now that he did give some hints, for example:

"The Father and I are one." (10.30)

"I am in the Father, and the Father is in me." (14.10)

"Before Abraham was, **I am.**" (8.58)

Here is my opening verse:

"In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God." (1.1)

I have a favour to ask: please would you remember that verse for me. I'm going to the shops now – shan't be long – to get the stylus and writing tablets. Best if I focus on that **and nothing else**. When Mary and I shared a home, she used to tease me, saying I was a typical man because I couldn't hold two different things in my head at the same time. Of course she was right. That was years ago, and I'm much worse now.

...And when I approach the end of my account, shall I just slip in the detail that I beat Peter in the race to the tomb? Maybe I'm still a little competitive! Hmm ... I'll see what happens when I get to that part.

But now I'm wasting time. Make yourselves at home. I'll see you in about an hour's time. **Don't forget that verse!**

Prayer:

O loving Father, as we remember at this time the suffering of your Son on the cross, we give thanks for this supreme expression of love.

We give thanks for people throughout the ages, who in different ways have reassured us of the love that you have for us:

those who have sacrificed their lives for others;

those whose acts of kindness have warmed our hearts;

those, like "the beloved disciple", who in words (written or said) have been generous in sharing with us their experiences and insights.

We pray that we too may be so open to your Spirit that we may with joy live out your love in all areas of our lives.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.