

SUNDAY SCHOOL NOTES: 14 April 2018: I am the Resurrection and the Life

The village of Bethany is only 3 kms from Jerusalem. That's closer than our church is to Tygervally Shopping Centre

The village was, and still is, much smaller than a shopping centre – just a few houses in the middle of the olive trees, fig trees and almond trees planted on the southern slope of the Mount of Olives.

Today Bethany is known as el-Azariyeh, a name which is derived from the name of its most famous inhabitant, Lazarus. Since Jesus had raised him from the dead, Lazarus had become a celebrity and people kept coming to see if this story was true. I suspect that the family didn't have much peace as people would have kept popping their heads in, 'just looking' (John 11:9). There were no fences or alarms to guard their privacy! It seems Lazarus didn't like being the centre of attention for the Bible doesn't record any comments he made or suggest that he looked for publicity.

Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, had become close friends with Jesus. We don't know how they met or how their friendship grew, but we think that Jesus and his disciples stayed with them on several occasions, possibly unrolling sleeping mats in a big upstairs room. It was in Lazarus's home that the dinner was held where Mary anointed Jesus' feet with perfumed ointment (John 12). Bethany therefore features quite prominently in the gospels.

It has been suggested that, when the disciples ran away from the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives after Jesus was arrested, they took shelter in Bethany. This makes a lot of sense. The disciples would have been too terrified to go back into Jerusalem where they knew they might be arrested; in fact we don't hear that any of them (except John) even watched the crucifixion. Bethany was just down the hill and would seem to have been the best place to run to. Perhaps they hid by staying with Lazarus and his sisters?

The family in Bethany must have been devastated when they heard what had happened to Jesus. They were near enough to hear the gossip from the city so they would pretty soon have learnt that the Romans had crucified their friend, even if the disciples had not come to them. They were also near enough to be under the dark cloud which fell over the land at midday as Jesus entered the final 3 hours of his life. They would also have heard the news about the temple curtain being ripped very soon after it had happened even though because it was Passover and they wouldn't have walked to Jerusalem to gather news. (Jews had very strict rules about how far they could travel on holy days.)

But imagine how the family must have tried to make sense of Jesus' death! They probably kept on saying things like, "Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. How can he then die?" and "But we thought he was the Messiah, the chosen one of God (John 11:22)" or "He described himself to Martha as 'the resurrection and the life'. He can't die." I am sure that sentence really bothered them: a dead man claiming to be the 'resurrection and life'? I wonder if, in the midst of their sadness, they hoped that somehow Jesus might be raised as Lazarus had been.

We never hear of the family after Lazarus was resurrected, but from the detailed description in John chapter 11, we can be pretty sure the apostle John had been there when Jesus performed this miracle. John also knew that Jesus had said 'I am the resurrection and the life'. When John was writing the fourth gospel, he also remembered that Jesus had gone on to tell Martha that 'Those

who believe in me, even though they die, will live.’ And ‘Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’ By the time John wrote those words down, he understood them a lot better for he had seen that Jesus had truly conquered death.

And, out of that terrible time of sadness after Lazarus’s first death, came these words which still bring comfort today when someone dies. For these words assure us that those of us who believe that Jesus is alive and that he is the ‘Resurrection and the Life’ know that death has been beaten. Yes, eventually our bodies will die, but our real selves (what we call our ‘souls’) will go to God. One of the great preachers of all time was a man called D L Moody and he said this: “Some fine morning you will see in the newspapers, D L Moody is dead. Don’t you believe it. I shall be more alive that morning than ever before.”

Jesus has gone ahead of us through death, beating out a pathway so that we can follow. He said in John 14: 3 that he is going to prepare a place for us and that he will come again and will take us to himself so that where he is we may be also.

This idea isn’t always easy to get our heads round. We see only the ‘dead’ part. So Paul tried to explain it by comparing us to seeds. The seed is buried in the soil – and seems quite dead. But at the right time, we see a green shoot peeping out. The seed has come alive again. It doesn’t look like a seed now – it has a new shape, but it emerges from the seed. In the same way, because Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life we too shall emerge out of death in a mysterious way to live in his new home.

And of course, we don’t have to wait till then to experience this ‘resurrection’ for Jesus promises that when we believe in him we immediately experience what he described as ‘Abundant Life’. Abundant Life will also be different from the life others live because when we follow Jesus we know that we are now the children of the King of Kings. This means we can share with him our frustrations, our uncertainties and our happiness. When we live close to Jesus we are ‘super-charged’ and see things differently – like an athlete running a race who has just had an energy drink and is able to keep on when others are falling down with exhaustion.

So Jesus is indeed the Resurrection and the Life for all humankind.