

There's Always More Than One Side To Every Story (April 2020)

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by Rev Paul Graham

It could not have gone any worse for him. What started as a promising, if flawed, idea has come to a catastrophic, and unsurprising, end. He had been the talk of the town. No, that's not putting it strongly enough. If not a national celebrity, he had certainly been the toast of many a gathering: travelling the local area, healing the sick, feeding the hungry both literally and metaphorically, taking on the authorities and bamboozling the religious elite with theological gymnastics. Performing nature-defying miracles as easily as you or I tie up our sandals.

It's not every day that we see with our own eyes the raising of a dead man. Particularly one who has been behind their tombstone for several days. Yes, we might argue that after a few minutes of inactivity there could have been a mistake and the one assumed dead suddenly starts breathing. But not after three days.

But there he was, our man standing in front of the cave mouth, caring not a jot for the putrid smell that accompanied the shambling figure as the one they call Lazarus appeared from the blackness, swathed in stained bandages to be greeted by gasps and screams from the previously-grieving onlookers. I'll never forget the look on the faces of the recently dead man's sisters as they hesitated before rushing forward to greet their resurrected brother. To take him off for a bathe, I hope.

As scandalous gestures go, this was just about the worst of them. Whilst I can shrug off the reports of mass catering as local gossip, I've been forced to come to terms with what I've personally witnessed of blind people being able to see and other restored bodies and minds. But this was a step too far. Bodily resurrection is widely thought of as a total impossibility and yet I can't deny my senses in the midst of that crowd around the tomb.

And that hadn't been the only recent occasion that resonated with so many.

There was that procession into Jerusalem only a few days ago. Riding on a donkey, accompanied by singing and chanting the like of which is only heard during circus season. But instead of the mixed clamour as each one cheers on their favourite gladiator or bear, the many heads thronging the streets were united in the focus of their adoration: one man and his donkey. It made me think of the parades I've heard about as Caesar's army return from the victorious conquest of yet another annexation to the "glorious" Roman Empire. Places like our own sorry land, existing under the unwelcome boot of occupation.

But this is what the crowd was also expecting: relief from oppressive reign and the ushering in of a newly restored Promised Land. And for a brief moment I almost joined them in their belief. I allowed myself the luxury of imagining a world without Roman boundaries, laws and restrictions. What would it be like to walk around in freedom? I ask myself. To worship in true freedom, to adhere to all those laws without having to get them past the censors first.

But then I got a grip again. Of course that couldn't happen. It has been tried before and it would fail just like all those previous attempts. Inglorious failure followed swiftly by retribution and brutality meted out on all who happen to get in their vengeful path. The passageways around the temple littered again with the corpses of those who for a short while thought that one man might be able to defeat the might of Rome. One man and a few simple labourers from the unfashionable lakeside area to the north; not much

of a revolutionary army really.

And so it proved.

I suppose after all the death I've witnessed I'm fairly immune to the screaming, the sound of nail grating against bone, all the sights, sounds and smells that accompany the further extremes of their justice system. And yet there was something strangely compelling about the one in the middle on that stinking hill just outside the city. Maybe it was the sign that had been fixed above his head, pointing out to all and sundry the folly of his claim of royalty. Maybe it was the disdain of those in uniform whose very presence dared his followers to interfere. Maybe it was the weeping of those who had gone from cheering to jeering in such a short space of time.

Or maybe it was something else.

I can't get rid of the nagging feeling that we've all been blind-sided by this chap. Not just his followers, who have all absented themselves fearing the same fate might be awaiting them. Not just the crowd, who are starting to move away now that the main event is over. Not just my colleagues, whose bloodlust seems to be petering out as each laboured breath shakes the body hanging before us.

And then the gasping stops, the final words, enigmatic as ever, are spoken, and I'm left... unsatisfied.

I should be triumphant; one more stay of execution for our religious order by giving over one more lamb for the slaughter. And yet I can't escape the possibility that we've all got it wrong. The Romans, us Jews, everyone.

Could it have been that my vision of freedom from Roman tyranny had been wrong, but for different reasons? Could it have been that for once I hadn't been right at all? That everyone, from Caiaphas, Herod, Pilate right down to those hairy fishermen, misunderstood his message.

That salvation isn't just from earthly tyranny, that water isn't just for life and that no amount of rules will get us our true identity as children of Yahweh.

Standing in the lengthening shadows, as the sudden darkness fades into the natural twilight of the end of this peculiar day, I'm left wondering if this whole thing is part of a plan so much bigger than everyone expects. The only comfort I can draw from this is that it is, at last, finished. We'll never know...

Imagined as an eye-witness account by an unnamed member of the Sanhedrin, Jerusalem AD33

Take time to reread the accounts of Jesus' death in any or all of the four Gospels. Place yourself into the story as any of those who were there: member of the crowd, frightened disciple watching from afar, triumphant Roman, thief facing justice or a member of the religious elite like this. What would you write about all that you see and experience on that first Good Friday? If you want to commit something down on paper, please send it to Paul (by hand or email minister@clarebaptistchurch.org.uk) for future publication...