

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE RESURRECTION III: THE JOHANNINE STATEMENT

IN TWO PREVIOUS articles on the resurrection, we first examined views held by some modern writers about the whole status of the resurrection-event: whether it is to be regarded as an event in history at all, or merely as a means of expressing belief about the present importance of Christ. In the second article we considered the resurrection narratives of the synoptic evangelists, Mark, Matthew and Luke, from this precise point of view. We now turn to the position taken up by John's gospel. What immediately strikes one is the much greater variety of the accounts in John, and the discreet but unmistakable angle of vision of the later Church.

The variety of the stories and their relationship to those of the synoptics raises in acute form the question of the origin of all the resurrection accounts: Some time ago, C. H. Dodd¹ classified all the gospel narratives about the resurrection into two basic categories: concise narratives (an appearance of Jesus, a recognition and a mission-charge by Jesus, e.g. the appearance on the mountain with which Matthew concludes) and circumstantial narratives (dramatic stories, much more developed than the former, such as the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus). Inevitably, of course, there are some mixed forms. This classification is not entirely satisfactory, nor is it clear what conclusions may be drawn from it, but it does suggest a useful simplification: that if indeed there are two basic types of narrative, this may give us the two basic forms of the tradition.

In his recent and almost indispensable commentary,² Raymond E. Brown is more radical: 'A more biblical approach (than harmonisation) is to suppose that one basic appearance underlies all the main gospel accounts of appearances to the Twelve (Eleven)'.³ He points out that since these appearances all lead up to a commission to preach, baptize etc.,⁴ 'it makes little sense to construct a series of such appearances to the Twelve; each gospel witness is reporting a slightly different version of an appearance that was constitutive of the christian community'.⁵ The variety which exists between the different versions stems from their development within different com-

¹ 'The Appearances of the Risen Christ', in *Studies in the Gospel*, ed. Nineham D. E. (Oxford, 1955).

² *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1971), to which this article is heavily indebted.

³ *Ibid.*, p 972.

⁴ With the exception of Jn 21, 1-14, which Brown decisively separates from the command to Peter to 'feed my lambs'.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*, p 973.

munities and different traditions, shaped by different theological emphases and different imagery. Thus Luke suggests that the sole appearance to the Twelve was on the day of resurrection, and that this appearance culminated in the final blessing and parting on the road to Bethany. (The story of the disciples on the way to Emmaus makes this hypothesis very awkward, since evening is already coming on when they begin their meal at Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and dusk falls fast in Palestine.) John 20 splits the appearance into two, in order to introduce the Thomas episode – a mixed narrative, since it has no mission charge. The division enables him to stress two lessons about faith which are of the highest importance in his gospel, and also to provide an excellent dramatic setting for the final confession of faith with which the gospel concludes.⁶ John 21 presents the appearance in a totally different context. It may even combine the memories of three distinct scenes: the first (verses 1–8), an appearance of Christ on the lake-shore and a catch of fish, the second (verses 9–13) a meal with the risen Christ, and the third the scene of promises to Peter, with predictions about the future of the beloved disciple. The situation is complicated even more by the fact that each of these scenes has a certain similarity with gospel scenes of events during Jesus' earthly life: the first with the vocation to be fishers of men (Lk 5, 1–11), the second with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and the third with the promises to Peter made at Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16, 16–18). One is tempted to wonder whether the writer of the appendix has not taken elements from all these scenes and blended them together, to create a conclusion which will enshrine important lessons for the future of the Church.

The risen Christ and his disciple

If this view of the fluidity of the tradition and the multiplicity of its forms is justified, then there is all the more reason to concentrate on the message which the evangelist uses his narrative to convey. One of the most striking features of John's account is the beloved disciple, whose presence seems in a way to pervade the whole presentation. It has often been suggested that, in the gospel of John, Mary is both an individual and a symbolic figure, standing for the Church, of which she is the mother and the perfect exemplar. In the same way, it is a most attractive suggestion that the curiously anonymous 'disciple whom Jesus loved' is also an exemplary and symbolic figure, standing for 'the disciple whom Jesus loves', in the collective sense of any faithful disciple of the future. Many solutions have been offered for the strange silence about his identity, the most common being that it is the author of the gospel, who refrains from mentioning his own name out of

⁶ It is assumed here that the gospel originally ended with chapter 20. Chapter 21 was added by another member of the johannine circle. It has many differences of style, minor differences of theology, and fits ill after the conclusion in 20, 30–31. This point of view is nowadays generally, or even universally, accepted.

humility: an odd humility, since the silence about the name is combined with a stress on his special relationship with the Lord. It is altogether more meaningful to discard all idea of a half-hearted disguise, and to accept the namelessness of the disciple as an indication that his personal identity is deliberately suppressed by the evangelist, so that his significance may lie precisely in his faceless quality and the generality that it brings.

It is perhaps his role in the resurrection stories that is all-important; but this is prepared for in previous scenes. At the supper, he is characterized by his intimacy with Jesus and the bond of affection which binds him to the Lord, making him the recipient of his secret revelation. In the courtyard of the high priest's house, in contrast to the other disciples, he is portrayed as faithful to Jesus in his passion, following his Lord in his sufferings, where even Peter denies him. Finally he alone remains at the foot of the cross, standing there over against the figure of Mary, the mother of the Church. If, as has frequently been suggested, Mary here corresponds to the daughter of Sion, the mother of God's chosen people in the Old Testament, the act of Jesus in giving the beloved disciple to be her son shows him clearly to represent the Church, the collectivity of the disciples whom Jesus loves. The importance of this action is emphasized by the words that follow: 'After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now accomplished . . .'⁷ It is the climax of Jesus' deeds on the cross, the climax of his 'hour', because it sets the Church on its path, creating the community of love between those he loves.

The figure of the beloved disciple takes on additional significance in the resurrection stories if he is considered in this way, especially as he seems to have been inserted by John into narratives where he originally had no place,⁸ and where John therefore saw him as conveying a special lesson. It is the beloved disciple who comes to believe at the empty tomb and who on the lake recognizes the risen Lord. In the parallel story of Peter's visit to the tomb,⁹ Peter is alone and fails to understand or find faith; even in John's version it does not seem that Peter understands at that moment. It is perhaps worth considering that it may be in reference to his generalized function as 'the disciple whom Jesus loves' that the saying about his remaining till Jesus comes was originally meant. It was only when this figure became too closely associated with a particular individual that the difficulty about his death arose.¹⁰ The evangelist wants to show that faith and understanding are the work of love, born of sensitive awareness and closeness to Christ rather than of mere seeing.

In this respect, the lesson of the beloved disciple coincides with the final beatitude of the main body of the gospel, 'Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe'.¹¹ At intervals throughout the gospel, the evangelist has stressed the insufficiency of mere seeing and the need for spiritual insight, in order to understand the message of Jesus and adhere to him. During Jesus'

⁷ Jn 19, 28.

⁸ Brown, *loc. cit.*, p 1004; and cf p 922.

⁹ Lk 24, 12.

¹⁰ Jn 21, 20-23.

¹¹ Jn 20, 29.

earthly life, when it is possible to see Jesus, it is of course primarily the negative side of this that is stressed, as when he complains, 'You will not believe unless you see signs and portents',¹² and where he is objecting to the mere gawping at wonders without understanding them.¹³ After Jesus has left his disciples, the other side, the spiritual insight, becomes all-important; and it is for this reason that the evangelist highlights the beloved disciple's loving responsiveness to Christ, and concludes with the beatitude which sets the tone for all future believers for whom the book is written: 'That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.¹⁴

The risen Christ in his Church

Another theme prominent in John's resurrection stories and of great importance for the community of the early Church is that of separation and return. That of separation comes out in the story of the appearance to Mary Magdalen. This meeting is reported also by Matthew,¹⁵ but there the words of Jesus are different, indeed almost otiose, since they do no more than repeat the message already given to the women by the angel. It is quite possible that Matthew's tradition did not include the content of the message but only the fact that a message was given, and that the evangelist supplied the content from the previous message. John may well have done the same, for his message is both wholly different from anything in the other gospels and fully consonant with his own theological emphases earlier in the gospel. For John, there are two principal senses to the moment of the passion and resurrection of Jesus which together form the 'hour' to which the whole gospel looks forward, ever since 'my hour has not yet come':¹⁶ it is both the moment of glorification and the moment when Jesus leaves his disciples to prepare an eternal home for them. Throughout the gospel, the hour of Jesus' passion is looked forward to as the moment of his exaltation. This is a typical johannine ambivalent term, which includes in its meaning the lifting up on to the cross,¹⁷ the raising up at the resurrection and the glorification at God's side.¹⁸

The johannine presentation of the passion itself is in fact a royal triumph: Jesus makes his captors fall back by a word, carries his cross like a standard, and is recognized as king by Pilate's inscription. But the triumph is still to be completed by exaltation to God's side.¹⁹ This is the most likely sense of Jesus' refusal to let Mary Magdalen cling to him. All kinds of improbable explanations of this have been proposed (his wounds were still sore; he was naked); but the most likely is that this bit of dialogue is a dramatic accompaniment of Jesus' following message that he is ascending to the Father. Contrary to the popular conception, fostered by the liturgical feast, that the ascension of Christ was an event which took place only forty days after the resurrection, the majority of New Testament texts are at one in considering as a single

¹² Jn 4, 48.

¹³ Jn 6, 26.

¹⁴ Jn 20, 31.

¹⁵ Mt 28, 9-10.

¹⁶ Jn 2, 4.

¹⁷ Jn 3, 14.

¹⁸ Jn 12, 32-4; 17, 1-5.

¹⁹ Jn 17, 5.

event the resurrection and the exaltation at God's right hand. It is only the Acts of the Apostles which mentions the interval of forty days before the final separation of Christ from his disciples;²⁰ yet the same author also describes a separation and exaltation to heaven which appears to take place on the day of resurrection itself.²¹ The import, then, of the dialogue with Mary Magdalen is to underline the fact that the glorification of Christ at the Father's side is an integral part of the resurrection.

But it teaches also about the effect of the exaltation for Christ's followers. The formula 'I am ascending to my Father and yours, to my God and yours',²² shows that the risen Christ takes his followers with him. As a formula, it recalls the expression by which Ruth protests that she will enter into complete community with her mother-in-law Naomi: 'Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God'.²³ It suggests that here, too, there is to be total community between Christ exalted and the disciples, in accord with his saying at the supper: 'I am going to prepare a place for you . . . so that where I am you may be also'.²⁴ It encourages the Church, then, to keep its gaze fixed on the risen and exalted Lord. We are already citizens of heaven, since his exaltation is only a prelude to ours. As Paul has it, 'our citizenship is the citizenship of heaven'.²⁵

Complementary to the theme of ascent is that of return. It was prominent in the final words of Jesus to his disciples before the passion, in such sayings as, 'A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me'.²⁶ Together with this series of sayings was another, which promised that the holy Spirit would come to them as his representative to teach, guide and strengthen them on his behalf, and be their Paraclete (the word is a legal term exactly similar to 'advocate', one who is called to stand by and support a client who needs help). To the Hebrew mind, this representative could almost be said to be Jesus himself. Although the modern mind would insist that they are two separate persons, their similarity of role and function gives them, to the Semite, the same personality, for it is in a way the function which defines the identity. So Malachi can prophesy that Elijah will come again, and Jesus can say that he has come in the person of John the Baptist.²⁷ Jesus himself can be represented in the gospel of Matthew as a second David or a second Moses, because the return of both these great figures was prophesied and Jesus fulfils the prophecies. In the same way the Spirit which continues Jesus' work makes him present and is his spirit in the fullest sense.²⁸

Correspondingly, the same teaching of the presence of Jesus' spirit occurs also after the resurrection as part of the dispositions which the risen Lord

²⁰ Acts 1, 3.

²¹ Lk 24, 51.

²² Jn 20, 17.

²³ Ruth 1, 16.

²⁴ Jn 14, 2.

²⁵ Phil 3, 20.

²⁶ Jn 16, 16.

²⁷ Mt 11, 14; cf Mal 4, 5.

²⁸ The necessity of writing the word with a small or large 's' draws a distinction where none should be made; both senses are included.

makes for his community, when he breathes on them and says, 'Receive the holy Spirit'. This is the fulfilment of his promise.²⁹ But his presence with them in their mission is in a way emphasized even more strongly by his charge, 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'.³⁰ The union of Jesus with his Father, and the fact that Jesus is doing only the work of him who sent him, have been often brought out in the course of the gospel, and now this union of sender and sent is transferred to the disciples. Thus the circle is completed: as the disciples are present with the risen Lord in his exaltation, so he is present with them in their mission on earth.

The two lessons about the future community are in a sense combined in Christ's dialogue with Peter after the meal by the lakeside. Until now it has been the beloved disciple who has represented and brought out the importance of the sensitivity of love; and it is to all the disciples that the Lord has given his spirit for their mission. In the dialogue with Peter, these two aspects are combined, because Christ gives Peter charge of his sheep only at the triple protestation of Peter's love. Not only does Peter's protestation repair his triple denial during the passion, but further it shows that the union with Christ in love is an essential prerequisite for pastoral office in the Church.

Christ the Lord

It is, as Raymond Brown points out,³¹ not by chance that the last words spoken by a disciple in the gospel of John (before the addition of chapter 21, the appendix) are those of Thomas: the supreme profession of faith. Brown regards the whole incident as a dramatization of the theme of doubt turning to faith. The drama certainly re-employs expressions already used for the previous appearance of Jesus; it thus suggests that it has been constructed by the evangelist in imitation of this – an echo with a different message. The message of the first appearance was the joyful union of Christ and his disciples; alone of the resurrection appearances it remains unclouded by doubt or hesitation. But the motif of doubt returns in full force with Thomas; it is as though John has split into two the appearance described in Luke,³² in order to bring out the different motifs more clearly. Here there is doubt, which appears only to be triumphantly overcome.

The significance of Thomas' confession can go unnoticed by a post-nicene christian. Firstly, its position is prominent in the gospel as the final response of man, especially because it arches over to rejoin the first verse of the gospel, where the relationship of the Word to God is already described: 'and the Word was god'.³³ Secondly, the rarity with which Jesus is called 'God' in the New Testament makes these two passages which bracket John's gospel all

²⁹ Jn 20, 22. ³⁰ Jn 20, 21. ³¹ *Loc. cit.*, pp 1032, 1047. ³² Lk 24, 36-49.

³³ The small letter is used deliberately in an attempt to avoid the confusion of the Word with God the Father or – in the other direction – the understatement 'the Word was divine'. Perhaps the best periphrasis is given by the New English Bible: 'What God was, the Word was'.

the more striking. Raymond Brown³⁴ finds only one other passage which clearly calls Jesus 'God' apart from these two in John;³⁵ even this is considerably less strong because it is dependent on a psalm verse, and such a literary allusion can often slightly influence or distort a writer's way of expressing himself. Apart from these three, there exist only five other passages in the New Testament in which there is a 'certain probability'³⁶ that Jesus is given the title, all of which are doubtful on grounds of text or meaning.

This lack of evidence for the use of the divine title for Jesus does not of course mean that he made no divine claims or that these claims went unregarded by the gospel. It only shows that to say of any man that he was God was to the Jews so staggering as to be almost meaningless; it was almost too baffling even to be blasphemous. Jesus' way of putting forward his true personality had, therefore, to be much more subtle. He claimed to do, and demonstrably did, actions which only God could do, such as forgiving sins, giving life and controlling the forces of nature. In John he suggests his divine quality more by speaking of his unique relationship with the Father and of his ability to do the works of the Father, and by the mysterious use of the phrase 'I am',³⁷ recalling the self-designation of God to Moses at the burning bush. But these indications seem to have evoked no response of understanding on the part of the disciples, only of murderous hostility on the part of his opponents.³⁸ The evangelist often comments that his disciples understood some word of Jesus only after the resurrection.³⁹ It took time, and above all the key of the resurrection, for the disciples to assimilate the significance of Jesus' words and actions, and to plumb the depths of their implications. Indeed, one may well ask whether the Church has yet done so, or ever will do before the consummation of the world. The continued lack of understanding of the Twelve, even after the forty days till the Ascension,⁴⁰ suggests that Luke considers this to have persisted longer than John does. But for Luke of course the moment of enlightenment comes with the dramatic scene of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost.

In concluding his gospel with this full declaration of the divinity of Christ, John does perhaps foreshorten. He represents Thomas as expressing with stark clarity what may well have been only dimly understood so soon after the startling event of the resurrection. But it is fitting that the gospel and the account of the risen Christ should conclude with a declaration of the full faith to which these events led and to which the evangelist will bring his readers.

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³⁴ 'Does the New Testament call Jesus God?' in *Theological Studies* 26 (1965) pp 545-573, published also in his *Jesus, God and Man* (London, 1968).

³⁵ Heb 1, 8-9.

³⁶ Brown, *Jesus God and Man*, p 28.

³⁷ Jn 8, 24, 28; 13, 19.

³⁸ Jn 8, 58-9.

³⁹ Jn 2, 22; 7, 39.

⁴⁰ Acts 1, 6.