

Christ is the Lord of Space, Time and History

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Christ is the Lord of Space, Time and History

I should like us to consider together two stories about our Lord Jesus as presented in the Gospel by John that emphasise the fact that he is the Lord of space and time and of the course of history. So let's read parts of those two well known stories. We shall need thoroughly to remind ourselves of some of their detail.

So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. (John 4:46–50)

Let me pause there, for the evangelist tells this story in two parts and the first part ends with the minor climax in verse 50. 'The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.' So ends the first part of the story. Now for the second:

As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' And he himself believed, and all his household. (vv. 51–53)

So the second part of the story ends, as did the first, with a statement about the belief of this nobleman. As we read and think about it, we shall discover how the man came to believe twice. 'I understand there is no law against believing in the Saviour twice,' you're thinking; and the point that will arise is exactly when the miracle took place in relation to this good man's tale. Now, with these things in our minds, let's turn to chapter 11.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. . . . After saying these things, he said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,

but I go to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.' Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?' (John 11:1-6, 11-15, 17, 20-21, 32, 39-40)

The signs that are recorded in the Gospel by John were recorded there, so we are told, for a distinct purpose. 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:30-31).

And so far the meaning is clear—the record of these miracles is meant to supply evidence upon which we may found our faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. A moment's thought will show us, however, that in addition to evidence that he is the Christ, the Son of God, the account of these miracles helps us to see what those terms mean. What does it mean that he is the Christ? It's all right your convincing me with evidence, but when you've finished convincing me that he is the Christ, I shall come back to you with a question—'And what do you mean by *Christ*?'

If you say to me that Tom Jones is the best actuary in Lexington, with my feeble knowledge of insurance I may come back at you and say, 'Well, I believe what you say; Tom Jones is the best actuary in Lexington. But do tell me, what is an actuary?—for I haven't a clue.' You can prove to me with evidence that Jesus is the Christ; but what do you mean by the term Christ?

Between them, the signs that are recorded here will show us what it means, that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Among the many lessons to be learned from the accounts of these two miracles about which we have read is this—they show us that Jesus is the Lord of space and time and the course of history.

This is a vast universe in which we live. The nature of space and time seems too awesome to comprehend. This year we and our little planet have been travelling on our annual journey round the sun—millions of miles. Travelling with the sun in the rotating arm of the galaxy that we're in; and then travelling in another direction with the whole of the galaxy in the direction to which our galaxy is moving.

And of course that raises the practical question, where are we travelling to? And also the bigger question of life and life's travel, for in another metaphorical sense life is a journey, isn't it? Even within the confines of our little seventy years, the matter of the past and the future often loom up in front of us, sometimes with worrying concerns. Here's a good mother and wife, preparing her husband's dinner. 'He is coming home from work,' she says, and she

doesn't know that already there's been an accident and the man is lying dead on the roadside. It will take some time for the news to catch up with her because, generally speaking, we are behind things. They happen and then later we discover them; and what has already happened we don't necessarily know. That future, which is now past, is still future to us and we shan't learn of it until some hours or maybe some days later.

That could be a worrying thing, couldn't it? How happy are those that have discovered Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God. Not only were all things made by him and through him and for him, but *he is before all things* (see Col 1:16–17). Not, he *was* before them, he *is* before them. And seeing he belongs to God's eternity all things in our space and time do not come before him, he is before them. Nothing will happen to you, my brother and sister that he has to learn about six or seven days later.

'He is before all things, and in him all things hold together,' and we go forward into the future calm and confident, knowing that whatever happens nothing will be a surprise to him. Nothing will happen before he knows it's going to happen. If we receive a shock, a grief and a calamity, then let us comfort our hearts that he is before all things, in him all things consist and he knew it was going to happen. It didn't happen because he was asleep in a boat or something.

Believing when there seems to be no evidence

So let us look at the first story in John 4. Because he is the Lord of space and time and the course of history, we shall look at the practical implications this had for the nobleman's faith. He lived in Capernaum and his son was exceedingly ill. Day by day it seemed that he was getting worse and death loomed on the horizon. He had obviously heard of the Lord Jesus and of our Lord's power to do miracles, but Jesus was away down in Jerusalem at the feast and seemed out of range of the nobleman at this critical time in his experience. But then, to his relief, he heard that Jesus had come back from Jerusalem and was in Cana of Galilee. At least that was within reach, within reasonable space and distance. He would go to what for him now was the sole hope for the recovery of his child.

Leaving home, he came down the lake by road or by ship and then up over the mountains to Cana of Galilee. When he found our Lord he asked him if he would come down and heal his son, for, as he explained to the Lord Jesus, 'he was at the point of death.' And our Lord replied, 'The trouble with you people around here is that except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.' The verbs were put in the plural, referring not just to the man himself, but everybody else.

The man got exasperated. 'Look, Lord,' he said, 'I don't know what you're talking about, but come and view my boy. If you don't come soon and lay your hands on him he'll die and Capernaum is some twenty-odd miles from here. Come, and we can talk about the theology afterwards. Don't stand there talking theology when my boy is so desperately sick, come and heal him.'

And our Lord replied, 'My dear man, you have misunderstood me. Your boy is well.'

'What do you mean, my boy is well?'

'Well, you asked me to heal him, didn't you?'

'You've healed him?' the man exclaimed.

'Yes, that's right, I've healed him. What I was saying is, the trouble with you people is that unless you can see a miracle done in front of your nose you're not going to believe. And that's true of you, isn't it? Your boy is well! You can't see it because he happens to be twenty-odd miles away, but I'm telling you that he's well; and except you can believe without signs and miracles you're going to have a rough time over this next twenty-four hours. It won't make any difference to the fact that the boy is well, but for your own peace of mind you'd do well to believe what I say right here and now, without any visible signs and wonders. And you'd be well advised to get on your way home.'

You'll say, 'Lord, you're being tough. I mean, can't you see the emotional state of the man? Why don't you give him a bit more evidence? If you did a miracle right in front of his nose, then he would get the confidence to believe his son was better, wouldn't he?'

Or would he? Suppose our Lord had done another miracle, healed a leper or something, what would that have proved? It would have proved that our Lord could do miracles, but it wouldn't prove that he had done this miracle, would it? The man already knew the Lord could do miracles; that's why he came to ask him to heal his son. He was asking him to do a special miracle—heal his son. Our Lord could have done many miracles there and then, but that would not have proved that he had healed the man's son.

And that put the man on the spot. Distance meant he couldn't see that the boy was well, so what should he do? Without seeing the evidence, should he dare to believe simply on the naked word of Christ? By God's grace, the man believed and got up and went home. How firm his faith was we might deduce from the fact that he didn't get home until late the next day. I don't know what hotel he stayed at on the way, or whether he slept under a hedge or something, but I imagine that perhaps a doubt here and there arose in his heart—'I wonder, is the gospel going to turn out to be true?' In the hours of the night, when the mind is a little feeble and doubts arise so easily, did he say to himself, 'Christ said it, and that's enough for me?'

My dear brothers and sisters, there is evidence galore that Jesus is the Christ; but now in Christ's personal dealings with us we have to learn and believe this necessary thing. Because he is the Lord of space and time and history, we have to trust him about the future. For him it's already past; for us it's still future. We must trust him and journey on through life. We shall eventually, of course, see evidence that what he said at the time was indeed true.

There is one spectacular piece of evidence about that. Do you believe in heaven, and that you're on your way there? How do you know it's there? You've never seen it, have you? And the Father's house to which you tell me that you are going, you've never seen that either, as far as I know, and yet you journey on. How are you so certain?

'Ultimately,' you say, 'the Bible says it. But behind the Bible stands the word of our blessed Lord Jesus and we trust his word, without further evidence if need be. "If you believe in God, believe also in me . . . I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (John 14:1; 16:28) As we journey on and at last come home, we shall see that what he told us was true.'

The evidence

But the story has two parts, as I said. The man was a very inquisitive kind of amateur theologian, I suppose. He was sure, as he journeyed home that night that the boy was well, because the Lord had said it. But when he got home and the servants came out excitedly to tell him that his son was well, he had a little question. It made no difference whatsoever to the boy's health, of course, but the question was this—'At what hour did he begin to get better?' Some people are a bit curious; they're curious even about their own salvation. 'When exactly was I saved?' they ask. And some folks can say, 'It was on 10 December 1962 at 5 o'clock in the afternoon.' And then some folks don't quite know when the hour was and they feel a little uncomfortable.

Well, this man wanted to know the precise hour. It's not enough to have the boy well, he wanted to know at what precise hour it happened and he enquired of the servants at what hour he began to mend. 'Oh, it was yesterday at the seventh hour, the fever left him,' they said. So he started counting on his fingertips, 'The seventh hour, when was that?' And he knew that it was when—well, when was it? Don't look at the Bible just for a minute—when was it? He knew that it was when he believed that the boy got better, yes? Well, that's not what the Bible says, is it? He knew that it was when the Lord said, 'Your son will live.' That's when it happened.

Someone will say, 'It can't have happened like that! Read the story again, Mr Preacher. You see, if you read the story, it doesn't say the man believed early on. It says the man came and said, 'Come and heal my son,' and the Lord said, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' Then the Lord said, 'Your son will live,' and it hasn't yet mentioned that the man believed. So how could it be when the Lord said it, if as far as the story goes the man hasn't yet believed?'

Do you see the point? The first time it says that the man believed is after the Lord said, 'Your son will live,' isn't it?

How do you work out that doctrinal conundrum? Well, what would you have me to think? That the man came and said, 'Lord, heal my son,' and the Lord said to himself, 'I have a difficulty here! Suppose I heal his son and I say, "Your son will live," and then the man doesn't believe. So I think I know what I'll do. I'll say, "Your son will live," but I won't heal him just yet. I'll wait to see if he believes; if he believes then I'll heal his son. But if I say, "Your son will live," and he doesn't believe, then I won't heal the son—how would that do?'

'Don't be so irreverent, Mr Preacher. If the Lord said, "Your son will live," he'll live, as so many did.' Quite so, and this is exceedingly important. When did it happen? When the Lord said it! Of course the man had believed before the text actually said he did.

What do you think happened when he was by the bedside of his child, thinking that within a few days his son would be dead? He had tried everything he possibly could, but it had all failed. His one hope was the blessed Lord Jesus, so he did what, for a father, was a desperate thing; turning his back on his child, he left him and came to Christ. He called on the name of the Lord, and said, 'Come and heal my boy.' It is written elsewhere in Scripture, 'Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom 10:13). When did it happen, then? It was when, in response to the man's call, the Lord said, 'Your son will live', that the boy mended.

What's all the fuss about believing afterwards? Well, it's a question of the evidence, isn't it? In response to his repentance, giving up hope in all else and his faith in coming to call upon the Saviour, the Lord healed his boy. Now it was a question of the evidence that the boy was healed and that's why our Lord called for faith; first of all faith in the naked word of Christ. Our Lord will challenge us in many an aspect in life, because he is the Christ. He will ask us to believe his promises with no more evidence than his word; and if we would have peace of mind we have to learn to trust his naked word. That's no cheat, because later on as we journey we shall find the evidence that his word was true.

'It was yesterday at the seventh hour,' and he knew it was at the moment the Lord had said, 'Your son will live,' and the dear man believed. You say, 'I thought he believed before.' It doesn't matter how many times you believe. I think sometimes I might get home to heaven and enquire of the blessed Lord, 'When was I saved?', he may well tell me I was saved before the time I think I was. I know for certain that it was when with my full heart and mind I dared to trust his word; but who knows whether it was before, when as an infant I called upon his name. What will that matter anyway, so long as I did believe and my faith is founded in the word of Christ?

Believing when there seems to be no response

So we have learned that our Lord could heal at a distance. The story of Lazarus' death and then his raising from the dead by our Lord is so well known, I need but sketch in a few of its details. But let me point out something in that story that is full of poignancy. John, as he records it, has not failed to emphasise it. There was a certain man called Lazarus of Bethany, and he fell sick. His sisters sent a note to the Lord Jesus saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' It wasn't in the form of a prayer; they knew the Lord so well they thought it was simply sufficient to point out the need to the Lord and the Lord would come and deal with it. 'Jesus loved Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus' (see John 11:5). And then it adds, 'So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was' (v. 6). Really?

'We've got the answer to that,' I hear you say. 'We're very good students and we have just learnt that Christ can heal at a distance, so we can see where the story is going! The Lord was some way off when his dear friend was sick but he doesn't need to go because he can heal at a distance, can't he? So he stayed where he was, and presently he'll speak the word and Lazarus, at a distance, will be healed.'

However, some days later he said to the disciples, 'Lazarus is dead.' Dead? And then he added, 'I am glad that I was not there' (v. 15). How can you make sense of that bit? You'd say, 'But Lord, you didn't need to be there—surely you could have saved him at a distance. Why are you glad that you weren't there?'

When Jesus arrived at Bethany over four days later Lazarus' body was already decaying. You'll say, 'Lord, this is very perplexing. Why did you let him die when you could have healed him at a distance? Now you say you are going to raise him again, but why couldn't you have done that at a distance—just spoken the word where you were and Lazarus would have come out of the tomb? You've left it late now, Lord.'

The response

When he came four days later to Bethany, Martha came out to see him. 'Listen, Lord,' she said, 'If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.' Then Mary met him where he was and through her sobs she said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 'Take away the stone,' said our Lord. 'Oh no,' said Martha, 'not now, Lord. If you'd come you could have saved him, but now don't take away the stone.' "By this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead for four days" (v. 39).

Why didn't our Lord heal him at a distance or why didn't he raise him at a distance? And the answer, of course, is that Lazarus' death was no accident. It was to be a great sign, staged for the glory of God—a sign of what? Lazarus died physically and he was raised physically, but his raising again—revivification, if you like—was not the same as the great resurrection will be when the Lord comes. Lazarus eventually went back to the grave, but that limited rising again was a sign of the bigger thing.

Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.' (vv. 24–27)

Why did he not come? The whole thing was staged as an illustration to comfort us; to buttress our faith and to let us know what is the programme for the resurrection. One day the dead in Christ shall rise. Those who believe in him, even though they are dead they shall live, and those who are alive, who are left, until the coming of the Lord will be changed (see 1 Thess 4:13–17; 1 Cor 15:51–52). But observe when and how that shall happen. Our Lord will not remain upon the throne of his glory and just speak a word—not according to the New Testament. 'The Lord *himself* shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God.' He shall come, my brothers and sisters.

Jesus is coming! Sing the glad word!
Coming for those He redeemed by His blood,
Coming to reign as the glorified Lord!
Jesus is coming again!¹

He shall come with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise. That won't happen until he comes, and therefore we need the signs to buttress our hearts in the interval. Many of us have already stood and some will still, perhaps in this coming year, stand by the bed of a loved one who is seriously ill. We shall send our note to the risen Lord, shan't we, like Mary and Martha sent their note? 'Lord, the one you love is ill.' We hope the Lord will intervene, speak the word from a distance and raise them up again for an extra period of life. Suppose he doesn't, my brother, my sister. Suppose he stays away, what shall we say then?

¹ Daniel W. Whittle, 1881.

Believing when there seems to be no hope

I like that other story of our Lord raising a person from the dead that we find in Luke's Gospel chapter 8. Do you remember it? This time it was Jairus's daughter who was desperately ill. He pushed his way through the crowd and came to the Lord Jesus and implored him to come to his house for his daughter was dying. The Lord began to go, but, as he went, there came this woman with her chronic illness and she touched the hem of his garment and was healed. Our Lord stopped and said, 'Someone touched me.' Mark tells us in his Gospel that his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, "Who touched me?"' (5:31). 'No, somebody touched me,' he said. 'Who is it?'

He stopped and I can imagine Jairus's temperature rising. 'But Lord, don't bother, you can come back and be with her. She's been like this for twelve years, why can't she wait? My daughter is on the point of death. Please come, Lord.'

But no: our Lord made the woman come out to the front. 'Now, why did you do this?' he asked—and there she was, telling all her story when servants arrived from Jairus's house to tell him that his daughter was dead. 'Do not trouble the Teacher any more,' they said. Perhaps Jairus was thinking, 'If only that woman hadn't got in the way we could have been at my house.' But then our Lord said, 'Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well' (8:50). Then he went to Jairus's house and at his coming he raised the sleeping child from the dead. Rather marvellous, isn't it?

The hope

You see, the Lord is coming but the dead shall not be raised until he comes. What is more, if he doesn't come for the next seventy years, some of us will be gone, won't we? Will it matter? You say, 'What keeps him?' Well, there's a lot of folks who need to get saved. There are millions that have never heard the gospel. Would you begrudge it to them? And if the Lord keeps busy reaching and saving lost people in our world and he doesn't come and we get ill and die, what does it matter, my brother, my sister? He will surely come in his timescale; he will not tarry.

In the meanwhile, if he allows us to pass by the way of death that's no disaster for, because of his resurrection and his coming again, we have the victory. God gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord and we shall be raised when he comes.

So may the Lord bless us and give us that confidence in him as the Lord of space and time and the course of history, so that we go forward with confidence and peace to the work he gives us to do.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.