

Holy Week 2020: Wednesday

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Introduction

An overall introduction to Holy Week 2020 readings

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. However as we reach Holy Week 2020, we find ourselves in a world which has been radically altered: the Covid19 pandemic and its ongoing consequences have, for many folk – especially those of us in more privileged circumstances – reshaped our daily experiences, reframed our cherished narratives, and redrawn our tried and tested maps for navigating life. It seems wrong then to blithely write as though this were a Holy Week ‘like any other’; and indeed now, more than ever, we need the wisdom embedded in the multi-levelled and richly textured narratives of the Gospels to challenge, comfort and guide us.

One consequence of the restrictions to movement and contact has been to call our attention to things which often go unheeded – such as the physical, mental and emotional spaces we inhabit, or to things that we take for granted such as human touch and interaction; this has in turn given me a different attentive focus when reading these familiar passages. Hence in these reflections I will be looking at the different types of *spaces* – intense, contested, questioning, unsettling, profound and paradoxical, relational, courageous, disrupted, and enlightened – which the various characters occupy, and at how attention to these can help us to deepen our understanding of conflict and our responses to it. Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic, these reflections have nevertheless been influenced by it; you might also choose to use them as a way of reflecting on the particular conflicts which it has exposed or heightened, and of your own responses – of both complicity and resistance – to these, addressing what needs to be amended, celebrated or strengthened. This too seems a very appropriate way of journeying with Christ through Holy Week towards Easter and beyond.

Wednesday: Unsettling Space

The way in which the Holy Week readings are ordered by the Lectionary produces a strange anomaly today. The set passage is the central section of the story of the last supper; however it has been cut adrift from its surroundings and presented as a ‘stand alone’ incident divorced from what precedes and follows it in the narrative (leaving a corresponding ‘hole’ in tomorrow’s passage). So, unless we already know the story, we have no idea what the ‘this’ provoking Jesus’ unease actually is and we are left hanging at the end: what is Judas doing? How will the disciples respond further to his exit? The effect is somewhat discombobulating – but once again this

is very apposite since the passage itself contains a number of deeply unsettling moments

Preparation

If you are able, find a copy of 'The Last Supper' by Jörg Ratgeb, a contemporary of Albrecht Dürer. The painting is in the collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Museum website (<https://www.boijmans.nl/en>) has an image which allows you to zoom in on the details. Spend some time just sitting with the image and noting your responses to it— be those physical, emotional, or intellectual (you might find it useful to jot these down for later).

Text

John 13:21–32

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me."

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.

One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;

Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.

After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

13:28 Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.

Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor.

So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once

Comment

The third of our readings for Holy Week brings us into a somewhat disturbed and disturbing space. The setting is a communal meal – something which Jesus and his disciples must have done on many occasions – and hence a commonplace occurrence which should have felt like a comfortable and familiar space for them. However it is anything but, and instead we are left feeling edgy as we encounter disturbing undercurrents which bring to the surface a strange mix of tension, understanding, incomprehension, action and passivity. In fact the whole story constitutes a deeply unsettling space.

Firstly there is the agitation of Jesus himself: *tarass* conveys a strong sense of being shaken. This is not the first time we have seen Jesus in the grip of *tarassó* – the word occurred in yesterday's passage (Jn 12:27) – and once again it seems to have been inaugurated by something which Jesus himself has just said. In this instance the precipitating thing (missing from today's text) is Jesus' acute awareness (perhaps the culmination of a sense which has been growing in him throughout the meal) that a close and loved companion is about to commit a destructive act.

Whether Jesus is shaken by fear, anger, or even perhaps with sorrow on behalf of, or compassion for, Judas – we simply don't know. What we can say though is that John is not showing us a calm and collected Jesus, protected from life by his divinity, but rather a deeply incarnated person in the grip of strong, complex, and very human emotions.

Then there is the uncertainty of the disciples who manifestly have no idea what Jesus is talking about. Peter the master fisherman, engineers the casting of line but they are then totally unable to get to grips with the fish they land! And so finally to perhaps the most unsettling aspect of all – the disruption and disintegration of Judas. In order to serve his various narrative agendas, John follows his usual course of painting Judas in a uniformly negative and hostile way as one in the grip of the devil. However apart from one mention of the devil by Luke (22:3) the other evangelists are slightly less harsh in their treatment, with Matthew even suggesting that the outcome was not what Judas had intended and that when he saw where his actions had actually led he was overcome with remorse.

Whilst the repentance and redemption of Judas is a theme which has been widely explored in different ways (take a look for example at Laurence Whistler's 'Forgiveness Window' in the Church St Nicholas and St Magnus at Moreton), it is beyond our scope here. However we can at least say that – as for many of us – the motives behind Judas' action were probably complex and may well have caused him some agonising. It's also not too hard to imagine that this is something which Jesus would have been, not just aware of, but also distressed by on Judas' behalf; perhaps this is indeed at least something behind this episode of *tarass*, especially given that Jesus is about to precipitate the moment which decisively pushes Judas to commit to this course of action which will be so destructive for them both.

So then we have a space which is, for a number of reasons, very unsettling both for those within it and for those like ourselves viewing it from outside. But what if anything can we take from this to help us reflect on conflict?

One of things I find most striking here is the contrast between the way in which Jesus and the disciples react to this disturbing space in which they find themselves.

On the back of his turmoil, Jesus proactively sets in train the series of events which will bring about all that is at the root of it – betrayal, suffering, death – albeit as a necessary path to fulfilling that sense of identity and purpose which he affirmed and embraced during the episode of agitation we considered yesterday. He not only recognises and acknowledges his *dis*-ease but also examines and embraces it and its consequences. In stark contrast, the disciples apparently do nothing with their patent unease. In fact they do worse than nothing – turning what appears to be a wilfully blind eye to both the disturbing undercurrents and their ever more overt manifestations. In the end they opt to gloss the departure of Judas with a variety of anodyne narratives. And despite Jesus' explicit comments and actions no one challenges Judas or follows him as he leaves the room.

This might lead us to reflect on the nature of our responses when we find ourselves in the unsettling situations which conflict often brings. Are we willing, like Jesus to face and examine that inner turmoil, in order to learn from it and see where it leads; or are we more likely to follow the disciples and try to muffle it or turn a blind eye to what it appears to be showing us? What are the potential dangers in each approach and might we do to guard against these?

Response

Either

Consider the questions raised in the last paragraph above in relation to a recent situation you have been in. Do they shine a light on anything which might have happened, or offer ideas for how you might respond differently in a future scenario?

OR

Revisit your responses to Ratgeb's painting. Were there things about it which you found disquieting? If so see if you can tease out any of the roots of that and follow where that takes you, noting anything which might be worth further reflection with respect to your own understandings or handling of conflict situations.

Prayer

Jesus
you were not immune
to being disturbed or unsettled,
but you also knew
how to face those sensations
and to collect and steady yourself
so that you could press on with the journey
to which you were committed.
Help us to grow in our capacity
to meet our turmoils
and, like you,
to learn from their uncomfortable embrace
that we too
might be able to ready ourselves
to meet what lies ahead.

Amen.

Season: Passiontide

Themes: Inner Journey