

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

At times, in faith communities, there can be a great unity: a unity in prayer; a unity with others; a unity with self. At other times, we know, there can be a great chasm, a distance, a presence of absence. Sometimes the unity comes during a time of great peace, other times that same unity can be felt even in the midst of tribulation. The same with the presence of absence: sometimes it is there in times of great peace; other times in great absence.

The gospel writers each depict Jesus' response to the circumstances leading up to his arrest, trial, torture and execution differently. Mark makes the presence of absence known. Jesus is, in Mark, venturing into the abyss where God is not.

John, however, has a different approach to this. In the Jesus of John, we hear a voice consoled by the sense of unity he feels with God, even though he faces into an abyss.

There is no one way. I find strange consolation that the gospel writers depict this experience of unity or absence in different ways. Perhaps we are hearing more about the artists behind these gospel texts than we are perceiving the actual experience of Jesus as he goes through these awful trials. Whether you are in a time of plenty in your spirituality, or in the midst of a time of lack, you are in company, especially if you feel alone. As long as there've been gospels — and longer! — there has been the joint experience of the presence, and the presence of the absence.

As you come to this week's text, take a moment to consider how, today, you are experiencing questions of Presence in the practice of your prayer.

Also, as we near Easter, there are some listening and engagement opportunities in the "Further Reading" section below.

Text

John 12:20–33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They

came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Comment

This text comes at a pivotal point in the gospel of John. That gospel can be divided into two main parts:

The Book of Signs (John 1:19–the end of chapter 12)

The Book of Glory (chapter 13 to the end)

The Book of Signs narrates the seven *Signs* that Jesus did in his public ministry. John’s narration of these signs is longer, more character-ful, and more detailed than the other gospels’ depictions. The culminating sign is the raising of Lazarus, after which the plot to kill Jesus takes particular administrative detail.

Throughout the Book of Signs, Jesus is speaking about *the hour*. “My hour has not yet come” he says to his mother at the wedding in Cana (2:4). Speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, he says “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will ...” (4:23). He speaks also about “I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God” (5:25). An earlier attempt at arrest was unsuccessful: “Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come” (7:30) and again, teaching in the treasury, he was not arrested because his hour had not yet come (8:20).

And now, in this lectionary text for this week, in response to hearing that some Greeks are requesting to see him — Greeks symbolising, perhaps, citizens of the wide world — Jesus says:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

In the schema of John, *the hour* is the time when the Son of Man is glorified: by laying down his life for his friends, by going willingly to a place where others would seek to force, by showing a practice of service at the feet of his friends while others would seek to mock him by elevating him naked, tortured and exposed on the cross. As I think of it, the *glory* is less the torture device and more the poise of Jesus to show love, even to the end.

John's telling of this awful saga is one where he portrays a deep picture of Jesus' sense of unity with God. Jesus is aware of what is coming, and a voice comes from heaven. He is troubled, yes, but he does not wish to be saved from the hour. He has glory promised him, and the glory sounds like words of consolation, or thunder, or words for other people. Jesus' mission is being elevated, even to driving out the ruler of the world, and being lifted up — eventually — as a sign to drawing all people to himself.

This way of telling the story is one that puts a high christology into the mouth of Jesus. He is aware of being loved; he is troubled but not undone; he has assurance of the way forward; and he sees glory on the other side of despair. There are times in our lives, when, in the face of difficulties, we have a deep assuredness, and this assuredness keeps us steady.

Were we reading the passion according to, say, Mark, we would hear a different cry: a cry of abandonment, of forsakenness, a lament, an accusation even — Jesus choosing a line from a psalm used as a night prayer and erasing everything in it except the mournful accusation: my god, my god, why have you forsaken me? The Jesus in John will say “Woman, here is your son”; “I am thirsty” and “It is finished” from the cross — focused on a mission to the end: to provide for his mother, to drink the last cup of the passover (which had been omitted from John's account of the meal), and to state that what he had come to accomplish had been accomplished.

There is no right way to narrate this. What I admire is that the gospel tradition narrates both the *presence of the absence* and the *presence of the presence*. We can find so many of our own personal experiences in the space between the tellings of Mark and John. At times in our spiritual life we feel alone, but are not afraid; at other times we are surrounded but are still undone. There is no conflict between these. We move back and forth, sometimes in the presence of consolation, other times in the presence of absence. Both are, it is important to say, important to notice, to see, to describe, to be in, to narrate, to reach out from, to reach out towards.

Response

As you think of your last year, what would you say your experience of the experience of presence or absence has been? When have they oscillated?

Ignatius of Loyola urged his followers to do a review of their prayer at the end of every prayer time they had. When I was going through the spiritual exercises I landed on meteorological metaphors for this practice. Had the prayer been like an overcast day? Or was it a soft twilight? Was I standing at a crashing shore, or trying to swim away from a whirlpool? Was I watching something unfold in the dawn? Or was I wishing it could stay one way and not change?

Whatever language or metaphor you use to describe this, it's a useful exercise, and especially useful to make a small note of it — a line or two, nothing demanding — and then to review this at the end of a week, a month, a season. Noticing how the experience of presence and absence moves throughout your week can give you a sense of wise detachment the next time you feel absent: absent from yourself, your loved ones, your prayer.

Prayer

Mysterious Jesus

what we do not know
is what all this was like for you.
Your friends told stories
and their friends wrote them down.
And we wonder:
were you in the presence of great presence?
or were you in the presence
of an absence.

In all our experiences of presence
and absence,
help us remember the story to which we are called.
A story of love, of generosity,
of justice, of truth.

Knowing that presence will come and go,
but the call to love
never fails.

Amen.

Further Reading

Some opportunities you may enjoy:

Friends, this coming Wednesday, March 17th, is the feast of Saint Patrick. While there are many legends of him, the most extraordinary thing about him is the document – The Confession – that he left behind. [We have a Spirituality of Conflict entry for Saint Patrick's day here if you wish to use it this coming Wednesday.](#)

As mentioned before, the Corrymeela Podcast is offering interviews considering Irishness and Britishness – and, on a deeper level, considering questions of belonging, history, politics, art and religion – for twelve episodes. You can subscribe to The Corrymeela Podcast on [Apple](#), or [Spotify](#), or [listen directly online](#).

For Holy Week, there are some options we'd like to share with you: the Iona Community are inviting people to join them for their Holy Week celebrations. [More details on their website here.](#)

For the Wednesday of Holy Week – 7–9pm on March 31st – some British and Irish theologians are giving an overview of a new book from SCM Press 'When Did We See You Naked?' a justice based theological enquiry into the crucifixion. [You can register for this free event here.](#) A note for anyone interested in this, the event will pay attention to instances of torture and sexual violence both in biblical texts and contemporary news.

Finally, Pádraig Ó Tuama will be giving an online day-retreat with the New York City 'Church of the Heavenly Rest' on March 27th. This is from 10am–12pm; 2pm–4pm (New York City time). On March 27th, those times correspond to 2pm–4pm; 6pm–8pm GMT (*Europe won't yet have entered Daylight Savings Time, hence the four-hour time difference, not five*). [You can register for this Zoom event here.](#)
