

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

19.09.2021
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

Ignatius of Loyola urged his followers to read a gospel text, and to allow the text to pose a question to their lives. He'd ask them to read the passage twice, then close the book, and let the text be present to them in the words and images: the sights, the characters, the events, the voices, the senses, the yearnings, the questions.

This week's gospel text has a question that might be at the heart of our entire Spirituality of Conflict project: *what were you arguing about along the way?*

Throughout this project, we've sought to examine conflict through the lens of the gospel; hoping, by a close reading of a gospel text, to introduce enough perspective — but also enough wisdom — to notice and reflect on how conflict is present in your life, and to accompany the inevitable conflicts with a spiritual practice.

This is a perfect time to let you know that a Spirituality of Conflict publication is on its way too. *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a collection of readings and prayers for Advent, Lent and Easter, edited by our own brilliant Pat Bennett. It will be released by Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent. You can be sure we'll let you know more about it.

Text

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms,

he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Comment

As we’ve reflected over these past few weeks, the tone of the gospel texts during this turn of Mark’s gospel is sombre. Jesus has had a successful and popular ministry in Galilee. But now, as he is turning towards Jerusalem, his tone becomes serious. His *message* alongside his miracles becomes ever more important. He wishes his followers to know more about why he is saying what he’s saying, as well as to understand ever more the complexity of what it means to follow in his path.

This week’s gospel text continues in this tone. Jesus is not a fortune teller, he’s a savvy political thinker. He *knows* — and not because of any holy foresight — that what he’s doing is attracting the kind of attention that will have him killed. He’s from a family bereaved already: his cousin John has died as a result of straight talking. Jesus understands what he has to do, and he has a good idea of what’ll happen. “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him”. Perhaps among the two of these — lack of understanding and fear to ask — it is the second that is most devastating. It is unfortunate not to understand, but it is devastating to fear to seek understanding. Why were they afraid? There could be so many reasons; groups are as complex as a storm system, and fear — as well as the fear of fear — operates on many levels.

Given their reluctance to ask Jesus what he meant by his dire predictions of his life and death and life again, it is no wonder that the next scene involves the disciples arguing amongst themselves. They wish to know who the greatest is, and they argue about this away from Jesus’ presence. But he is aware. Again, I always think it’s best to assume that Jesus had this kind of knowledge because of honed intuition, rather than some divinely ordained eavesdropping technology. It’s never too difficult to know when a group of your friends has been arguing anyway: there’s a tension in the air. You can feel it, you can hear it in the silence when you approach.

The disciples’ silence when he asks them that most penetrating of questions is telling. If group dynamics have many layers, so does shame. Their shame at being known seems almost to echo other shames at being known — and perhaps naked and ashamed — elsewhere in the biblical literatures. What were they arguing about? Who the greatest was. How would they have established a precedent for determining who the greatest was? The one closest to Jesus? The one who seemed to misunderstand him the least? The one with the most power? The one with the biggest sword? The one who seemed least likely to die? Who knows.

What we do know is that there was some kind of standard against which they were measuring themselves.

And Jesus asks them to pay attention to this. Not just to the argument, but to the technology of operations underneath their argument. He’s asking them to step outside their conflict for a little while in order to see some of its mechanics. Jesus sees their mechanics: whether it’s fear or bravado, whether it’s strength or dominance, whether it’s pride or oppression... And in seeing their machinery, he proposes another kind of logic: hospitality. He acquires a child — and I always wonder from whence the child came; mostly I assume it must have been a child of his own — and embraces the child, and speaks of hospitality.

So a certain kind of intervention is being staged: men are arguing about greatness, and when they’re asked to bear witness to their argument, they’re silent and ashamed. Jesus proposes that the architecture of their working through the world

should be hospitality — with all its vulnerability, open-heartedness and risk.

As we propose a practice of a spirituality of conflict, this is our approach, too: to not be afraid of looking at conflict; to know that conflict is a part of daily life; but to rob destructive conflict of its capacity to silence us. And by engaging with conflict on a level of spiritual practice, to find the tools whereby hospitality can become more and more a centre of operations: hospitality towards our own vulnerabilities, our own fears, our own aggression, our own need to dismantle aggression.

Response

Friends, the response for this week's reading is perhaps held at the heart of the reading. As you — in your family, in your workplace, in your congregation — find yourself circling around a conflict, consider using this text as a template for your personal and group reflection.

- How can you come to a place of discussion among each other?
- Who has been left out of the conversation?
- What measure of greatness or victory or dominance has been operational in the conflict?
- What would it mean to understand embodiedness within your conflict?

Jesus placed a small child among them, a child who — in their stature, age and education — would have failed every measure of greatness established by the disciples' argument. He introduces a person into a room of argument, and asks them to look at this person. He disrupts theoretical measurements of greatness by an embodied experience that moves the ideological objectivity of their argument to an in-person subjectivity of discussion.

What would this mean in your experiences of conflict in your congregation, or group, or family?

Prayer

Intervening Jesus
you heard your friends fight
and could see
what they did not wish to see:
their fear, their measurements of power,
their anxiety, their uncertainty.
In all our conflicts,
may we hear your question,
and be guided to the practice
of radical hospitality
even in places where
radical hospitality seems naive.
For what else is the gospel,
but something newly born?
Amen.

Further Reading

The book *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the brilliant theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

It'll be released from Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent.

The ISBN is 978-1-78622-399-9

You'll be able to get it from all good bookshops, or online venues.

If you can order directly from Canterbury Press, or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!