

Tuesday of Holy Week

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Introduction

What do we do when faced with a difficult situation in our life? A time when we have a choice about how to respond, a time when that choice may lead to potentially different outcomes? Do we stay to face the situation and perhaps fight our corner? Do we run away as fast as possible without looking back? In this passage we read as Jesus makes such a choice – a choice that ultimately leads to his death. We read why this was his choice, and how Jesus predicts that, through death, changes would occur within a culture that would that bring much goodness to both Jews and to those who were marginalised within society.

Text

John 12:20–36

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. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Comment

The Gospel passage just before our reading takes us to two extremities in how one man is perceived by those around him. On the one hand, Jesus is the hero of the hour – Lazarus has been raised from the dead (v9), Mary anoints Jesus' feet (v3), and the world is following him (v19). And yet, at the same time, the Pharisees see Jesus as such a threat to their way of life that they plot not only to kill Jesus, but Lazarus too – for it is on his account that many Jews were believing in Jesus (v11). Life can't get more dangerous than knowing there is a death warrant out for you – and Jesus appears to be well aware of his predicament.

Jesus momentarily considers calling for his father to rescue him (v27), a possibility of running to a safe space, before clearly stating that, 'no – it is for this reason that I have come to this hour' (v.27). We sense the inner turmoil of a man who knows what he has to do, with the one that would like this situation to be a million miles away. It is interesting that Jesus doesn't do either of our natural instincts – he hasn't fled, but neither is he fighting for survival. He stays in the turmoil. How and why does he do this?

At the beginning of our passage (v20) we read that some Greeks had sought council with Jesus. We don't know why they were not able to go directly to Jesus, or if Jesus communicated directly with them, or even if they heard the words Jesus spoke. We don't know if they were Gentiles, or Jews living among the Gentiles. Yet this encounter prompted Jesus' next thoughts, 'A single grain must fall to the earth and die, in order for it to bear a lot of fruit – otherwise it stays as a single grain'. In replying to Philip and Andrew, Jesus is reminding himself of his mission – he had come for the salvation of the Jews and the salvation of the Greeks and Gentiles. As he prepares for the turmoil of his death Jesus is stating his mission to both himself and the world. It is his knowing that death will bring much fruit that means Jesus doesn't try to fix, or manipulate, or fight or run away to another province. Jesus knows a new life will come that will bring transformation to many. In this short sentence, Jesus is sharing with us how he manages to stay in this place of inner turmoil – in order for new life to emerge.

Jesus encourages his listeners to take a risk – to lose your life in order to find a new life. He invites the crowd onto the journey, to take the opportunities that come when challenges arise, and to be wise in this journey 'walk while you have the light... believe in the light'. The challenge is that we don't actually know what this new life will look like, what it will feel like, what we will experience until we have journeyed through this space from one life to another. And to enter this space, we must lay down all that is precious to us.

Edith had been happily married to her husband Jim for many years, when the very destructive nature of depression hit the husband. The marriage appeared to be falling apart, the children were struggling, Edith was emotional – and Jim moved out of the family home. During the next few months, each partner went on their own journey – both finding themselves in a liminal place – a place of inbetweenness – for they were not in their old relationship but what was to come had yet to be revealed. Edith met God in her liminal place, and realised that the old life was gone – it was buried and could not be retrieved –she felt God asking her to let go of this life that had been. The liminal place was empty, but for a few visitors – it was barren and dry. And then, by some miracle, life began to grow. Edith and Jim both emerging from their own challenging places – together watering a new shoot that grew from the old. Their relationship was transformed into something new and even more precious than before – with great fruit and blessings to them and to those who shared in their lives. It was risky – neither Edith nor Jim knew what, if anything, would grow when the old life was allowed to die. And yet, this new life only became possible by journeying inwards towards the turmoil and then letting go – for it was in this process of sitting in the turmoil, of letting the past fall to the ground and be buried, that new and enriched lives emerged.

Jesus is describing what will happen after his death – a hard message to understand and accept for those who were expecting a Warrior King – a King who was expected to rescue the Jewish nation. The idea of a seed dying and then bearing fruit in new life is one of hope. A journey of death and transformation.

Response

How many of us, when faced with a very difficult situation of conflict – stay and fight the situation, and how many of us try to run away – as fast as we can to our ‘safe space’. How easy is it to stay and ‘be’ in this difficult place? How do we make the decision about what to do? Do we just react in the moment? Do we seek refuge before moving towards the conflict? Do we seek the bigger picture? Do we ‘sit’ in the turmoil? What journey do we choose to make and how do we make that choice?

You are invited to find a space to sit in that is free from distraction, with some paper and coloured pencils. Consider for a moment what is most precious in your life – and write or draw images to represent these.

Now consider which of these precious areas of your life draw you closer to who you truly are before God. Mark these in a different coloured pencil.

Which are these precious areas of your life have the potential to be a barrier between yourself and God? Mark these in a different coloured pencil.

In the quiet and solitude, allow God to speak to you. What is God saying about what is precious in your life? What is God saying about losing your life in order to save it?

Prayer

When we are in deep pain and life has taken a fall
Let us know You are near
When we struggle to get out of bed and face the world
Let us feel You close by
When all around us the world is carrying on – as though all is well
Let us be immersed in Your love
When we are unable to love ourselves, let alone those who are close to us
Let Your arms wrap around us and hold us tight

And when we emerge from our time of turmoil
When we have wrestled and rested in our liminal space and found You
When we have crossed to a place that we never dreamt of
Let the seed that was buried for so long rise up and bear fruit
Let the fruit of that seed be a blessing
to those who journeyed with us in our turmoil
to those who are in pain and despair
to those who we meet each day
to the stranger we only meet once

May the peace we find be infectious
May the peace we find be passed on to others
May the peace we inhibit be always found in You

As we live in the joy of Your everlasting love.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger