

Wednesday of Holy Week

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Introduction

Our passage falls at an interesting time in the reading of John's gospel.

Immediately before our reading, Jesus takes the role of a servant to his disciples in the act of washing the disciples' feet. Immediately after our reading Jesus becoming an authority figure – telling his disciples what they must do – love one another. In between we see an apprehensive Jesus foretelling his own betrayal.

This passage captures Jesus troubled in spirit, the disciples mis-understanding and misreading the situation, a contradiction, issues of power and powerlessness, bystanders and the use of a sign and another reference to light and darkness.

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.” 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

Picture a table around which Jesus and his disciples are gathered – a low table with seating on the floor. On the table are remnants of a shared meal – most likely the Passover feast telling of the escape from Egypt. We read only of a space for men (who prepared the meal and where are the women – close by or excluded by the cultural traditions of the religion and times?) John is full, relaxed and is reclining after the meal. Jesus, in contrast, is anxious and troubled. Sat next to John he is trying to savour this one last taste of normality amongst close friends before the

torture, pain and humiliation that is to come – he is not relaxed or reclining. Jesus' spirit is in turmoil. Unable to keep his feelings to himself any longer, Jesus says 'I tell you, one of you will betray me' (v21). Jesus has already hinted at this, saying to Simon Peter, 'And you are clean, though not all of you' (v 10). Did the disciples not pick this up? The two comments play on Simon Peter's mind and he finally motions to John to find out more and he asks Jesus, 'Lord, who is it?' (v 25?).

The disciples do not understand what Jesus is really getting at. Jesus has given them a riddle, and they need to see the picture through a different lens to begin to understand. They don't do this, and assume that Judas is going out to do a job he is assigned to do on behalf of this group of friends. Did Simon Peter not wonder how Judas was going to betray Jesus, or why? Or did he assume he had misunderstood and that no betrayal was going to take place – after all, they had been a close group for three years now. How often do we fall into this trap of making wrong assumptions? We see life through the lens of our experiences, our expectations and our hopes. Peter looked at Judas and heard the words of Jesus through his own experiences and expectations. He didn't consider the real reason why Judas was leaving the room – even though Jesus had just spelt out what was to happen.

Jesus' reaction to the disciples' assumptions, as recorded in John's gospel, is in sharp contrast to an earlier interaction with Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a teacher of the law, seeks to find out how to enter the Kingdom of God. He is effectively told off by Jesus for not understanding, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' (John 3:10) – and yet how could he? For the Spirit of God had yet to be accessible to all. Yet Jesus does not reprimand the disciples for their lack of understanding, and neither does he correct their wrong assumptions. It would appear to be a contradiction in how Jesus reacts to his own group of disciples, and that of a Pharisee. And while Jesus was troubled in spirit – the spirit of God was yet to fall on the disciples.

Simon Peter made a choice in finding out who would betray Jesus. He then made a choice in how to respond to the reply – he chose to be a bystander. Rather than continue to ask more questions and find out Judas' intentions, he appears to have done nothing. The term 'Bystander Effect' was popularised in the 1960s when a group of people observed a murder in New York City but did not step in to assist or call the police. Latane and Darley 'attributed the bystander effect to the perceived diffusion of responsibility (onlookers are more likely to intervene if there are few or no other witnesses) and social influence (individuals in a group monitor the behaviour of those around them to determine how to act).'* Was the fact that Peter was in a group, and that no-one else asked any questions of Jesus, critical in this lack of further action from Peter? It would appear that Peter felt powerless to act further – through lack of understanding and making assumptions, and in being part of a larger group whose behaviour didn't reinforce or back up his initial question. From our reading it would appear that not one of the disciples try to stop Judas from leaving their company that evening. Peter had not felt able to directly ask Jesus who would betray him, and now feels powerless to ask more questions before Judas leaves.

Judas leaves the room on Jesus' command – after receiving bread that Jesus had dipped in the dish – an act reserved for deep friendship and in the light of what is to happen, a contradiction in the use of this act. We read it was night and presumably therefore dark. It is a theme we see throughout John's writing – the contrast between light and dark. Did John say it was night because of the spiritual turmoil that Jesus was feeling? Yet darkness only exists because of light, and light because of darkness – the inter-dependence of this metaphor must not be lost – for the whole of this passage is one of inter-dependence. Indeed, the utter darkness and rejection that Jesus feels just a few hours later is inter-dependent on the magnificent resurrection and glorification of the Son of God that is to come just a few days later.

*<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bystander-effect> accessed on 11th April 2017.

Response

From a CMS mission partner who lived in South Sudan for 8 years before war broke out again:

'It took me a long time to accept I was not going back to live in South Sudan again. Soon after returning to England the war erupted once again fiercely in Juba, the capital, and soon spread to my town, which had largely been peaceful. It was so hard, I saw pictures on Facebook of fighting, of a friend under a table in his house whilst all hell let loose around him outside. I had friends stuck for weeks in the bush between the 2 warring parties, some were abducted for a day, only through a miracle did all 4 of them return alive. Stories of refugees flooding to Uganda, I came to the realisation I may never see some friends again. What could I do? I sent out regular emails for prayer, I sent some money, and some of my churches and friends raised more money to send, to help people get to Uganda for safety. Other than that I could do nothing, except listen to my friends, their fears for themselves, for their country, which, only a few years before we had all had such huge hopes for at Independence.'

We can all be in situations of feeling helpless, a sense of having no power to act to change a situation. A time when all we can do is to be in the mess of life, to sit with one another and journey through the ugly. The gospel reading is right at the beginning of this most difficult and painful time for Jesus and his friends and family. The Gospel of John invites us to journey through the darkness until one day the light breaks through once again. This time with the wounds and deep perforations changing how the light is reflected from us and back into the world.

Prayer

God of the trouble heart
You call us to journey in the dark places of life
You call us to journey in the hard places of life
You call us to journey with those who struggle
You call us to sit in the mess of life, unable to put things right

In these times God,
May our thoughts be a prayer to you
May our words be of hope and understanding
May our actions be a response to your love for us
May our very being bring light to those who are in darkness

Amen.