Proper 28

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Introduction

Today's Gospel reading heralds an abrupt and unsettling shift of key in Luke's narrative. Jesus' reflection on the widow's gift segues into a long apocalyptic discourse filling the remainder of the chapter in which he foretells not just the destruction of the Temple, but also of Jerusalem itself (though today's passage stops just short of this section). By the time Luke's Gospel was written, these two cataclysmic events had already occurred – so what if anything, can we take from this passage today, and how might it inform our reflections on the dynamics of conflict and our responses to it?

Preparation
Choose a situation of conflict currently going on in your country or the wider world – you might want to consider BREXIT, or a long–standing territorial dispute, or a situation involving migrants etc. – and explore some of the narratives associated with it. Try and collect a number written from different perspectives – for example from a variety of newspapers or online material – and then look at the language and imagery used in them. What sorts of things do these reference and where do they come from? Are there different types of language and image within any one account? Are there differences or similarities in the language and imagery used by accounts written from different perspectives or starting premises?

Text

Luke 21:5–19

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said,

"As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"

And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name

and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.”

Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom;

there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.

This will give you an opportunity to testify.

So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance;

for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death.

You will be hated by all because of my name.

But not a hair of your head will perish.

By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Comment

There is a temptation (and indeed it is a well–established practice) to read apocalyptic passages in the New Testament as though they have no relation to the context and times in which they were written and delivered but are always, and in their totality, referencing an eschatology beyond this – ‘the end of the world’ taken in a very concrete way. This can then bring assorted problems in its wake. especially if such readings are taken as normative for the attitudes and actions which should govern and shape Christian understanding and praxis.

However such passages are invariably made up of a complex mix of cultural and religious motifs and narratives – not all of which can be freely or literally transferred to frame other scenarios. They may also refer to events which have already occurred but which have been retrojected into the text in various ways (for

example by inclusion in reported speech) thus appearing instead as anticipatory. In today's Gospel passage, and indeed through the rest of chapter 19, there are four separate thought strands which, while they are interrelated, come from different roots (two Jewish and two Christian) and encode distinctly different things. Thus from Jewish tradition comes the idea of 'the day of the Lord', which was a basic element of Jewish religious thought at the time of Jesus. Here time was seen as falling into into two distinct ages: 'the present age' – in which their existence was located, and 'the age to come' – which would be the golden age of the reign of God. Since the former was evil in ways which were ultimately resistant to remedy, the latter could only come into being through a cataclysmic birth process – 'the day of the Lord' – marked by convulsions in the cosmos itself, and which would be attended by terror and destruction (see for example Is 13:10–13; Joel 2:2, 30–31). Lk 21:9 & 11 (and later 25–26) draw their imagery from this tradition.

However in Lk 19 this imagery then becomes inextricably linked with a different strand of the narrative – the corresponding idea from the Christian tradition of the *parousia* – the return of Jesus – something which the church in Luke's day was eagerly awaiting. Whilst there are some elements which belong specifically to the Christian thought world – for example the idea in v.8 that there would be multiple false claimants to the mantle of Christ – many of the New Testament passages referring to the return of Christ have imagery transferred from the older (but differently rooted and derived) day of the Lord tradition.

Then, from Jewish history comes the narrative of the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem (v. 6; and –from outside today's passage vv. 20–24). There are differences of opinion as to the dating of Luke's Gospel, but whilst some scholars place this around 59–63 CE, many hold to a later date of somewhere in the 70–90s CE (with a minority going for the late 90s to mid 2nd Century). Hence it is very likely that it postdates the catastrophic events of 70 CE, and thus the overthrow of the Temple of which Jesus speaks is not so much a prediction of something to come, as an event which has already happened and whose pain is keenly felt by some at least of Luke's readers. Similarly Luke's narrative is being written after the beginnings of Nero's great persecution of the Christians (which began in 64 CE after the great fire in Rome) – so once again events already underway are being referenced in a reported speech (recall that Luke is not a direct eyewitness) which predates them. And again there is a blending of this narrative with imagery drawn from the 'day of the Lord' tradition and also now with direct teachings about the role of the Holy Spirit in preparing them, and the presence of Jesus with them in these persecutions.

Of course, as with all scripture, these particularities do not mean that the passage can only speak to the specific situation for which it was written! There is much here from which we too can learn, by which we can be challenged, and from which we can draw comfort. Amongst this there may well be things which will resonate with us in the context of thinking about conflict and our response to it. However as we come towards the end of this three year journey through the lectionary cycle, I want to return to something which has been a recurrent thread through our reflections and an important element in the shape of the spirituality of conflict which has been gradually emerging from these. That thing is the importance of understanding as fully as possible the narratives which are used to frame and articulate conflicts. What we have in the apparently straightforward speech in today's Gospel reading is actually something which is an assortment of reportage, referencing, complex ideas, and specific images all woven together. Understanding these different strands, their roots, reference points, imagery, and language, helps us to a clearer understanding of the passage and the messages it is attempting to convey to its readers. In the same way we need to work at clarifying and expanding our understanding of the different constituent elements which make up the complex narratives of conflict and how these overlap or synergise each other. The more we understand about the material and mechanics of the narratives, the better our chances of reading a conflict situation correctly and responding appropriately.

Response

Think this time of a situation of conflict in which you are (or have been) directly involved. Spend some time looking at and reflecting on how that conflict has been framed by the different individuals or groups involved – noting in particular if there are distinctive elements to these and, if so, what their roots are. Has this helped you see any aspects of the conflict situation in a different light? How can you more consciously attend to the different elements of these narrative frameworks and underpinnings in future?

Prayer

Holy Spirit
Give us a discerning eye
and an enquiring mind
that we may better understand
the stories by which our lives are shaped;

Give us a brave heart
and gentle hands
that we may better shape the stories
through which our lives will be understood.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills