

Fifth Sunday of Lent

29.03.2020
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

We speak about conflicts within ourselves, and also conflicts between individuals and communities. However, it is also true to recognise that conflict can be part of the human condition. Conflict can be the source of art and ache. Conflict can be the source of change and human transformation. It can be what calls us into our deepest yearning and our greatest endeavour.

The text for this week, from the gospel of John (and towards the end of what theologians call John's first 12 chapters "The Book of Signs") brings us great themes of humanity: misunderstanding; grief; death; emotion; change; risk.

One can approach this particular text as part of the Christological depiction of Jesus of Nazareth through the writings of the fourth gospel. One can also approach it, as we will do in this reflection, as a narrative that gathers in some of the existential crises of being human. How are we when we are in pain? How can we understand our selves and each other? We so often misunderstand each other and are unsure what to do. In our bodies, we are sites of great desire and emotion. The Jesus of John's gospel, it is true, arrives on the scene a fully developed person, conscious and confident of his mission and identity as the Son of God. However, the Jesus of John is also depicted as a man of emotion, a man who loved his friends, and upon whom his friends depended and called, as Mary and Martha do when their brother Lazarus is on the brink of death.

Text

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Comment

One of the themes in John's gospel is that of misunderstanding. We see it from the first miracle – the miracle of wine at the wedding of Cana. The servants have brought the pitchers of water, and served it, and it is fine wine and the understanding is that the host of the wedding has broken convention and served fine wine later rather than earlier. One of the techniques of the writer is to present

events happening that have multiple interpretations – the immediate and the underneath. While many of the characters respond to the immediate interpretation, the invitation to the reader is to perceive and respond to the deeper meaning.

The theme of misunderstanding can be seen in Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, who asks "How can I be born again?" and the engaging dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman who, when in conversation about water of life, says "Sir, you have no bucket". This literary technique of misunderstanding continues and, in a certain sense reaches a culmination, in the story of Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the eleventh chapter.

It is in this chapter, with its many layers of misunderstanding, that the reader feels like they are one of the characters in the text. Why did Jesus delay? Why did he go into hostile territory? Why the protracted conversation with Martha, herself in the grip of grief? Why did he weep at the grave? The onlookers in the text have one interpretation of Jesus' tears and readers have produced many more over centuries. And perhaps one of the greatest curiosities of the text is about Lazarus. What happened to him after he had the graveclothes? How did he live again and how did he die again? How did the siblings of Bethany understand this strange miracle and the tears of their friend Jesus?

In John's gospel, a link can be established between a "sign" and the ensuing discussion about the significance of that sign, followed then by a discourse about Jesus' identity and purpose. This can be seen in how Jesus as the 'bread of life' (6:35, 41, 48, 51) Jesus as the 'light of the world' (8:12) and the 'good shepherd' (10:7,9) and finally Jesus as 'life' (11:25) is the perplexing identity story that leads to discussions and misunderstandings and irony and perceptions in the chapters that follow each of these phrases. However these stories also demonstrate the conflict and complexity of understanding what it meant to follow Jesus in the settings of the day, and can highlight a story of faith that feels very appropriate for readers today.

It can be difficult to know how to pray, and it can be difficult to know what to do when prayers as sincere as the ones of Mary and Martha go unanswered. It can be hard to know what it is that moves God, even when we are moved in our own circumstances or prayer.

In Mary and Martha, in Lazarus and the disciples, we find companions on the road where friendship with Jesus is accompanied by bewilderment. What did he mean? How did he make his decisions? How do we follow? How do we understand? How do we make sense of what he does? And how do we continue in the midst of misunderstanding? In John's gospel we see that while the reader is invited to perceive the deeper meaning of Jesus' glory and identity. However, we also see that in John's gospel Jesus has friends, he cleans their feet, he visits their homes, and he says "Greater love has no one than to give their life for their friends". The project of perception is accompanied by the faithfulness of friendship.

In our own prayer, with its bewilderments and conflicts, benefits and constraints, we may recognise that true understanding is a goal that evades us. However, understanding is only one outcome. Friendship, faithfulness, accompaniment, solidarity and shared stories of life – however bewildering – is another set of outcomes that are possible, no matter how evasive deep meanings are in the unpredictable circumstances of life.

Pray, in whatever way and by whatever means makes sense for you. Pray for understanding; for consolation; for patience; for courage, for yourself and for others.

Prayer

God of all time, We ask, we weep, we wait, we die, we hope, we live, we carry on, we pick ourselves up, we try to understand, we misunderstand, we learn, we ask again, we wait for understanding.

In all of these, may prayer be a companion, not a torment.
May we find in prayer the consolation that sustains us through all things,
Knowing that some things change,
and some things remain the same.

Amen.