

Holy Week 2020: Monday

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By Pat Bennett

Introduction

An overall introduction to the Holy Week 2020 Readings

One of our general principles in producing the weekly reflections for the Spirituality of Conflict project has been to avoid tying these too tightly to events current at the time of writing. However as we reach Holy Week 2020, we find ourselves in a world which has been radically altered: the Covid19 pandemic and its ongoing consequences have, for many folk – especially those of us in more privileged circumstances – reshaped our daily experiences, reframed our cherished narratives, and redrawn our tried and tested maps for navigating life. It seems wrong then to blithely write as though this were a Holy Week 'like any other'; and indeed now, more than ever, we need the wisdom embedded in the multi-levelled and richly textured narratives of the Gospels to challenge, comfort and guide us.

One consequence of the restrictions to movement and contact has been to call our attention to things which often go unheeded – such as the physical, mental and emotional spaces we inhabit, or to things that we take for granted such as human touch and interaction; this has in turn given me a different attentive focus when reading these familiar passages. Hence in these reflections I will be looking at the different types of *spaces* – intense, contested, questioning, unsettling, profound and paradoxical, relational, courageous, disrupted, and enlightened – which the various characters occupy, and at how attention to these can help us to deepen our understanding of conflict and our responses to it. Thus whilst not referring directly to the pandemic, these reflections have nevertheless been influenced by it; you might also choose to use them as a way of reflecting on the particular conflicts which it has exposed or heightened, and of your own responses – of both complicity and resistance – to these, addressing what needs to be amended, celebrated or strengthened. This too seems a very appropriate way of journeying with Christ through Holy Week towards Easter and beyond.

Monday: Intense Space and Contested Space

This first reading for Holy Week brings us to one of the most well known and best loved of the Passion vignettes – Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. This story with its dramatic and evocative detail has at its heart two very different spaces which overlap with one another.

Preparation

Read through verse 3 and verse 5 several times and then try and capture the essence of each of them in one of the following ways:

- use the word 'perfume' to make an acrostic describing Mary's actions/attitudes and then do the same for Judas
- write a cinquain for each verse. This is a five-line poem with the structure noun/two adjectives/ three verbs/two adverbs/noun
- make a collage representing each verse using pictures and/or textured materials

Text

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well,

since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

The most obvious space here is the one occupied by Jesus and Mary which is created by her actions and his acceptance of them. There have been various different ways of reading this: as an act of prophetic witness foreshadowing Jesus' death or proclaiming his Kingship; as an embarrassing incident which is at best immodest and at worst uncomfortably close to erotic; as a beautiful and intimate act of love and devotion; even as primarily something which Jesus does for Mary – accepting an action which implicitly elevates her above the disciples and even John the Baptist (who held himself 'not worthy to untie the thong of [Jesus'] sandal').

However what I want to focus on here is not the quantitative meaning of the moment but its qualitative feel. Whatever Mary's motives were (something which – in contrast to his treatment of Judas – John does not specify) the thing which is absolutely clear is the intense quality which is the hallmark of this intimate space. The Evangelist conveys this through the adjectives he uses – 'costly', 'pure' – and by the details of Mary's actions which he chooses to describe. This is not some neutral act of ritual hospitality, it is profoundly, intimately, emotionally connective. Inevitably then, there is an overflow – no one is unaffected by the intensity of the moment – and intensity can be a two edged sword, beautiful and dangerous! Just as the fragrance of Mary's nard penetrates every corner of the house, so the effects of her act also spread far beyond the two people caught up in it.

And one of those ripple-out effects reveals a different space within the story, one which this time also includes Judas. The hallmark of this space is a tension of a different kind, and it is shaped not by an action but by the antagonism of a contested narrative. Once again there are various different ways of reading elements of this – particularly the enigmatic comments about the poor with which Jesus follows up his reproof of Judas. However the key thing I want to attend to here is the way in which this moment which we have just witnessed is read in very different ways by those present.

Essentially what John's economical retelling shows us is that the intentions and actions at the centre of the story are interpreted and used in very different ways and with correspondingly different consequences by different characters within it. For Mary and, it seems, for Jesus, the act of anointing is both beautiful and deeply appropriate; for Judas (and perhaps the other disciples) it is wasteful and woefully misplaced: on the one hand it is an action which brings *sh' lôm*, on the other an action which implicitly causes its disruption by denying aid to those in need. In fact we could also say that John himself uses the incident to service two contradictory narratives – one to do with the identity of Jesus and one with establishing (for whatever reason) a certain character for Judas which will allow him to be eventually consigned to the eternal torment of Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell.

So this first station on our Holy Week journey presents us with two things to reflect on with respect to conflict. Firstly that any situation which is highly charged – for whatever reason – will, like a stone dropped into a pool, set off a wave packet which spreads out far beyond the central point. We might want therefore to reflect on our own responses in situations of conflict and on the extent to which we are willing or able to regulate these to avoid amplifying or widening potential fallout. Are there tools or techniques we can learn which will help us to be more aware of our own emotions and of when and how we might need to 'put a damper' on them?

Secondly – there is very rarely a simple narrative or a single set of understandings around any situation, particularly ones which involve conflict. What seems to us to be an obvious reading of a situation or delineation of its consequences, may appear very differently to another person directly involved or looking on. How then can we develop our awareness of what shapes our own readings of a particular conflict situation and critically examine these? How can we be more ready to hear and receive the narrative of the Other and give to that also a properly critical, rather

than simply prejudiced, attention?

Response

Either

Go back to whichever task you did in preparation and revisit the different 'situation captures' you made for Mary and for Judas. Reflect on what prompted you to read the situation and respond in the way that you did. Is there anything here which you can take to help you reflect on a conflict situation (great or small, public or private) that you are currently involved in?

Or

Reflect on an intense situation you've been involved in. Were there ways in which your own responses had consequences beyond yourself or the immediate situation? With hindsight, is there anything you might have done differently in regulating those responses? Are there practices you could adopt which might help you if a similar situation arises?

Prayer

Jesus, the anointed one,
You were no stranger
to strong emotions
in yourself or others,
nor to the consequences
which sometimes
come in their train.

Help us to learn the discipline
of holding our emotions in check
when that is necessary,
and the freedom
to give them expression
when that is what is needed
for the health and comfort
of others and ourselves.

Amen