

Holy Week 2020: Tuesday

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Introduction

An overall introduction to 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, disputed, 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.

Tuesday: Questioning Space

Today's passage holds some well known and well-loved verses but overall can be somewhat perplexing, especially when read without its surrounding context. This feeling though is very apposite: the passage is punctuated by a number of questions but, as is so often the case, answers don't necessarily arrive; and even when they do, they don't always make things clearer!

Preparation

Read through the story and identify any questions which are raised in it. For each one try and summarise, as succinctly as possible, what the question is about and the answer which is given (or not!) Finally give a one or two word description of

how the answer is received or the effect it has.

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 honor.

“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

There are three distinct ‘questioning spaces’ in this passage, each one a little different and thus with a different lens to offer us as we reflect on the dynamics of conflict and our responses to it.

The first of these comes right at the head of the passage, though technically the question is couched in the form of a request: “Sir” say the ‘Greeks’ “we wish to see Jesus”. However this request clearly holds some implicit questions: ‘How do we get to do that?’ ‘Can you arrange it for us?’ We never learn if they actually achieve their wish – instead we see Philip going to consult Andrew and the pair of them then approaching Jesus, who makes a response which mixes the cryptic, the poetic, and the challenging in equal measure, but the Greek inquirers themselves are no more seen or heard from. We don’t know why they made their request – perhaps they had heard about the raising of Lazarus or had seen and been intrigued or mystified by Jesus’ manner of entering Jerusalem – but it seems reasonable to suppose that what they actually want to do is to learn or understand a little more about who this person actually is.

Jesus begins his response to the disciples by alluding to his forthcoming ‘glorification’ – a theme which is echoed and amplified by the thunderous voice from heaven in verse 28. In John’s Gospel, the language of glory plays a key role in the way in which God and his purposes are made known through the actions of Jesus, and in how the true identity of Jesus himself is gradually revealed (for further on this and its relevance to conflict see the reflection for [Easter 7 in Cycle 1, year A](#)). What then follows in the next ten verses, whilst somewhat elliptical in places, is part of this unfolding of identity and purpose. So we might say that Jesus does indeed answer their enquiry – not by responding to the overt request, but by attending to the deeper questions/intentions which lie beneath its surface (as indeed can be the implication of *apokrinomai* – the word used here for answered).

In the middle of this answer though, we encounter our second ‘questioning space’: suddenly Jesus breaks off and turns aside to ask a question *of himself*. It is almost as though he suddenly ‘hears’ what it is he is saying to those nearby and this provokes an inward tremor – ‘Now my soul is troubled’ and an internal debate. We cannot know what is going on in his mind at this moment but it feels almost as though he is reaching for a touchstone – perhaps something forged through his own journey – to steady his own sense of identity and purpose. Jesus then himself asks a question couched as a request and a voice from heaven responds as though (despite the subsequent comment in v30) to reinforce the answer which Jesus’ has already given himself to his earlier question.

The moment – though profound – passes quickly in John’s account and Jesus returns to his explanatory answer, which leads us to our final space shaped by questions. Not only do those listening apparently fail to recognise the voice from

heaven for what it is, but Jesus' subsequent comments merely produce a very disconcerting disjunction for them between the image of 'The Son of Man' they would have been familiar with from the writings of Daniel and Enoch and the one Jesus presents to them through his talk of loss and death. In their subsequent questions 'How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?' we can hear the jarring discord of an overturned world view. Jesus' response is not to provide a direct answer to these questions but to invite them to move forward guided not by concrete answers but by something less tangible – a light which will, if they let it, allow them to begin to see, understand, and become part of, the different patterns of God's Kingdom.

Questions are an intrinsic element of any conflict situation – but questions come in many different guises and serve many different purposes. Today's story presents us with just three of many possibilities to use as a lens when we think about conflict:

Firstly questions may not always be what they appear on the surface – and likewise answers may in fact be addressing what is hidden, or what the answerer *believes* to be hidden within them. Do we take the time to think about questions before we plunge into answering them? Do we routinely have a critical check on the assumptions we make which may drive our answers? And, from the other side of the coin, do we take time to consider what may lie behind answers we are given, rather than going with our immediate response (which can often be very emotion driven)?

Secondly – and not unrelated to the above – we need to take time to ask *ourselves* questions – particularly ones about our own sense of identity or about the narratives by which we orientate our courses of action. In our Spirituality of Conflict reflections, we have often touched on the issue of the 'blind spots' which we all have and of the value of sometimes exploring these areas with the help of a trained listener or a trusted friend.

Finally, are we too dependent on having watertight answers, or fully developed understandings about situations before we can allow ourselves to move forward? What skills can we develop to help us manage uncertainty or cognitive dissonance, or to better read situations when we don't have all the information we'd like?

Response

Think about a conflict situation in which you are currently or have recently been involved – perhaps something related to present circumstances. What questions has it given rise to, either from you or others? Use the examples from today's passage to help you examine these. Does this help you to see the questions or responses in a different light? Is there anything from this exercise which can help you move forward in this situation, or be better prepared to meet it should it arise again?

Prayer

Jesus
the asker of deep questions
and the giver of sometimes
inscrutable
or uncomfortable
answers;
help us to grow in our capacity
to ask the right questions,
and our ability to live patiently
and persistently

with the difficult answers.

Amen

Season: Passiontide

Themes: Inner Journey