

Holy Week 2020: Maundy Thursday

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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, 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.

Thursday: Profound Paradoxical Space

The set text today gives us the familiar, rich, and well-loved story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (minus the disturbing episode we looked at yesterday) and much has been written about all the nuances and layers of meaning behind this action which are encoded in the text. There is however something else very striking about this story when set against the whole spread of John's passion narrative, something which gives us the opportunity to see and consider the most important inhabited space in it, and indeed in the entirety of the Gospel narratives, that of Jesus in his own body.

Preparation

Those of us of a certain age and who were brought up with 'imperial' measurements will be familiar with the adage that 'you can't get a quart into a pint pot!' For those more familiar with metric measurement a pint is 0.568 litres and a quart is 1.136 litres – and hence the meaning is pretty clear. For today's preparation

Either

Find a small box (e.g. a shoe box) and a large piece of material (e.g. a sheet or a bath towel) and explore the sensation of trying to pack something into a container which is too small for it.

Or

Find some Christmas carols (or hymns) which contain imagery contrasting Christ's position or experience in heaven with his experience as a baby (e.g. 'Lo! within a manger lies, he who built the starry skies) and spend some time exploring those contrasts in whatever way you like.

Text

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,

got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will

understand.”

Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”

For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?”

You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

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.

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Comment

One of the things which is striking about this text is the attention John gives to the physicality of Jesus. John's Passion narrative is not without physical description – but generally when he mentions action, he is talking about things done *to* Jesus (for example the anointing with which the Passion story begins and ends), or by others (eg. Simon Peter warming himself at the fire). There is none of the descriptive detail of physical suffering which we find for example in Luke. In John's Passion – the longest one of all the Gospels – Jesus is someone who primarily *speaks* and most of the text is a reporting of these words.

But here, right at the central point of the passion story, John suddenly switches to giving a detailed account of Jesus' actual actions: he gets up and leaves the table; he removes a garment and ties a towel round himself; he takes a basin and pours water; he kneels down (by implication); he washes and dries feet, moving (by implication) round the table as he does so; finally he puts on his robe again and returns to sit at the table. Until he reaches Peter there is no reported speech – meaning is signalled by John simply through the physical actions of Jesus.

I want to suggest that this direction of our gaze towards Jesus' bodily presence, also presents us with an invitation to consider the Incarnation as this is experienced *by Jesus himself*. Indeed we might understand that in this incident he is giving to the disciples and ourselves, not just a theological concept to take on board or an example to follow, but a microcosmic intimation of his own experience of taking on flesh, with all its constrictions and restrictions.

In this sense I think the Incarnation represents, at one level, the most constricted space imaginable for the one experiencing it. It 'begins in a womb and ends in a tomb' – the two most confined places any of us ever inhabit. And in between these small beginning and end points, all the vigorous, expansive, uncontainable essence of God elects to be delimited by the spatial and temporal constraints of human flesh. It seems impossible to even begin to imagine what this must have felt like. But even as Jesus presents us with the ultimate example of what it is to have one's space restricted, he also shows us that this neither defines nor limits the possibilities for living, loving, and acting in expansive, generous, sacrificial, joyful, and creative ways. Neither does it preclude us making space for others *within* our spaces, even when those spaces may seem impossibly small (something I will return to tomorrow).

Twice now in the Passion readings, we have seen Jesus shaken with agitation – he knows that suffering and death probably cannot be avoided; he realises that agency is about to be taken away from him. And yet he continues to serve and support his disciples; to give them (albeit they won't yet recognise these) tools for surviving and flourishing without him; to leave them a map and compass for the onward journey; to point them towards sources of consolation and they can turn to in what is to follow: 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.' (Jn 13:1) Paradoxically the space which Jesus inhabits in his earthly life is both the most restricted and the most expansive one imaginable: the quart not only fits completely into the pint pot but also cannot be contained or defined by it and so endlessly overflows it!

Often conflict situations will, either in reality or in our perception, seem to limit the spaces – physical, emotional or intellectual – within which we can operate. The incarnate life of Jesus constantly presented to us through the three year lectionary cycle shows us that there are always possibilities for creative thinking and action – even within the most seemingly restricted spaces. How then can we find ways of discovering unseen or unrecognised possibilities at those moments when we feel that the degrees of freedom within which we can operate have been curtailed? Are

there questions which we can routinely ask ourselves, or techniques which we can employ to enable us to loosen up thought or action when we feel that we have reached the limits of our understanding or capability – especially in the context of conflict scenarios?

Response

Either

Revisit a reflection from the Spirituality of Conflict series (or simply a Gospel story involving Jesus) which you have found either particularly inspiring or challenging for your own understandings/practice with respect to conflict, and spend some further time with it. Are there different things which strike you in this return visit?

or

Find two jugs or other containers of very different sizes and fill the larger with water. Pour it out into the smaller, observing and relishing the sensations associated with overflow – and let this simple action lead you into prayer, following wherever the Spirit takes you.

Prayer

Jesus
our – oh so human – brother
you above all
knew what it was
to be confined to a small space;
and you, above all
showed how a small space,
faithfully inhabited
is unable to limit
either love or life.
Help us to learn
how to inhabit our own smallnesses –
whatever they may look like –
in ways which are
rich, generous, and expansive
as befits the life of your Kingdom.

Amen.

