

Holy Week 2020: Holy Saturday

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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.

Holy Saturday: Courageous Space

Today's reading brings us into contact with two men – one who only appears in the Passion Narratives and one whom we know has previously had a significant encounter with Jesus. It seems that they were both on a similar journey, though possibly at different stages. Whatever the precise truth of that, we know enough from what John says here to understand that the actions they undertake in this vignette are not without risk to their social and religious reputations and positions.

Preparation

We often use the words courage and bravery interchangeably. How would you define each word and is there a difference between them? If there is, does it matter, and if so, then why? Explore these questions in any way you find helpful.

Text

John 19:38-42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Comment

There are a variety of detailed legends attached to Joseph of Arimathea including ones that have him bringing Christianity, vials of blood and sweat from Jesus, or even an adolescent Christ himself to the shores of Great Britain. In contrast the Gospel accounts are somewhat more spare in their details – we know from Matthew that he was wealthy (Mt 27:57); from Luke that he was a righteous man who was a member of the Sanhedrin (Lk 23: 51); and from Mark that he was respected member of that Council (Mk 15:43). Mark and Luke also note that he was someone who ‘was waiting expectantly for the Kingdom of God’ – so perhaps his interest in Jesus is not totally surprising.

What is less clear is the extent to which this was something about which he kept largely silent. Thus whereas Matthew labels him ‘a disciple of Jesus’ (though makes no comment on how open this was), John states unambiguously that his discipleship was secret ‘because of his fear of the Jews’. Whatever the extent to which he was or was not a public follower of Jesus, it is clear (Lk 23:51) that he had neither agreed with, nor consented to, the actions which the Sanhedrin had taken against Jesus.

Nicodemus, the other character in today's reading, is a wealthy Pharisee whom John initially introduces to us at an early stage in Jesus' ministry (Jn 3: 1–21). At that point, Nicodemus, though clearly interested in Jesus, is also extremely cautious about approaching him openly, coming instead under cover of darkness. Moreover, though a knowledgeable and learned man, he seems completely unable, or unwilling to take onboard what Jesus is saying. As far as we know from the text, he slips away back into the darkness and that's the end of it. However when we next encounter him in John 7, he is speaking up for Jesus – albeit in a somewhat oblique way – and in so doing draws a slightly sharp sarcastic response from some of his fellow Pharisees (Jn 7:51). And finally, in this passage, he comes openly to attend to the burial of Jesus bringing with him a substantial and costly amount of spices.

It seems then that both of these men are on a journey towards allowing themselves to be more openly linked to Jesus. And while their wealth was unlikely to be threatened by such an association, it is clear that they both had something substantial to lose when it came to their status and reputation within the religious communities of which they were prominent members. That risk would have been even more heightened following the events of the preceding 12 hours and the persisting anxieties around the body of Jesus for those who had engineered his death (Mt 27: 62–66). Nevertheless, both men publicly associate themselves with this despised and disputed body – Joseph not only openly asking for it but also placing it in his own tomb, and Nicodemus bringing expensive spices in a quantity which was anything but discrete. Neither of these are gestures which can be read as neutral or cautious!

Although we tend to view courage and bravery as synonymous, they have different etymological roots and thus each has in fact a somewhat different feel. Whereas 'brave' has its roots in Middle French and Italian words meaning bold (originally 'wild/savage'), 'courage' is, via Middle English, rooted in the French and Latin words for heart. We might perhaps think of bravery as something instinctive – running towards the explosion or fire to try and save people, and courage as involving a more conscious element of choice – electing to enter the high risk occupations of bomb disposal or firefighting. In this story Joseph and Nicodemus are aware of the risks and, while in the past they might have turned away from these and elected to stay hidden and safe, here they choose to act in defiance of them in order to honour and care for the body of Jesus.

While situations of conflict may sometimes require bravery, they almost invariably require courage of some kind. This may be the courage to risk doing something differently, or to reach out across a divide; it may be the courage to say things or take actions which might make us look foolish, or expose us to potential reputational damage; or we may need to find the courage to step outside of the narratives and understandings which give us our sense of identity and security; or to examine our own choices and actions to see if these need to be changed. Such courage might not necessarily involve us making big or dramatic gestures, or stepping out over the abyss (though it sometimes may) – but what it does require is a willingness to try and live out of the heart, just as Jesus invariably did, and just as Joseph and Nicodemus do in today's Gospel passage.

Response

Think of a situation in which you have been involved which required courage in some way – either from you or from someone else. What did that look like? Are there ways in which we can encourage one another to live more courageously? Is that something which you could do more of, or would like someone to do for you?

how might you personally go about this?

Prayer

The Prayer of the Corrymeela Community seems very apt for this story

Courage comes from the heart
and we are always welcomed by God,
the Croí* of all being.
We bear witness to our faith,
knowing that we are called
to live lives of courage, love and reconciliation
in the ordinary and extraordinary moments
of each day.
We bear witness, too, to our failures
and our complicity in the fractures of our world.
May we be courageous today.
May we learn today.
May we love today.

*Croí – pronounced 'kree' – is the Irish word for 'heart'