

Fourth Sunday in Lent

14.03.2021
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

In this week's reading, an excerpt from the famous conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and Nicodemus, we hear the words of Jesus – confident, confronting and causing a certain kind of conflict – asking over and over again: do you believe? what do you believe? do you follow? what do you follow?

We do not need to fear that this is an old shibboleth that will grant or deny us access to a heaven. Instead this is an invitation – albeit a confronting one – to respond. What do you say *back*? Of all the words available to you in your vocabulary, what would you say to this person who is asking you, truly, what you think, what you believe, what you follow.

As you prepare for this week's text, it might be an idea to take a moment, to deliberately set aside old demands from religious threat, and to willingly and generously grant yourself permission to say exactly what you think in response to a Jesus who – whatever else we think of him – always granted himself that same permission.

Text

John 3:14–21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Comment

It's probably an obvious thing to say, but from a literary point of view, the character of Jesus is at the centre of the literatures of the gospels for the next number of weeks. Whether in an extended discourse (as with this week's reading; part of the dialogue with Nicodemus) or in an observation of Jesus speaking about death, or the entrance to Jerusalem, or the trial, torture and execution, or resurrection... the texts all focus our attention on Jesus of Nazareth for the next few weeks.

I say it's an obvious thing because, well, that's the gospels — they're all about Jesus. But from time to time, we are in the discourses of Jesus where he's pointing to corruption or leadership or other people; other times the reader's gaze is directed towards an individual who is either being critiqued or praised; or on the followers of Jesus, again being critiqued and praised.

Lent this year, however, is moving from us seeing the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus, to the Transfiguration to the Turning of the Tables in the Temple. We are *seeing* Jesus, and this is the theological and literary project of the text, and the season. For all the pieties associated with Lent — giving up things, taking up things, giving alms — the ultimate goal is to remove impediments to *seeing*; seeing Jesus in particular, and seeing him in circumstances all around.

This week's text is an excerpt from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Interpersonal dialogues are a feature of the gospel of John: between Jesus and Nicodemus; between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well; between Jesus and the man born blind from birth etc. This gospel — the latest one to be written, perhaps around the year 90AD, or even later — contains extended dialogues, places the most elevated christology alongside the most emotional depictions of Jesus, narrates only seven signs, has no mention of demons or the kingdom, and records the longest dinner speech in the New Testament.

John's gospel features some binary themes: follow/don't follow, darkness/light, belief/unbelief, life/death. In this excerpt of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus some of these themes are seen: "whoever believes in him may have eternal life" "whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" "those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe.. because they have not believed" "light has come into the world" "people loved darkness rather than the light" "all who do evil hate the light" "those who do what is true come to the light". The confidence of voice given to the character of Jesus in this gospel account is, for me, confronting. It's a *my way or the highway* voice.

This would have inevitably caused conflict among those who were observing him—and it did. It causes conflict, too, in those of us reading the text during Lent in this year of our Lord 2021, a year of Pandemic, an era of Populism, a time of Untruth, Fake News, Vaccine Conflicts, Inequality, Racism and Distraction. What does it mean to look to this character of Jesus, whose self assuredness is so articulated? Does the attention to these words and beliefs of Jesus of Nazareth in this week's gospel text console you, confuse you, challenge you or critique you? Or something else? What do you think of a character who, in a time of occupation by a foreign army was able to hold attention on himself and use this attention to critique his co-religionists? What would you say back to someone who says "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already"? Would you agree with him or argue with him?

Such binaries are, in my own opinion, a literary *function* rather than a *fundamental*

to this depiction of Jesus. He seemed to be interested in causing conflict in people who were attracted to him. He wanted them to speak their minds, and was content to be an irritant in their lives until they spoke the truth to him. What are the conflicts that binary religious language cause in you? And — rather than deciding whether to accept it or reject it all out — what do you say back? What is your self understanding in conversation with the text? What is your argument back?

This is, I think, the invitation of the text. Not to think about whether you're condemned or not, but rather to think of what you'd actually say back to someone who was pushing and pushing and pushing. Pushing people to speak truthfully back to him, rather than to perform what they think will win them friends and influence. Jesus seemed uninterested in pandering to popularity — he regularly made life difficult for his friends and would-be followers.

What's helpful to remember is that in this fourth gospel, alongside such binary language from Jesus is the most elevated theology of friendship we find in the Christian scriptures. Jesus, in this gospel, is not interested in telling his friends to love their enemies. He's interested in loving his friends till the end. This last supper depiction has him disrobe and wash the feet of those he loves. And even in this text, famous for being used as a battering ram about perishing and condemnation, the motivation of God towards the world is *love* not despair. For God so *loved the world*. This is a demonstration of an incarnation that is interested in the argument of being alive, not the ambivalence of affectation.

So again. You. What do you say back? What do you assert? What could you say that'd make Jesus look at you and see a friend who is willing to speak truthfully to him, as he speaks truthfully to you. Lent is not about chocolate or wine, boys and girls. Lent is about this. Look. Listen. Speak back. This is the word of the Lord speaking to you. This is You speaking back to the Word of the Lord.

Response

Once, when I was a school chaplain, and had an office full of young people for a reflection session, one of the young people asked me *What do you think about Jesus?*

This was not a test. This was not an opportunity to bear witness. This was an experience where a twelve-year-old asked a serious question and wanted me to demonstrate truth and respect in the way I answered.

I had been infected by all kinds of religious fear growing up. I had heard people preach fear-based sermons on “when you reject me before people I will reject you before God”. There were anxieties about evangelisation that had been baked into my bones. But here, in a chaplaincy, with a kind and good and intelligent and curious twelve-year-old, I was faced with a much more demanding — and, truthfully a much more interesting — question. This young person wasn't asking to be converted. They weren't asking to be witnessed to. He was asking my experience. He was asking me to tell a story from the literature of my own life.

I loved what he asked. After I offered him my answer, I asked him. How about you? What do you think?

He spoke. I listened. I have never forgotten him.

What about you? What do you think about Jesus?

Prayer

Strange man of Nazareth

You poked and prodded people around you.
People who had power were provoked into questions,
people with curiosity, too; you scraped surfaces,
willing to risk irritation or aggression in the name
of truthful encounters.

In our lives — tired and under demand as they are in
this time of pandemic — enliven us by the kind of
conversation that is unforgettable. Meet us
with ourselves as you meet us.

Because this is the water of life. You
drank from it. You needed it.
So do we.

Amen.

Further Reading

Friends, in an entirely unrelated, but nonetheless relevant note, we are soon to approach the feast day of Saint Patrick, marked on March 17th.

[This entry, with an excerpt from Patrick's *Confessio*](#) is one you might want to bookmark for the day, or share around.