

Thirty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

20.11.2022
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

Friends, as we mentioned in the email that came out yesterday, today is the final entry for the Spirituality of Conflict project as it stands. We will continue to write an email a month, with reflections and resources on conflict and the bible. We have been amazed at this community of kindness that has read this resource over the six years. We always thought it would only last three, so being with you for this time has been moving.

We will be in touch with you again later this week, with some small reflections and farewells from the team. Below is a short reflection on Luke 23:33-43, the reading for the 20th November, the 34th Sunday in Ordinary time for this year C, the feast of Christ the King.

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Today's feast — the Feast of Christ the King — is one of irony. A man from a region of a Roman outpost, had leadership potential, posed threat to power, and was executed. And he is called King by many. What kind of King? What kind of power is demonstrated? A king needs a kingdom (or do they?). What is the jurisdiction of this monarch?

I'm foreign to concepts of monarchy, they always strike me as something to be resisted, so I come with conflict to the concept of kings and kingdoms. I know some prefer speech of the Kingdom of God, or the Community of the Beloved, or the Inbreaking of Heaven. Wherever you land in the choice of language, this term "Christ the King, invites an imaginative collaboration: where you bring your thoughts about power, powerlessness, authority, leadership and worship to the feast.

As you begin, perhaps you may wish to reflect on your relationship (or your changing relationship) with titles, and what they mean for you.

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## Text

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

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## Comment

*A reflection from Pádraig Ó Tuama*

The choice of this text as the Gospel narrative for the feast is one that demonstrates the conflict at the heart of the historical church about its own power, authority, states, engagement with politics. A feast of a king, and the text is the conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and the two men crucified alongside him, each of them suffering under the torture techniques of empire. And not only far away empire, empire nearby, soldiers within shouting distance mocking him, a circumcised Jewish hanging naked on a cross, facing his end in the slow death of Rome.

Luke’s gospel is a political one: with mention of soldiers and crucifixions scattered throughout, and also mention of Pilate and power. The invitation is to make a choice, so Luke’s depiction of two men crucified alongside Jesus, one of whom makes a choice towards and the other of whom seems to turn away, is a recognisable literary technique. It seems to imply that there is always time to recognise what is in front of us. The man who condemns himself but recognises innocence is praised for his capacity to tell the truth, even at this stage of his life.

In this small text, there are archetypes, powerful ones: the distant emperor; the local procurator doing the emperor’s bidding; the soldiers demonstrating belonging by echoing a mocking they think solidifies their political affiliation; the distinctions between innocent and guilty; the impact of the distinctions between innocence and guilt; the internal arguments among the so-called guilty; the suffering; the way that those who bear the wounds on their body see empire most clearly; the brutality of the end; the disposition of freedom even while condemned; the titles given us by others; the titles given us by ourselves; the titles accepted; the titles rejected. These — and many more — archetypes are present in just over two hundred words. In a way, it is a landscape for some of our conflicts: the parochial echoing the systemic.

The irony of the Christian theological and liturgical tradition is that it does not propose a way to overcome conflict; rather it proposes a way to behave within it: keeping what power you can, using vulnerability to expose violence; refusing to let empire’s aggression control the response of the suffering; trusting, it hopes, that there is something of longevity in responding to conflict with character, resistance, truth-telling, sacrifice, generosity and the openness to surprise.

As we have worked on this Spirituality of Conflict project over these six years, we have been people gathered across Ireland and Britain, writers and people influenced both by history and religion. As the project began, I had deep concern about the state of British–Irish relations as the project known as Brexit was brewing. We needed increased ties of friendship, collaboration, conflict, fruitfulness and communication across bodies of faith in Ireland and Britain. Through meals, tensions, discussions, differing points of view, collaboration, walks, grief, pandemic and productivity, we have been honoured to be alongside you in the generosity of your reading and responses.

We aren't going away: we are just making the project a little smaller in order to make it more manageable! We will be in touch once a month.

We want to thank our funders, especially the Trench Trust whose initial sponsorship of the project has kept us in resource and time and websites. Thanks to Thought Collective for the gorgeous website design, and to Irish Government's DFA funding, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the Church of Scotland's Mission and Discipleship's unit for their generosity and support of this project.

While he came late to the project — towards the end of year 2 — Glenn Jordan became an indispensable partner to us all, quickly taking his place with humour, kindness, intelligence, fun, stories and conversation. After he died in June 2020, we gathered for a zoom liturgy – friends from across difference joined in grief and love. To name Glenn is to name the hope we have of the power of friendship in the midst of conflict: to name one of the things that might help save us.

More from us later this week, and with many thanks,

*Pádraig Ó Tuama*

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## Response

Friends, I know I speak for all of my colleagues in the Spirituality of Conflict project when I say that our response to you is one of gratitude. We have met over six years, with different configurations of writers, in community, online, in joy, in grief, in collaboration, and considered what the readings about the gospels might have to say to a world and readership that also read conflict in our everyday lives.

While the weekly readings are finishing, we will keep in touch with you once a month with a reflection on the bible and conflict. And we will also let you know of opportunities for meeting, for online events, and in-person gatherings.

As mentioned above, we will send out an email later this week with some reflections from everyone involved in the project.

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## Prayer

May we embrace the conflicts that enliven,  
intervene in the conflicts we can resolve,  
be safe from the conflicts that destroy,  
end the conflicts that kill,  
and be supported in the conflicts that are bigger than we can address.  
And may we have the insight to navigate them.

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Paradox