

Day of Pentecost

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Introduction

There is a choice between two readings for Pentecost Sunday. One of the readings (John 7:37-39) is a reading about “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” The other reading, however, is a repetition of the text encountered on the Second Sunday after Easter, where the disciples are in the upper room and Jesus comes among them.

In the spiritual life, repetition is important. In the life of conflict too. After all, we return to some old wounds again and again. We can find ourselves living in repeated patterns again and again, even patterns that wound us.

Ignatius of Loyola, in his wisdom, recognised that there is a need for us to return – again and again – to texts and prayers. Where in one reading we may encounter a particular layer of meaning in a text, when we return to it, we may greet that meaning, but also find another. The text is inexhaustible in its capacity to reveal, and is neither singular nor static in its dynamism. Where a text may disturb in one reading, we may find it soothes in another.

Text

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Comment

It may be of benefit to return to the reading from the Second Sunday of Easter and reflect on it, but especially, to reflect *on your reflections*.

In this way we can listen to ourselves listening, and listen to other things, always present, but perhaps with less volume than as now. This practice of viewing again what we have seen before is a theme found in so many works of poetry and spirituality. Ricoeur speaks of the second naivety. And TS Eliot, in the final section of the final section of The Four Quartets, writes these timeless lines:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

We know the dynamics in our lives of conflict, too. In our closest relationships there are patterns – repetitions – of anxieties, obsessions and compulsions we have had for decades. So the upsetting story of today – a story from church, from work, from home, from a friendship – is, in its own way, the story of everyday, a story that has been working in us over and over for years. The famous psychoanalyst DW Winnicott called this the primitive agony, but Winnicott knew that we knew about this already. “The poets know of it” he said.

So, to return again to the upper room.

It is evening, and this may, perhaps remind us of the primal story of Genesis. John works closely with the text of genesis in the structure of his gospel, beginning with “In the beginning” and using motifs of day/evening and gardens at significant points throughout the text. So the disciples, perhaps like the Adam and the Eve, are hiding, and suddenly they see their Jesus among them, but he is not their Jesus, they, like Mary, cannot cling to him now. He is present and beyond all at once. He is in time and out of time.

And instead of the “Who told you that you were naked?” we hear here a greeting and a blessing. “Peace be with you”. Shalom. Shalom is a blessing for a people, a blessing for the space between the people, a blessing for the fear that causes a person and a people to hide. Shalom is like fresh air, or warmth or fire, going in between the spaces. Shalom, the Talmud tells us, is God’s name. (*See Shabbat 10b commenting on Judges*).

So Jesus comes among the people, who are always the people hiding from their maker, and says the name of God to the people hiding from God. It is a blessing. It is a greeting. It is an invitation and an imperative. Peace, he says. Peace between you. Peace in you. Peace.

Where are the spaces between us that are in need of peace, and in need of God.

Bearing in mind that Peace and God are perhaps two small words for the same big thing, bring these spaces of discord to prayer, folding conflict into the wide space of blessing.

This will not eradicate the discord. It may open it, showing us what was always there, waiting for us to learn, waiting for us to mourn, waiting for us to greet.

Prayer

Jesus our Peace

You call us back to the first story

because you, Word made Flesh,

are the first story,

and in flesh, you call us to the story of our lives.

May we hear and tell the story of us

in such a way

as to learn, to mourn, to live.

Because you know well

the ways of those who hide their story.

Amen.

