

3 Holy Week Sermons

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Monday

Isaiah 42:1-9 John 12:1-11

I want to say how very honoured I am that you should trust me enough to allow me into your lives at this sacred time. If Lent is like a long drawn out visit to the dentist, Holy Week is open heart surgery. So it's a very great honour that you trust someone to come and stand in the operating theatre with you. Fear not, Our Lord is the surgeon and the anaesthetist. I'm just handing around the scalpels and forceps. But because it's a question of our heart, we are in Holy Space, it's a very, very great privilege to be honoured by you, that you feel safe enough to come and share some of that time with me.

What I'm going to be attempting to do as we walk together over these days towards Good Friday is dwell a little in a passage from Zechariah which is very familiar to us from this time of year:

And I will pour out on the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that when they look on him whom they have pierced they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps bitterly over a first born. (Zech 12:10)

There are two dimensions of that spirit of mourning which we're given. One I think is the work on our hearts which is the work of Lent. Lent is the time when our hearts are broken. You remember on Ash Wednesday:

Let not your garments be torn but your hearts broken. (Joel 2:13)

What the Holy Spirit does with us over Lent is take our heart and start to heal it, and that means making it more capable of mourning, of looking with sorrow on the one whom we have pierced. A hard heart, an unbroken heart, is unable to look at a pierced one. It's too unpleasant a reminder. The gift of the Holy Spirit at this time, giving us mourning, is to enable us

precisely to look at the one who is our victim, and to undergo that discovery of moral equivalence with all the people who we don't like to think of ourselves as morally equivalent to; because we're brought together to celebrate a murder, to celebrate someone undergoing being murdered. And we'll be asked, as the days go by, to adopt various parts in that re-enactment of a murder. Crowds shouting, "Crucify him". Crowds saying, "Give us Barabbas". Different voices of participation in a murder. And we do this, not so as to recite some sacred text, but so that we may be inspired by the spirit of mourning to look around and see the other murders we participate in, to look at the other parts of the world where people are killing each other in the name of God, and saying, "Yes, actually that's our story". Another Shiite mosque blown up. "Funny how those religious people murder each other". And what we're celebrating is our moral equivalence with that, what it's like to be people undergoing a murder that's taking us by surprise.

In the story, which we'll be dwelling in, there are normally three or four positions. One position is the crowd. I don't know whether any of you were at Palm Sunday services yesterday. In the Catholic lectionary it was Mark's passion that was read. The interesting thing about Mark's passion is the sense of how speedy it all is. What a muddle. What chaos. The getting excited about someone coming in. The chanting at him, the words of the great high priest, the muddle, the confusion, the murder, the lynching, the way in which crowds whip each other up and whip each other down with enthusiasms, and how it ends up in a murder. And how it's everybody's fault and nobody's fault. There's something delightfully chaotic and fast-paced about Mark's text. We have the luxury now of dwelling in some of that slightly more slowly. Because there are other voices. There's the crowd which is normally our voice. And it's the crowd that we are coming to learn how not to be.

Then there are the voices of the disciples. And they half get it and half don't get it. They are half sticking by Jesus, and they are half running away. And another voice of course we hear in the text is the disciples' retrospective vision. What they got afterwards that they hadn't got at the time. And of course that's what most of our Gospel texts are. It's the "Oh, so that was what it was about" of the apostolic group.

But then there's the fourth and most profound and important voice, which is the one we'll be straining hardest to listen to, which is the voice of Our Lord, the One who is undergoing this. Speaking very gently and very quietly, not "shouting or crying in the streets" as it says in the Prophet Isaiah, not bullying people, but moving towards occupying a place that

only He can occupy, a quiet but deliberate voice. Our surgeon. Our anaesthetist. The one who enables us to have an open heart, to live with our scandal.

In today's gospel we have a household of faith. Jesus has come back to Bethany, to a place which he likes. And there are three key disciple figures:

Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead, just as in every small church group there should be people who have been raised from the dead, people to whom someone has said "Lazarus, come forth". And for that reason are able to live outside the Law, through having been brought to life in a way which does not know death any longer. A way that might cause scandal or curiosity to other religious people. A key person in any community;

and then Martha, the servant, who is here serving dinner, exercising diakonia. Here she's not complaining about it as she is in one of the other gospels. Here, she's just doing it. Service is being performed;

and then there is Mary, again, sitting at the feet of Jesus. But she is the one who has not only sat and learnt but she is the Prophet. She is the one who anoints, thus fulfilling the Song of Songs, where it says that my Beloved will anoint. The women will anoint.

Oh, that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant. Your name is oil poured out. Therefore the maidens love you. (Song of Songs 1:2-3)

And then later on:

Your head crowns you like Carmel and your flowing locks are like purple. A king is held captive in the tresses. (Song of Songs 7:5)

This is what's being fulfilled by Mary. But she's anointing him for his death. Her act of prophecy means that she understands that he is going.

And then there is Judas, the other disciple, the one who actually runs the money and makes sure things are OK. And he's a bit iffy. Not much is made of him here. He's a bit iffy. He doesn't understand the importance of prophecy; he doesn't understand the importance of the one going. So he thinks that the oil should not have been used, whereas Jesus is keen to say: No, if you really understand what living together as the household of God is like, what becoming the new temple is, where the aroma fills the

house, just as the incense fills the house in the temple. If you really understand what this is you'll understand that such extravagance of gesture and prophecy is not to be separated from living with and loving the poor "who will be with you always", but are part of the same thing. But Jesus is preparing them for when he is not there. The whole of Holy Week Jesus is preparing them for when he is not there, teaching them the mode of presence by which he will be present when he is no longer present to them.

People are coming. The crowds are beginning. A group referred to as "the Jews" are around.

A word about "the Jews" because they'll appear frequently enough during this week for it to be worth getting something right here. The word, literally "Judeans", should not, by any of us, be read as referring to the people whom we now call the Jewish people. We're talking probably about what would have been something rather like people who now call themselves Christians, since we're in to moral equivalence. In other words, what had previously been rather a broad term was taken over by a group who wanted it to mean something rather narrower and tighter and more excellent. You know what I mean in that use of the word Christian. Well, the Hebrew people had quite a multifarious belonging and forms of belonging. And one of the groups, the people who had come back from Babylon with quite a strong religious line, was known by others as the Judeans. They were very keen on Moses and the Law and a particular interpretation of ways of belonging. This is by no means the same as the Jewish people. This is, if you like, much more of a cultural and religious group within the Jewish people. And they were clearly interested in Jesus. They were half tempted by him, hence the Chief Priests' concern. They're going to be with us, they're part of the crowd, they're part of us: - people who want a system of goodness; for whom Jesus is not going to give a system of goodness, but open up heaven. So let's sit with these people, with these groups, over the next few days, allowing us, allowing ourselves to be approached by one who is about to be murdered. Allowing ourselves to be approached as murderers, not being scandalised. That's the route Our Lord is taking us, gently, quietly, establishing justice, moving to the space of being the victim, without creating enormous waves of scandal, trying to allow us access to God, who can only be reached when our hearts are broken, and we look at our sisters and brothers as people equally involved, and therefore equally able to be called into new life. That's our task for Holy Week.

Tuesday

I Corinthians 1:18-31 John 12:20-36

The two readings that we've had today are actually the readings appointed for today, and they mesh together very tightly. I don't know whether it's Paul commenting on John or John commenting on Paul, or both commenting on an earlier account of what Jesus was about. But here we have, in acted out form, Jesus explaining what is meant by:

The Jews seek signs and the Greeks seek wisdom. (1 Cor 1:22)

Here we have in St. John's gospel a continuation of what I was trying to tell you yesterday. Jesus trying to prepare people for the way in which he is going to be found after he is gone. He is trying to prepare them for the strange, quiet place where he will be found, where he will be forever, but which they cannot easily understand. And he's trying to prepare them for this in the midst of fairly tumultuous activities, tumultuous activities of the sort that would normally distract us from being able to tell what's going on. Remember, the first background to all the gospels is the chaos of a crowded dynamic leading to a lynch; not a good place from within which to work out what's going on. Because normally, within the chaos leading up to the crowd dynamic that takes us to a lynch, we are all being dragged along by the crowd. We don't actually know what's going on. So the quiet voice that's attempting to show what is actually happening is going to be very hard to listen to, and the one speaking is going to be very hard to hear. Hence the way in which, in this account which we have in John's gospel, Jesus answers the question that's posed to him by refusing to answer it.

You see the first thing that happens is that some Greeks, meaning diaspora Jews from the Greek speaking world probably, come and say to Philip:

We want to see Jesus. (John 12:21)

Philip and Andrew, the two members of the apostolic group who have Greek names: the Greeks must have thought, "We've got an 'in' here, these are our sort. They will surely show us Jesus." And so Philip and Andrew go to try and persuade Jesus to allow himself to be seen. And immediately he responds in a way that doesn't satisfy the question at all. And really this passage is a long drawn out answer to how we really do get to see Jesus, not in the way in which typically we ask for it. He responds initially by saying, "OK, these are Greeks, they seek wisdom.

I'll give them wisdom. Wisdom. The seed must fall to the ground and die before it gives fruit. Get it. No, of course not." Then he makes a very interesting point:

If anyone serves me he must follow me, and where I am there shall my servant be also. If anyone serves me the Father will honour him. (12:26)

OK. So here you are, you're a Greek. You say, "Listen, cut the crap. What I want is to see you. I just want it to be straightforward. None of this high fallutin' preachy nonsense. I just want to see you." Just like a little bit later Philip, the Greek, will say "Show us the Father. I just want to see you." And Jesus says, "No. No. If you serve me you will follow me." In other words, you will start to find yourself in a pattern of desire that will take you places you probably don't want to go. And it is while you are doing that that you will find out who I am and you will know that I am with you. And then you will also find that my Father will honour you. In other words, you will yourself start to receive the same reception as I. You will know who I am from within, because you will have become like me.

Well, this is not really what they want to hear. He's going to go back to that. He's going to go back to that. A little pause:

Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. (12:27)

Stressing once again, this movement is deliberate. In the midst of the growing lynch mob there is a very quiet act of deliberation going on, a quiet act of deliberation that can't easily be understood.

Father glorify thy name (12:28)

The word glory and the word reputation are the same word in Greek. Glorify thy name means show forth the reputation that your person has in this world.

And a voice comes from heaven saying, "I have glorified it and I will glorify it". (12:28)

Meaning, I am going to point to exactly where my reputation is going to be found. My reputation is going to be your reputation, that of a crucified criminal. That is what the reputation of God is going to look like. And interestingly, here we have a sign, this thunderclap, and just as the Greeks wanted to see, and they wanted wisdom, and they get something that

leaves them dissatisfied, so here we have a sign. And of course, a sign is entirely useless without anybody there to interpret it. Some people say, “Oh, it was a thunderclap”, and others say, “Maybe an angel has spoken to him”.

That’s the whole point of signs, they’re not self-interpreting. They’re not very useful things to get to know anything about anything. Signs can always be read according to where you start reading it from. No good. A sign itself is no good.

Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.”
(12:30)

It’s you who want signs.

Now is the judgement of this world. Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out. (12:31)

Key point. He’s attempting to explain that what he’s going to undo is a principle, a governing principle. The Greek word for prince and principle is the same word, archon (ἀρχων). The governing principle of this world is about to be undone. You’re going to look for something spectacular. It’s not going to be spectacular, because, in fact, all that’s going to happen is that I’m going to inhabit the space of the victim. I’m going to be lifted up, given the reputation of a criminal, of a blasphemer. I’m going to occupy that space. And by occupying it, and allowing my Father to give me the reputation that comes from him, (in other words, that this is my son, this is the innocent one, this is the Holy One of God) I’m going to undo the whole principle by which the world builds its togetherness, which is security over against someone who needs to be thrown out. We will be secure if we gang together, find ourselves someone whose fault it all is, and give it to them in the neck. The only way in which that, the bricks and mortar of social order, can be undone is by somebody occupying the place of the victim as if death were not. And that is what Jesus is going to. How could they understand him? He says it again:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.
(12:32)

He takes the language, remember, of Moses’s serpent which was both the problem (it poisoned people) and the remedy (if people looked on it they would be cured), the standard ambiguity in the word ‘pharmakon’ (φάρμακον), (from which we get ‘pharmacy’), which is both poison and remedy. And of course a pharmacos (φαρμακος) in the ancient Greek

world was also the town scapegoat, who was kept in considerable riches and splendour against the day when there was some sort of crisis or an earthquake, and they needed to sacrifice somebody. They would walk him through the streets in glad rags, people touching him, so that all the bad vibes would be transmitted to him, and then he would be taken to the top of the hill and encouraged to engage in voluntary sacrificial activities. That was the pharisee in the ancient Greek world, the one who is being lifted up. That is the moment when all people will start to be able to be drawn to him, when hearts will start to be able to be opened, because all hearts that are formed by the principle of this world learning how to gang up together against whoever it is that is going to give us our unity, all hearts that are formed in that way, find themselves exposed in the presence of the exposed victim. And if this one is indeed glorified by God, if his innocence is declared, then there can be that breaking of heart, that looking on the one who was pierced, that leads to mourning, and the realisation that we can live in some other way. That is the way in which the prince of this world is to be overthrown.

The crowd, of course, are not particularly happy with this. It all sounds very mysterious, this business about being lifted up. “We’ve heard from the law that the Christ remains for ever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?” Remember what I was saying, the group of people called the Jews, the Judeans, they were half tempted. They were really quite interested by what Jesus was about. It’s not simply about them being bad guys, they were curious. “If you’re the Christ then you’re going to stay for ever. What’s this business about being lifted up?” And of course the answer is - he only stays for ever as lifted up. It is precisely enabling us to go where we cannot see him, but where we come into the presence of the crucified and risen victim who lives for ever. It’s only by going into that space that we will discover that Christ does indeed live for ever.

“Who is this Son of Man?” they say. Jesus said to them,

(And now we go back to the image of vision)

“The light is with you a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you.” (12:35)

And isn’t it interesting that they’ve asked to see Jesus. What Jesus is indicating is that what he is doing is creating the light by which they can see everything. In other words, he is not the object of their vision, but that which makes their vision possible. That’s the space he’s going to, the

space he's going to inhabit, by being the innocent one who reveals what is at the base of all human getting together. And by inhabiting that place peacefully, and gently undoing its traps, he is going to make available the possibility for any of us to walk and see where we're walking, not constantly be scandalised and trapped by religion and folly. If we follow him then we will find that we are given the same reputation as he. And then we will know who he is and we will find that we share his name. And that name is God's name and reputation and glory.

And when Jesus had said this he departed and hid himself from them.
(12:36)

So isn't it wonderful. They asked to see him. They get an explanation of how they can't see him, and then he hides.

That's how this works with John. You want to see. What seeing is going to look like is being found in my place, doing what I do, receiving the reputation of the Father, occupying peacefully that place of the lynch which is coming up, and from there really being able to walk in the light. In the midst of the lynch, the build up, he's trying to show where the eye of the hurricane is going to be and how to move into it. And that's where we're following him during Holy Week.

Wednesday

Isaiah 50:4-9a Hebrews 12:1-3 John 13:21-32

Weirder and weirder. We get two 'boo' words in today's gospel which tend to throw us off kilter, because they have resonances for us that are too strong to enable us to hear what's going on.

One 'boo' word is 'Satan'.

And Satan went into him. (John 13:27)

It's the only use of the word 'Satan' in John's gospel.

And the other, the other 'boo' word is, of course, 'Judas', which has become for us a symbol of something, and just in this last week a sort of cause célèbre in a certain press. (*Lost Gnostic Gospel of Judas revealed, National Geographic story 6/4/06*)

What I want to do with you today is to ask you to separate, as we have been doing, the three levels of sound which are coming through this passage. Remember we've talked about those three levels before. The first level is the level of the crowd, of the lynch mob. That voice is here today simply as a person. That's all that Satan means. The second voice is the voice of the disciples, the ones who half know that something is happening, and half don't know and don't get it. And the third voice, working at an entirely different level, is the work, the voice, of Jesus, doing something and explaining something, peacefully. So let's try and explore that voice, to see if it can quieten the way in which we hear the 'boo' words, so as to give them their proper banality. Because that's what's difficult for us, to hear the banality of what is going on here. 'Boo' words hide banality.

A couple of key words in today's reading. Two key words for the whole of the gospel, particularly at this passion time. 'Handed over'. To 'hand over'. In the reading, as we heard it, it was translated 'betray'. The reading as we heard it said:

I say to you, one of you will betray me. (13:21)

All it says is: "One of you will hand me over". And remember that 'handing over' has different senses. It is a positive thing. What Jesus is doing is handing himself over. Earlier in the chapter, which we don't get to read today, we get to read tomorrow, the foot washing chapter, early in that chapter we get:

God has put all things into his hands. (13:3)

In other words God has handed over everything to Jesus. And Jesus is now handing himself over. He is transmitting himself. He is literally going to transmit himself, giving his body and blood to people. What they do with it is up to them, that's part of the vulnerability of handing over. It's the risk of putting yourself in someone's hands. But remember that betraying is simply a sub-section of handing over. The verb is actually the same verb in Greek. To transmit; to hand over; to betray; the same word.

And then the other word with two meanings is the word 'eat'. We have this strange moment of Jesus dipping a morsel into some liquid and handing it over to Judas to eat. Because the same word can mean to enjoy and to destroy, not only in English, but more to our purposes in Hebrew and Aramaic, a word with the same root. I suppose we would have something the same with our word backbiter, a backbiter - someone who

eats their neighbours. That's the same set of resonances that we have here. One of the words in ancient Syriac for a calumniator, a slanderer, was a pieces-eater, someone who eats the flesh of their neighbour. So what we have here is a handing over and an eating. Exactly the same act. It can be a betrayal and a destroying. Exactly the same act. But what Jesus is doing he's doing very calmly and gently. Remember that the disciples don't get what's going on at all. The beloved disciple asks Jesus who it is. And Jesus says, presumably sotto voce, so that only this disciple could hear – it's the one to whom I am going to give the morsel. But that message doesn't get back to Simon Peter in time, and none of the others know what's happened, because after Judas takes his bite he gets up and goes, and Jesus says:

What you are going to do, do quickly. (13:27)

And that's the only thing they hear, "What you are going to do, do quickly", an entirely ambivalent remark which they are able to interpret in a variety of different ways. And one of the reasons of course which John knows, and which we all know, is that Judas wasn't the only person given a morsel by Jesus that evening. Everyone is given a morsel. The handing over, and the how the handing over is lived out, is universally available, the possibility of betrayal is universally available. So what happens here? Judas does something terribly banal. A reward notice has gone out into the local Post Offices. It says that at the end of Chapter 11 – not the bit about Post Offices, I'm making that bit up – but the ruling authorities had let it be known that anyone who provided them with information as to where this person might be found would be rewarded. The notice had gone up. And Judas thought "Hmm. I might take advantage of that". And then he does. That's all. We know nothing about Judas's motivation. There are hints that it might have been for the money. It might have been, because he thought that he could provoke Jesus into doing something grandiloquent by handing him over, that it would produce the final clash of powers, in which the Holy One would be vindicated. We don't know anything about Judas's motives. And guess what? In the real gospels, as opposed to the Gnostic gospels, it doesn't matter, because what Judas did is utterly banal. All he has done, in fact, is give someone away, give a friend away. The last time we see Judas in John's gospel he's standing with a group of soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane, that's all. It says very clearly:

And Judas was standing there with them. (John 18:5)

And that's very significant because that's what's specifically forbidden in Leviticus:

You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand forth against the blood of your neighbour. (Lev 19:16)

All that Judas has managed to do is the utterly banal thing of breaking a commandment. That's all he's managed to do, to achieve nothing at all. We don't even hear the end of the story. There is no story of Judas, because all that has happened to Judas is that the prince of this world, the principle by which social order is maintained, the self-defeating social principle has taken advantage of him, to try to create spurious meaning, to try and produce something exciting, meaningful, advantageous. And guess what? Nothing is going to happen. Jesus is not going to rise to the bait. He's going to go quietly, having handed himself over to occupy the space of the one whom the lynch mob get. And by doing that, actually he's going to undo the mechanism of the lynch from within. And it says:

When Judas goes out it was night. (John 13:30)

At the moment, if you like, it's the moment when the power that thinks it can create meaning by lynching is inexorably set in motion. From that moment on, what Jesus is doing is going to be invisible, and Jesus immediately says:

Now is the Son of Man glorified (13:31)

It's at the moment when he does not resist that he goes into occupying the space of the one who is betrayed, occupying the space of the killed one, the necessary victim, the one who it's convenient for you that we kill someone so that the nation not perish. It's when he occupies that space peacefully that the whole panoply of fake meaning is undone, is revealed to have no meaning at all. That is when God is glorified, when the self-giving victim shows that he's been able to undo all the power of darkness and death to give fake meaning.

It's one of the reasons why it's so important that we don't get carried away by Judas. Anyone who tries to make a story out of Judas doesn't get it. They are trying to create meaning where there is only banality, just as anyone who tries to make Satan apocalyptic doesn't get it. All there is is the ordinary social structuring of this world, the ruler of this world, the principle by which we create our unity, our meaning, our togetherness, and which is fake. The handing over, the gentle handing over, the quiet

handing over, of himself, to occupy that space, not even provoking it or tempting it, but deliberately moving into that space was described by the patristic authors almost as if it were Jesus giving the devil a bait to grasp, as though Jesus was a particular sort of bait on a fishhook, and once the fish got it, it was in fact hooked. That's how the patristic fathers described this handing over, the Greek fathers. They saw it as though Satan thought he had sprung a trap for Jesus, but Jesus was in fact undoing the trap from within. The quiet handing over which cannot be heard, the one who occupies the space, who does not allow themselves to be given identity by the crowd, by the pressure ("give us meaning", "give us signs", "give us wisdom"). The one who occupies that space gently is the one who will explode the whole system of meaning from within, which is the promise of glorification. And it can only be done as the trap tries to close down and finds that it's been stuck half open. Because if someone occupies that space voluntarily, and shows what it's about, it doesn't work any longer. It depends on people not knowing what they doing in order to work. It depends on people being able to pass the buck in order to work. Whereas, what Jesus is doing is showing that from the perspective of the innocent one "they hated me without cause". There was no real reason behind it, there's no real meaning to it. Meaning is created slowly and gently by the creator who brings things into being in the midst of our learning how to undo our sacred forms of handing over.

See the irony of the two words in John, the 'handing over' and the 'eating'. How easy it is to receive something from someone and use it to destroy them. How difficult it is to receive something from someone and realise that you have been challenged to transmit something. Someone has given themselves to you and is saying "You're going to be me. Where will you take it? Where will you take it?" That's the risk of creation. The other way is the trap of false meaning. And it's the very, very, very, delicate interface of those two which John shows us in today's gospel.

I want to bring out finally once again the banality. We're so used to reading this as a ritual with the grand words that we forget how different the voices are: the voice of the crowd; the unknowing of the disciples; and the quietness of Jesus. In the face of the quietness of Jesus what we typically dress up as a particular form of wickedness is banal, it's meaningless, it goes nowhere. We need to let that music out of our ears if we are to hear the deeper, slower, quieter, music carrying us towards Good Friday.

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