

Reflection - Wednesday of Holy Week, 2020

21 After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me."

22 The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.

23 One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;

24 Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

25 So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

26 Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.

27 After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

28 Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.

29 Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor.

30 So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

John 13:21-32

I would like to think about a number of themes that run through this and other readings in Holy Week and initially about the idea of gifts. On Monday, in John 12:1-11, we heard about Mary's gift to her Lord of expensive perfume.

- gift

Mary's gesture of anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume was extravagant. It was a costly gift. According to the Gospel writer, it had a value of 300 denarii, 300 times a typical daily wage for a labourer. Judas, of course, said it was a complete waste of money. Yet, the smell of perfume must have filled the house - to some an indication of the divine presence as well as a reference to the offering of perfume in the Temple at the time of certain Festivals.

The giving of gifts suggests relationship, a sense of obligation one to another. Such generosity is what economists or perhaps anthropologists call the economy of exchange. Mary's gift to Jesus was just excessive, way more generous than anything that could

ever have been expected. Yet Jesus commended it. Jesus sees that Mary, in the giving of a gift, was responding to an even greater gift, the divine gift - the gift that offers an eternity in closeness to God, the gift of God which is always there, always waiting for our response.

Judas, by contrast, seems unable to respond. Judas' world view is reflected in his horror at the waste of 300 denarii. It is Judas, in another part of the Gospel, who values the betrayal of Jesus at 30 pieces of silver.

- the story

John's account of that last, shared meal between Jesus and his disciples differs significantly from those in the Synoptic Gospels both in the timing and nature of that meal. Those who see the Gospels as historical accounts of the life of Jesus find that difficult. Yet the author of John's Gospel is producing something much greater than an account of who did what to whom, where and when. John's Gospel is concerned with the significance of the life of Jesus - his birth, life and death. John's Gospel is a story presented in the words of Jesus, it is presented through the memories of the disciples, it was created under the influence of the Holy Spirit, *'who will teach you everything'*. The story of Jesus is the story of the ultimate truth of God. That is the message of John.

In chapter 13, verse 21 onwards, we read that Jesus was ill at ease. Some summaries talk of his emotion, his quivering hands, his faltering voice, all signs of the betrayal to come. On Jesus' left reclines Judas. Judas occupies the place of highest honour, the place at the table kept for intimate friends. By handing Judas bread dipped in wine or perhaps in a sauce, Jesus is showing a sign of true affection, the offer of love. Yet, only the disciple that Jesus loves, being close to Jesus, recognises what is happening. Perhaps the other disciples see only a conversation about the common fund and donations to the poor. Yet Jesus is identifying the one who was to betray him. And Judas went out. It was night.

- the characters

Apart from Jesus, our Gospel texts refer to three other active participants at the meal, two by name. There is the disciple that Jesus loved - probably John, Son of Zebedee. He is reclining to the right of Jesus; he reclines on the heart of Jesus. Jean Vanier tells us that we should use the word 'womb', not heart. 'Womb' is the better translation for John is dwelling in Jesus. It is this state to which we are called, to be in communion with Jesus, to remain in him and he in us.

There is Peter, Peter who had refused the washing of his feet because it upset his understanding of the relationship that he had with Jesus. It is Peter who is soon to deny even knowing Jesus. Peter is so very human, anxious, concerned, confident yet vulnerable. Peter is that sign of hope for us all, a project for the Holy Spirit, a project on which Christ was to build his church.

And there is Judas, the disciple who was angry with the waste of the expensive oil in Bethany. Judas spurns the offer of love, the love that is given freely. And Satan entered Judas. Judas went out. It was night.

- love and betrayal

Judas is not just the keeper of the purse but also the thief, the one who Satan entered into and - according to the account right at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the pathetic, pantomime figure who was disembowelled in the Field of Blood. Yet in all this literary gore, it is right to remember that when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, Judas is there. When the disciples recline to eat - Judas is there, seated in the seat of honour. Judas is the trusted friend of Jesus.

Betrayal is a huge word. It conjures ideas of secrets, shared thoughts and experiences, of relationships between friends that are turned inside out, that are used to hurt, to defile, to destroy. Yet, Jesus quietly instructs Judas to *'do what he has to, but to do it quickly*. Jesus gives permission. The Passion cannot happen without it. Judas is the hinge between life and death, love and betrayal. Judas, the betrayer, is central to the plan of salvation just as God was there in the actions of the evil men who crucified his son. These are indeed paradoxes.

Those who know about these things, say that the word used to describe Judas, Judas the betrayer, is not a useful translation. The original Greek has more of the meaning of someone who hands over; Judas hands over Jesus to his Passion. Jesus, the active, becomes Jesus the passive - the one who is handed over. Jesus, who taught so volubly now speaks little. Jesus who performed signs and wonders does them no more. Jesus who triumphed in his ministry will despair in the Garden. Whereas Jesus brought others back to life, now he will die. Jesus is handed over. Judas did what was necessary. He handed over Jesus in order that we should see the glory of that expression of divine love. And yes, Judas did indeed betray Jesus to a death on the cross, yet God can demonstrate his excessive love even in betrayal. Judas did not understand that depth of forgiveness and of love in the heart of God.

- glorification

At its essence, the writer of John's Gospel is concerned with ideas of what it is to be loved by God and what it is to have seen God's glory in the Word made flesh. And this appearance of God is not overpowering for we see it there in the washing of feet. Jesus does the most humiliating, the most demeaning of tasks. He washes the feet of his followers. By his action, Jesus holds out his hands in friendship and in love. Yet that act is just as much about the receiving of love as the offering. *We are capable of love because God loved us first (1 John 4:19)*, that is how the author of John's first letter has it. In all our complexities and vulnerabilities, it is the understanding that we are accepted, valued, forgiven, loved by our Creator God who gives us permission to reach out to others in friendship and in love. In this Holy Week, as we prepare for the miracles of Easter, that is the message that we continually find so hard to accept, the message of that holy, sacred and loving covenant, 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34).

*Would you know your Lord's meaning? Learn it well.
Love was his meaning.*

*Who showed it to you? Love.
What did he show you? Love.
Why did he show you? For love.*

Hold fast to this and you shall know more about love than you will ever need to know or understand about anything else for ever and ever. Amen

Mother Julian of Norwich

Paul Martin