

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

Holy Week 2023

Monday in Holy Week

Reading

John 12:1-11 (RSV)

The Anointing at Bethany

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Laz'arus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2** There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Laz'arus was one of those at table with him. **3** Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. **4** But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, **5** 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?' **6** This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. **7** Jesus said, 'Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. **8** The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.' **9** When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came, not only on account of Jesus but also to see Laz'arus, whom he had raised from the dead. **10** So the chief priests planned to put Laz'arus also to death, **11** because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Reflection

JOHN'S GOSPEL lays out the final week of Jesus' life spaciouly, just as he had done with the first week of Jesus' ministry. In today's Gospel we have an incident told differently in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew and Mark have a similar incident in the final week (Matt 26, Mark 14), whereas Luke sites it earlier (Luke 7). There is presumably a link between the anointing of the feet of Jesus at Bethany and his washing of the disciples' feet later in the week on Maundy Thursday. St Clement of Alexandria and some modern scholars see the fragrance of the ointment filling the house

as not only a sign of the Christ, the Anointed One, but also a reference to Jesus' remark in Mark 14:9: 'wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her'. The fragrance of the Gospel fills not only the house where Jesus is present but the whole of the Gentile world. This fragrance is of an ointment used to prepare a body for burial, as Jesus explains, but it is to be the fragrance of the glorified body of the Messiah, raised from the dead.

Tuesday in Holy Week

Reading

John 13:21-38 (RSV)

Jesus foretells his Betrayal

13 ²¹ When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.' ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; ²⁴ so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, 'Tell us who it is of whom he speaks.' ²⁵ So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, 'Lord, who is it?' ²⁶ Jesus answered, 'It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.' So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'What you are going to do, do quickly.' ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the feast'; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; ³² if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow

afterward.' ³⁷ Peter said to him, 'Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' ³⁸ Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times.

Reflection

IN TODAY'S Gospel, we learn about the betrayal of Jesus that will lead to his arrest, trial, passion, and death. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the disciples – even the Beloved Disciple who is singled out in this passage for the first time – knew which of them will be the betrayer. We can't even be sure that Judas Iscariot himself knew. Those hearing the Gospel learnt at the Anointing at Bethany – yesterday's incident – not only was Judas a thief but also that he would be the betrayer. At that stage, that was for us to know and for the disciples to find out later.

It is only after Jesus hands him the morsel at the Last Supper that 'Satan enters [Judas]'. Simon Peter persuades John, the Beloved Disciple, to find out from Jesus who is the betrayer, and John (and presumably Peter) privately witness the handing over the morsel and its significance. The morsel reminds us of the Eucharist – not everyone who partakes is a worthy partaker – and of the warning about treachery in Ps. 41:9: 'Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me'. Even when Judas goes out, everyone assumes that he has just gone shopping.

This is no human struggle that is taking place: it is a battle between God and Satan. Simon Peter thinks he can play a part in the struggle – and lay down his life in defending the Master – but Jesus warns him that he will deny him three times before cockcrow. So much for human bravery! God, in the glorification of Christ, will be victorious and win the costly and supernatural victory.

Wednesday in Holy Week

Reading

Matthew 26:14-25 (RSV)

The Betrayal is plotted and the Passover Meal begins

26 ¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, 'What will you give me if I deliver him to you?' And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

¹⁷ Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?' ¹⁸ He said, 'Go into the city to such a one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at your house with my disciples.'" ¹⁹ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the passover.

²⁰ When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples; ²¹ and as they were eating, he said, 'Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.' ²² And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him one after another, 'Is it I, Lord?' ²³ He answered, 'He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me, will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.' ²⁵ Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Is it I, Master?' He said to him, 'You have said so.'

Reflection

THIRTY PIECES of silver was the value placed on a slave, gored by an ox (Exodus 21:32). It was also the wage of the shepherd cast back into the Treasury (Zech 11:13). No doubt Jesus – and St Matthew (who alone gives us the precise sum) – is aware of these ironies, as are we. Judas' motive – greed, disappointment in what the Messiah turned out to be, or agitator to make the Messiah act as he should – remains unclear. In seeking an opportune time to betray Jesus, Judas settles upon the Passover, and theologically there could not be a more appropriate time for the death of a slave and the price of a shepherd. It is the Kairos, for the death and resurrection. 'My time is at hand', says Jesus.

Matthew's account is slightly different from John's. In Matthew, the disciples anxiously each ask if he is the betrayer. Judas joins in last – perhaps to disguise his plans – and gets the answer 'You have said so'.

Scholars continue to speculate about when the Last Supper took place. Matthew, Mark, and Luke appear to suggest Wednesday evening but John (and the Church thereafter) go for Thursday. There are complicated questions about which Calendar is being followed – so there may be more unanimity than we think – and, in favour of Wednesday, that does permit more time for the intense schedule of events in the unfolding of the Passion, involving variously Arrest, Trial by Sanhedrin, Trial by Herod, Trial by Roman Procurator. The advantage of John's timing is not least that it allows us on this, 'Spy Wednesday', to stay with – and meditate on – the plot to destroy Jesus. It is a plot of the sinful against the Innocent One and therefore it is a plot in which we are all implicated.

Maundy Thursday

Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (RSV)

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁵ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Reflection

The Triduum

WE KEEP Holy Week very actively – waving palms and processing to 'Jerusalem', having our feet washed, or watching others have their feet washed, eating and drinking of the Supper of the Lord, going out to 'the Mount of Olives' to watch in the Garden of Gethsemane, making the Stations of the Cross, venerating the Cross, receiving Holy Communion as we commemorate the Lord's death, sensing the bereavement of Holy Saturday and busying ourselves ready for Easter, gathering at the new fire and watching the lighting of the Paschal Candle, spread its light amongst

us, singing our hearts out as we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead and our own hope of immortality.

All of this 'enactive' stuff, teaching us, year by year, in the ways of discipleship. Then along came a time when we could do almost none of it. The whole Church remained locked in social isolation. Has this happened before? Not in England, apparently, since the thirteenth century, the time of King John. And yet our recusant heritage, splendidly highlighted by the chapel at Hendred House (for a time disguised as a log shed), and the chapel at Milton Manor (discreetly hidden away upstairs), remind us that there were many years when the corporate gathering we have always taken for granted in our lifetime was not possible. And this reminds us of many places in the world – even when there is no plague – where Christians cannot publicly gather to celebrate their faith.

In the light of all this we should perhaps look back on our experience of the time of plague as a rare privilege. Not only did we all share something of the privation of the persecuted Church, but we had the opportunity not previously experienced in our context to approach the mysteries of Holy Week and Easter almost entirely contemplatively. Many had the experience of learning what the domestic church really is – a household - but one sharing a faith. Some had the maybe rather daunting experience of learning to be a hermit. For others, anxiety, bereavement, loneliness, or sickness makes any Holy Week particularly hard and it is too glib simply to say unite your sorrows with Christ on Calvary or with his Blessed Mother standing by. And yet, what else can we say? May we all learn and know the victory of the Cross.

GOOD FRIDAY

Reading

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 (RSV)

Jesus the Great High Priest

4 ¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need....

5 ⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he

was heard for his godly fear. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Reflection

The Mystery of the Cross

GOOD Friday tells us of the suffering, death, and burial of the one who entered the Holy City of Jerusalem amidst great jubilation only five days earlier. At any reckoning, it is a story of human tragedy, but it is not only the tragedy of a young man, who was brutally executed, after showing so much brilliance as a religious teacher and healer. That would be true in a universe without God. I remember an undergraduate whom I met in university days who had a striking portrayal of the crucifixion over his mantlepiece. He wasn't himself a believer but he valued the picture as an example of good behaviour. The human tragedy is much more than the loss of innocent life. It is well-expressed in the desolation of the bereaved disciples on the Emmaus Road after the Crucifixion. 'But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Lk 24:21), they told the mysterious stranger. It's the Redeemer who has died.

We can draw much from the good behaviour. Here is one who is perfectly obedient. The reading from Hebrews puts it this way:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

So, at the very least, salvation is derived from the obedience of one who is perfect. We obey him just as he obeyed the will of his Father. But the one to redeem Israel is not just obedient. He suffers representatively. When we read Isaiah and encounter the 'Suffering Servant' – which we repeatedly do – we can never be sure whether we are talking about one man or a whole people. Or, to be more precise, we can do justice to the sayings only if we bear in mind that this is both a man and a people. A man who suffers. A people who suffer. Such has the complex destiny of Israel appeared over the years, particularly in the last 75 years.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us

whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

So the one who is obedient also suffers representatively, and we have to embrace the mystery that he is 'stricken, smitten by God'. We also have to embrace the mystery that his chastisement makes us whole, we are healed by his stripes. That, as Isaiah says, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. His life is poured out as a fragrant offering, a sacrifice to God, the one sacrifice which ends any need on our part to offer other sacrifices.

None of this is at all easy to understand, and simplistic explanations won't do. We have to wait for Easter, and for the stranger on the Emmaus Road to explain himself, if we are really to begin to understand. Meanwhile the Letter to the Hebrews helps us on our way. Here is the 'great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God....not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'

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