Tuesday Holy Week

Today’s gospel (Jn 13:21-33,36-38) is very strange. It is a mysterious moment in the story that is absorbing us this week, a story in which we are meant to find ourselves. If we do not find ourselves in the story, we will not find Jesus either.

He is at supper and falls into ‘deep agitation of spirit’. He is not approaching the end of his life with cool stoicism. But nor is he panicking. Philosophically, death is something we can objectify, distance from ourselves. It is out there, something affecting others. But, as the present crisis has shown us, it is not out there. Now or later, it is coming for all of us. Better be prepared and what better way than to practice dying? A spiritual path does not isolate us safely above the hard fact of our mortality. Jesus trembled before it. But deep prayer shows us what death the great unknown, really is. Meditation whether you believe or not is deep prayer.

We get a glimpse into the mind of Jesus whenever we see, in ourselves, how meditation makes us both more sensitive and vulnerable to suffering; but also frees from the instinct to lash back at those who hurt us. Suffering comes in many forms: at this moment in the story it is as the rawest pain of an intimate betrayal, the death of love.

Jesus tells the disciples directly that one of them will betray him. They are bewildered and start whispering among themselves who it might be. Peter asks John, the disciple most intimate to Jesus, who was reclining next to him, to ask him who it would be. Jesus complies; as an intimate friend he shares everything. He gives a piece of bread to Judas signifying that he is the one whose name will be forever cursed in history after this night.

At that instant ‘Satan enters Judas’. This is a dark inversion of what should happen. The bread Jesus gave Judas is the same with which Jesus identified himself: ‘this is my body’. By giving the bread he gives *himself*, as every Christian who celebrates the Eucharist in some way feels. But Satan? Suddenly, though, this becomes like a black mass, the kind that Satanists celebrate. Not the receiving of holy communion but blasphemy, the unleashing of the dark perverse of self-destruction.

The human heart is good, Godlike. People give themselves, like the 600,000 in Britain recently who in 24-hours volunteered to help others during the crisis. But there is also a heart of darkness to reckon with. There are splinters of this darkness in each of us. In human beings, even between those who are intimate, darkness can become personal and conscious: the people who coughed into the faces of the police who told them they were breaking the social distancing rules; the paedophile who grooms his victims; he serial killer; the addict; those whom power or wealth have corrupted.

The same darkness is waiting, unconsciously and impersonally, in the billions of Covid-19 virus that could fit into a space the size of this full stop. We don’t know much about the virus or why Judas betrayed his teacher and friend. Darkness is *dark*. The gospel says when Judas left table to betray Jesus, ‘night fell’.

Wednesday Holy Week

The virus may have been physically present in humans for a long time. Circumstances came together that made the terrible mutation we are experiencing. Eventually, we will understand the science and find a vaccine. We don’t personally blame the virus itself for what it is wreaking, any more than we blame meteorological conditions for natural disasters. We would be foolish however, not to ask about the human element – disrespect for the environment, social injustice, exploitation of the weak - in the creation of these disastrous circumstances. Because every effect has a cause.

But at the human level – yesterday I was reflecting on the character of Judas and our capacity for betrayal – personal responsibility cannot be avoided. We always point a finger of blame somewhere. The husband of a friend of mine gave her an unwelcome Christmas present one year by confessing that he had been having an affair with her best friend for the past decade. In an instant (the same time it took for Satan to enter Judas) he transmitted the virus of the infidelity that shattered her world, inwardly and outwardly. It does not take long to kill someone. But later, as her life had begun to re-form, she told me she was still mad at him, but that she could see how it had happened and her own involvement in the circumstances behind the collapse of their relationship. He had become highly stressed at work, emotionally distant, and she had allowed him to become increasingly separate, convincing herself that this was the best way she could love him.

This week we are living the story of the last days of Jesus. It is a root story in humanity’s collective memory. It helps us read the story of our lives and see sense in the senseless, light in the darkness. To see darkness is the beginning of spiritual vision. What the story will not allow us to do, is evade the truth or deny reality. Unless we come to insight into the meaning of our own story, we will be condemned to repeat the works of darkness until the story of our life ends. So, we don’t know why Judas became the archetypal betrayer. And, if we did, it would make the story too personal and prevent it being the root story of humanity.

All we can say is that our dark deeds are bound to what darkness has previously touched and traumatised us. Who betrayed Judas? Why could he not bear the light? Whatever its cause, his betrayal lead to the climactic triumph of the dark forces of the Passion of Christ. From this moment of darkness Jesus becomes the Christ : his suffering has become universal.

We read the story by allowing it to read us. We see how our suffering and darkness are already contained in the story. We simply accept what we cannot avoid. With the wisdom this brings we penetrate the darkness. We need only a path to guide us into it and through it.

The path is our guide through the dark. ‘The Prince of this world approaches. He has no rights over me; but the world must be shown that I love the Father and do exactly as he commands; so up, let us go forward.’ (Jn 14:30-31)

Holy Thursday

‘Do this in memory of me’. Jesus says this during the Last Supper, which evolved – and is still evolving in Christian life - as the Eucharist. We ‘remember’ him as members of his mystical body and this remembering nourishes us and helps us to grow. It is food for the journey, a healing of the human condition, a celebration of life as it could be lived with the powers of forgiveness, equality and sharing. Of course, it is symbolic. But symbols are forces of transformation.

There are different kinds of acts of memory. There is a remembering of anger and resentment we call vengeance. There is nostalgia, of regret and sadness for what is lost in time. These kinds of memory keep us looking backwards. They fail to incorporate the past in the present. They cannot prepare us for what’s coming next in the flow of time, the unknown future. These forms of remembering do not guide us to the present moment. They are not the way of ‘calling to mind’ that the Eucharist is about.

In a contemplative Eucharist, such as we celebrate at Bonnevaux (and do online every Sunday), it is easier to feel the presence of Christ in the eternal now, the present moment where the past is healed, and we are renewed to build the future.

Many of the readers of these daily reflections have been forced to become more solitary and even isolated since the beginning of Lent. I was talking today to a meditator who has been in quarantine for two weeks in a hotel room. He is coping well, he told me. He hasn’t turned on the television at all. Some days he adds a third meditation to his regular morning and evening sessions. He keeps in touch online with family and close friends and he started a creative work project which is absorbing him. He began the enforced solitude and dramatic slowdown with the advantage of an already established spiritual path. He is glad to be going home soon but he has learned a lot from the experience and is grateful for it. He feels he will life differently, more simply and gratefully.

For many others the slow down or solitude have not been so easy. Time has hung heavy on them. They have felt restless, lonely, isolated, forgotten, abandoned. When we are in pain it is natural to seek distraction, to “take your mind off it.” But distraction can become a problem in itself, giving only temporary relief. As it becomes more addictive, higher does are needed to achieve the same result.

Many of us are addicted to some forms of distraction already. Finding ourselves in house arrest may mean we automatically increase the dose or look instinctively for other ways of fixing the problem – which they don’t. It can also be an opportunity to discover what a spiritual path and practice mean.

Meditation doesn’t solve the Covid-19 problem. If the virus is contagious before meditation, it will still be contagious afterwards. But a simple daily practice of meditation will, without doubt, change the way you approach and cope with the crisis