Holy Week Addresses 2020

John 12.1-11

John 12.20-36

John 13.21-32

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Wednesday – Jesus betrayed

This year we journey through Holy Week in the company of St John’s Gospel. So far this week we’ve thought about the mixed messages conveyed by Mary’s anointing of Jesus with expensive ointment and Jesus’ commitment to teaching a universal gospel of salvation to Greeks and Jews right through these closing days of his life on earth. We’re aware of tension between Jesus and his followers and within Jesus himself too - and the strength of this is brought home powerfully to us tonight in the revealing of the betrayer himself.

Jesus is deeply distressed and reveals his fears to his disciples – one of you will betray me. Inevitably the gossip begins: who? Who is it? Who is going to do this to Jesus? His closest friend, the one whom Jesus loved, extracts the confidence from Jesus in the seemingly innocent passing of a morsel of bread. Jesus then urges Judas to get on with it – and out Judas goes into the physical and spiritual darkness of the night.

As I write these words, I imagine myself right there amongst them all watching these terrible events begin to play out.

And I have to admit to finding myself feeling a little sympathy for Judas. Just as Jesus absorbed into himself all the pain and sin of the world through the cross, so I am conscious of the way tradition has poured upon Judas all the responsibility for betraying Jesus. Yet we know we are as vulnerable to self-interest as Judas was; we are just as culpable in our denials of Christ.

It isn’t accidental that only seven verses later – shortly after this evening’s passage is concluded - Jesus predicts Peter’s denials – “truly, truly, I say to you”, Jesus says, “before this night is out you too will have denied me three times.” Jesus wasn’t going to let the rest of the disciples get away with blaming Judas for everything that was to follow. Jesus immediately shows them their weakness too – as indeed he reveals ours this and every Holy Week. We like to think ourselves as accompanying Jesus to the cross this week, yet in truth we are accompanying Judas and Peter too. I’m not sure which I find more uncomfortable – or from which I find more to learn.

John mixes narrative with theology in his typical easy style that can lead us to overlook the significance of some themes that flow through his passion. One of them is the theme of glorification. We have heard Jesus say tonight: Now is the Son of Man glorified and in him is God glorified; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

This doesn’t sound like the voice of Jesus to me, especially when it is immediately followed by pastoral words of comfort and instruction from Jesus to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

So, what is John trying to say through his theme of glorification, words almost certainly that he has put into Jesus’ mouth long after the resurrection?

This isn’t the first time this week that we’ve heard this theme expounded by John, nor will it be the last; rather it is a theme that has been building in tandem with the growing tension of the passion story.

On Monday it was merely hinted at when Jesus defended Mary’s actions in anointing Jesus by reminding his disciples of the imminent death of their Messiah. And then last night Jesus twice reminds his disciples that the time has come for God to glorify his name through him. And then this evening John makes the definitive statement on glorification in a tongue twister almost as confusing as the Prologue to John’s gospel on the incarnation that we read with joy each Christmas.

The timing is all important. Jesus talks of glorification immediately once Judas has left to get the final stages of the journey to the cross underway. Thanks to Judas the great act by which God will be glorified has now begun, and through it all truth will be revealed for all humanity for evermore. The identification of the betrayer – that moment of greatest tension and darkness in the entire story of these final days – is also the means by which the tension will be broken forever and eternal light break in to the world for all to see by.

For John the glorification of God through Christ’s passion begins with Judas, it does not wait for the resurrection itself. God is glorified in Judas, in Peter, in Caiaphas, in Pilate, in Barabbas, in the crowd, in the Roman soldiers, in the cross….as well as in the resurrection.

John’s rendering of the passion story reminds us powerfully that yes, we are partly selfish like Judas and yes, we are partly vulnerable like Peter, but that despite that we too are the means of glorifying God, the means by which God is revealed and known.

And as Good Friday creeps ever closer with all the guilt this day traditionally brings, here is the hope to which we cling. For God is at the heart of the worst of times; even when we are in the deepest, darkest of places ourselves, we are never alone. Hope is always at work.