

Palm Sunday Meditations

Truly I tell you

‘Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.’

That has not happened too often. Actually why not?

Exploring the story, the first thing I learn is that this woman does not have a name. What she did seemed to be so marginal and secondary, or maybe so annoying and displeasing, that remembering her did not seem to need a lot of care.

I guess that has to do with the fact that she is a woman.

Many names of others are conserved: James the Elder and John – the Sons of Thunder, who live up to their byname (even the byname has been conserved), when they want to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans.

Why do I know their name and not the one of the woman?

Or Peter, the rock (how ridiculous), the coward and betrayer, who sleeps in the garden and pulls out the sword.

Why do I know his name and not the one of the woman?

What is behind all this, that the names of those who are connected to violence and terror, betrayal and pomposity are written in bold letters, while the name of the woman, connected to an awesome act of love is kept secret?

I assume that the disappearance of her name has to do with the fact that she refuses to be part of this undeserving game of always being above and never being deeply touched by suffering.

She accepts that you can't have things under control all the time, that you don't have to find words or a backdoor for everything.

What a source of uncertainty she must have been, how insecure she must have made people just by her quiet and yet unmistakable act of love.

A challenge for all who confidently focus on certainty, control and distance. A challenge for all who, besides doing all the talking, unlearned the other forms of communication, the language of the hands and the eyes of this woman.

I can watch her in my mind's eye touching and soothing Jesus' forehead with her hands, softening the wrinkles and soothing away any tension he may have had by her warm fingers and the smell of her precious oil.

I can see, in my mind's eye, how she looks at him knowing that nothing in the past can be changed but preparation for the future can begin.

I can see her in my mind's eye, how Jesus starts to relax as she massages his feet and, as she watches him, how he draws breath and arranges his thoughts.

The longer I watch her, in my mind's eye, her tender loving, the more I feel my own tension soothed away, how I draw breath and arrange my ideas, how I start losing my fear of being weak and powerless, my fear of losing words, my fear of being touched.

Being touched, not only did Jesus good, it also eases me and puts my mind at rest.

The silent love and giving of the unnamed woman helps me to realise that I don't need to know or understand everything, and sometimes accepting what lies ahead, without question, is what is required of me.

The woman encourages me to believe in the language of silence, the language of touching and being present, the language of going along and sharing the suffering.

This is still a strange and somehow foreign language and I am ambitious to learn and listen to her message.

The unnamed woman is a patient teacher, as she has been for nearly 2000 years. I still do not know her name. She still remains silent with a smile on her lips...it is up to us to keep silent no longer but to tell about the unnamed woman and her tender love which touches and moves not only me.

The Last Supper

Three to four hours, and a meal that would forever change the world.

No war or time of peace, no government or nation, no army or ruler has had or will ever have an impact on the course of history in a way this one evening did. They all sat round the table. Lively conversation... and the main course served. Jesus hadn't said much throughout the evening. He seemed serious, almost sad. Where there tears in his eyes?

A sadness in his smile?

And then in a brief moment of silence while everyone's mouths were full, he spoke: "I tell you the truth" – and he looked at them all – "one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." The truth, the bitter truth in the middle of a feast.

You could have heard a pin drop. Suddenly everything came to a sudden halt, and one by one his disciples asked, "It isn't I, is it?"

But it could be all of them.

It could be me.

"It is one of you – one who dips bread into the bowl with me.

They all had been dipping their bread into the bowl...

They all stopped dipping and eating, as he continued.

"The son of man will just go as it is written..."

He'd just got to Jerusalem. How could he talk about leaving it? Talk about going? Where to?

People still needed him. People wanted to hear his teaching. People longed for his love and support.

How can he talk about betrayal?

But hadn't he warned them? Prepared them?

Now they were all angry. Confused. Upset. They didn't know what to think. And they'd lost their appetite.

Silence. Denial. Nobody wanted to think such thoughts.

But then he broke the silence again.

He took some of the bread that was prepared for that day, and said: "Take it; eat it; this is my body."

His body? What did he mean, his body?

They had no idea what he was talking about.

When the food was gone and it was time for another glass of wine to be served, Jesus took the cup of wine, and they drank from it.

"This is my blood of the new covenant which is being shed for many."

Drinking blood sounds strange.

But that wasn't what they were thinking at that moment. ...his blood being shed for many...

They weren't hearing things. That was the way he phrased it.

Not something in the past or something in the future, but something in the present. As if he knew something had already started. Like this traitor who he had spoken of was already up to no good plans. As if his death was already on the way... As if he was already dying.

And shed for many?

What did he mean?

How could they ever understand?

Jesus thanked his host, when he left the house.

On the table in the upstairs room were bread and wine – body and blood – a reminder of Jesus' last meal with his friends, forever changing the world.

It's become communion for the church.

And we have been celebrating it ever since, remembering him, getting closer in line with him, becoming more and more who he was, who he is, who he's meant us to be.

In the Garden

In the shadows of Gethsemane's trees we find a place of broken promises.

In the end they all had left Jesus and fled. These people are the same who just hours before had been fighting amongst themselves over which one would be sitting at Jesus' right hand. They had declared undying loyalty. Peter even went so far as to say "even though all may fall away, yet I will not."

They'd left the lighted upper room where they'd shared the last supper, and entered the darkness of the garden. An olive orchard away from the busyness of the city of Jerusalem.

Their faithfulness fails. Their commitment fades away. Their best intentions are lost in these moments of tiredness and fear.

Jesus told 8 disciples to stay at the edge of the garden. 3 he took further on to share with him.

He urged the three to keep watch, to stay awake, to stay alert, to stay near him. It would have been so good, not to be alone. It would have been so good, not to be so exposed, so abandoned.

Jesus' agony is deep – to the point of death.

He's got to let go.

He's got to accept.

He's got to suffer right through to the end.

But they don't understand.

Pray with me – but they are caught in their own thoughts and fears.

Remain with me – but they distance themselves by falling asleep.

Stay awake for me – but they miss the point right from the beginning.

The garden of the broken promises becomes the garden of the broken heart.

Jesus' disappointment goes deep.

Weights heavily. Aches unbearably.

And this all doesn't happen once – which would be painful enough.

No, it happens three times.

That is too cruel to bear!?

No friends at your side – but God?!

In this situation of utter loneliness would he have known that God was still with him? Could Jesus have known this when he threw himself to the ground and prayed to his father?

He must have.

He speaks with God. Negotiates. Pleads.

And the outcome is: not what I want, but what you want.

In spite of his enormous pain Jesus can still make a decision. "Whatever comes – it will be with God at his side.

When Jesus comes back to his disciples for the 3rd time, his words are almost ironic: Are you still sleeping and taking a rest?

And before any of them could answer, he adds: the son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

Such a death is not a decision one can make for oneself.

Such a death is a decision the others make...

...having utterly abandoned the one they were friends with for so long.

Pilate

We have come a long way from the last supper and the broken promises in the garden of Gethsemane.

"Get up, let us be going. See my betrayer is at hand." were Jesus' last words spoken in freedom.

Immediately after he'd said this, he was kissed by Judas, arrested by the chief priests and elders and abandoned by all his friends.

Peter denies him. Judas commits suicide.

And Jesus is brought before Pilate.

There stands Jesus in front of Pilate.

Even though Pilate is the man who controls the country, he appears confused.

Confused that a king would attempt to set up a kingdom in the manner that Jesus has pursued.

Confused that the religious leaders are fighting against their own people.

Confused about the way this all goes...

He notices the mob that seems to be restless on that morning. They are howling about something and they are quite serious about their requests. Pilate tries to recall what he knows about this wandering preacher... the words in his heart, "I find no fault in this man." And he reviews the last three years:

A widow's son is miraculously called from the deathbed.

The bride whose wedding almost went bad had more wine than she'd ever planned.

The cripple who walked out of the house carrying his bed.

The parents who rejoiced over their daughter's restoration to life.

The thousands who were fed.

All of this Pilate remembers.

And now Jesus was thrust into his courts by the religious leaders.

It was here that things began to go wrong for Pilate.

He violates the voice of his conscience.

Instead he orders Jesus to be whipped.

But that is not enough. They want him crucified.

Pilate can no longer stand this. In the brilliance of his mind, he vaguely

remembers an old Hebrew habit: He calls his servant and orders a basin of water to be sent and washes his hands.

Pilates actions and non-actions may accuse us in one way or another.

They may question us.

They ask us, where we see ourselves as we are reflecting on Jesus' hours before Pilate.

Are we part of this washing hands and looking the other way, saving our bare skin and neglecting what could be done to save somebody else's life?

Where are we standing?

...guilty of doing nothing?

Are we among the oppressors who are handing innocent lives to the cross?

Are we washing our hands in innocence as Pilate does, because we shove the responsibility for what is going on in the world to others?

Stations of the Cross cannot be looked at without getting involved.

They touch us.

They draw us near.

They make us part of their story.

And they make us part of the story of Jesus' passion.

In all who suffer, in all who are tortured and die Jesus suffers, too.

...and at the same time he bears the guilt of the world.

Whoever is willing to follow Jesus, must play a part in the stations of the cross of this world...

Then we learn to see with Jesus' eyes:

images of horror on the one side,

and visions of hope on the other;

people who comfort and help and

people who believe in life in spite of death.