

Monday in Holy Week

Welcome to this series of thoughts and questions. We are making our Journey with the Disciples and all followers of Jesus to the foot of his cross.

The Rev'd Brian Harris has offered a prayer to use.

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy.
Sustain and support the anxious, be with those who care for the sick, and lift up all who are brought low,
that we may find comfort, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

John 12:1-11. Jesus is Anointed at Bethany

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

Some thoughts and questions from Malcolm.

As soon as this Corona Virus struck and we were confined to our homes for worship one image came into my mind. It may be familiar to some of you. It is the comment of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter from his prison cell. He used the phrase 'Religionless Christianity'. He had been imprisoned for being part of a conspiracy to overthrow Hitler. In the letter he began to think about several things, one of them being a situation where we are unable to worship together.

Others of you might think of a poem by Philip Larkin which he called Church going. He muses about whether some of the churches he visits were worth the stop and how many more might fall into decay through neglect - but he includes the important line for us especially now that we cannot enter our buildings. He says, 'It pleases me to stand in silence here. A serious house on serious earth it is'.

So now it is Holy Week and we cannot enter our serious church buildings. We have to do something quite different: worship and pray together but apart in our own homes. Christianity but without coming together for worship in a building we love. Loss is what we have to think about in Holy Week. The loss of hope and of the immediate loss of the earthly Jesus. Judas, Mary, Lazarus and the others were wondering what was happening after his startling ministry with all those fine sayings and inspiring acts.

Where was God in all this? With hindsight we know what happened but at the time it did not look like that. Bonhoeffer's concepts were picked up by a group of theologians who wanted to ask about the absence of a God who so many want to intervene in the affairs of this world - 'Is God Dead?' they asked. Bonhoeffer's answer was a different one. He said that in the events of this Holy Week God had 'allowed himself to be edged out of this world and on to a Cross'

On this Monday we think of absences - from worshipping together, from the reassurance of being in a 'safe' building, God's serious house on serious earth, and we ask what we can do. Our task is not to criticise as Judas did but to 'anoint Jesus' in our thoughts and with deliberate acts of love and service as Mary did. Our religion for now takes place outside our buildings but we are still a community - and a community of communities in the City Centre of York and beyond.

We may feel separated and even a sense of bereavement. It is what kind of personal impact we can still have which is important. Just like us today it was Bonhoeffer's inner faith which sustained him. Just like us he often felt it was not enough and that he was a failure, but others thought differently.

Poem chosen by Malcolm.

Who Am I?
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectations of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!