Week 6

Prepare yourself by reading Luke chapter 19.28 to chapter 23.56

Reflections on the Gospel reading

We have come to the end-point of our Lenten journey. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem where the end events of his earthly journey would be played out. This final week of his life was critically important for all the Gospel writers, if evidenced only by the amount of space in each Gospel devoted to it. Luke devotes 23% of his Jesus-story to this final week. In a similar way he devotes 8% to the birth events of Jesus. That’s about 30% of the story allocated to the bookending events of Jesus’ life, his birth and death. This is where the meaning of his earthly existence is explained. He was born with a purpose that was not revealed until his death and resurrection. The other 70% of the story covers the final three years of his life, a series of events and teachings that exemplified his time of engaged living in Galilee and the surrounding districts.

This final week then beings with an entry procession where he is surrounded by an adoring crowd all fully engaged in this expectation-charged present moment. In a sense this was a Roman triumph in reverse. Rather than a parade for a general to celebrate a huge victory, this was an anticipatory triumph, a credit-card type of victory – enjoy now and pay later. All four Gospel writers tell the ‘Palm Sunday’ story but Luke’s version is palm-less. Where the other Gospel writers mention the crowds waving tree branches or palm branches, Luke describes them only as spreading their outer garments on the road before him.

The crowd were like any excited group gathered for action and celebration – they were totally in the present moment. They adored Jesus and were prepared to do whatever he asked of them. They expected big things of him and were prepared to back him. We are reminded here of the story of the general Jehu in 2 Kings 9, who was anointed with oil and thus chosen by God as the new king. He couldn’t be king however without overthrowing the present king and he needed the backing of his officers. In verse 13 it is recorded that they spread their cloaks on the steps and blew trumpets to proclaim him king. Jehu was expected to walk over the cloaks to accept their offer of support. It was an agreement for them to work together. Here on a Sunday in Jerusalem, in a new time and place, it happened again. A new leader was proclaimed as of king of Israel and Jesus was accepting the pledge of support from the crowd by riding over their cloaks.

This reading is the shorter of the two Gospel readings appointed to be read on Palm Sunday. It is read at the start of the day’s liturgy and later in the service the full passion reading is read. This final week is full of intense action in energy-filled present moments. In the upper room around a meal table, in the temple in a scattering of money and animals, in a dark garden with soldiers, in a cold dark courtyard, an army barracks, in a trial-court setting and a bloody dusty walk up through streets and up to the hill of execution.

Let’s look at some of these moments and reflect on the pain, fear and expectation that fill the present moments of Jesus and his disciples. There is much kairos in these chronos moments. They are significant times where life changing events take place for Jesus, his followers and the world.

Read Luke 22.7-38

Here Jesus and his inner-group of disciples are gathered for yet another meal together. In their three years together wandering around Galilee their relationship changed and developed over time in the context of shared food. If we do the sums on this, we could ‘guesstimate’ the number of shared meals as being in the vicinity of 2000 if they ate together twice a day. These meal times were generally unhurried and focussed on time and place, the diners gathered around a common table and perhaps a common plate. Freed from the distractions that people face in our day and place they focussed upon one another. No televisions, mobile phones to take one’s attention away from what was happening - just people, place and food. Jesus’ relationship with his followers grew from master and servant to friend as he opened his heart and mind to them (John 15.15). They were truly now ‘companions’ because their friendship was facilitated through sharing bread together – Latin ‘cum panis’, shared bread. Here at the companionship meal the inconceivable happened. One who dipped his bread into the shared food dish betrayed him. (John13.26).

To this special Passover meal where they remembered the great time and place liberating event of centuries before, Jesus added another layer of meaning and foreshadowed another divine liberating event. His body would be broken, and his blood shed and this sacrifice of himself would be recalled again and again until he comes again. His disciples would meet him whenever they gathered to share bread and wine and remember his sacrificial life and death. Paul recorded this event in 1 Cor 11.23-26 and said that he received this instruction from the Lord himself. ‘Do this in remembrance’ opens a rich possibility of meaning. The remembering of the Passover event involved a somewhat mystical participation in the original event because they were the recipients of the benefits of the event. In an important sense, in this remembering, chronos time was suspended and all that mattered was the reality of the kairos event – God’s saving action in the here and now existence of his people. We are invited to understand this power of remembering as we share holy communion. Jesus the incarnate and crucified Saviour is present with his people because he is also the risen Lord, the head of his gathered body.

Jesus was present and revealed in the breaking of the bread at the end of the day’s journey on the Emmaus road (Luke 24.30) and on the beach by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21). Jesus said, ‘remember I am with you always’ (Matthew 28.20). From now on the Lord would be present with his people in a real way wherever and whenever they gathered and remembered the upper room meal. He was physically absent after his resurrection and ascension but was present with them in the Holy Spirit and in the ‘sacrament’ of holy communion.

Read Luke 22.39-62

After the remembrance meal Jesus led his companions through the dark streets to the garden of Gethsemene. Here Jesus wanted to be quiet and gather himself before the day that lay ahead. As if the things that happened at the meal had not been sufficiently challenging and confusing, the quiet of the dark garden was about to be invaded. Jesus was fully engaged in the moment where temptation and anxiety dominated, and he sweated profusely. In this moment where Jesus was fully aware of his humanity and frailty he was suddenly aware of God’s strengthening presence (Luke 22.39-46). His companions were in the garden and yet absent - they were asleep.

Suddenly the moment was transformed with noise and lamp light as the temple police and betrayer arrived. The confused disciples were unsure what to do and spoke and acted rashly as they had on the mountain of transfiguration. Peter lashed out with the sword and was rebuked by Jesus. Jesus was led away, and the disciples ran away. Peter at least remained and followed him to the courtyard of the high priest but there it was his turn to experience anxiety and fear. When challenged and questioned he three times denied knowing Jesus. The rooster crowed, and Jesus looked at him. Jesus looked at Peter without judgement but with an understanding look. Peter ran off weeping. God is always with us in our present moments with a knowing and loving watch.

The well-known Catholic story-telling theologian Megan McKenna sees this as the end of Peter’s disciple-relationship with Jesus. In the garden of resurrection McKenna points to the message given to Mary Magdalene by the angel and Jesus - ‘Go and tell his disciples, *and Peter*, that he is going ahead of you to Galilee’. McKenna’s assertion is that Peter was no longer a disciple and so is mentioned separately. If he had he not denied Jesus, he would have simply been one the disciples and not mentioned by name. Many people had followed Jesus for a time until they could no longer understand him or face the cost of following and Peter had now joined that group. Interestingly this mention to Mary of the disciples and Peter is only in Mark’s Gospel – and we are told by the early church father Papias that Mark was writing down Peter’s own recollections. If McKenna is correct then Peter made an honest assessment of his failure and faithlessness. John in his Gospel addresses the issue of Peter’s abandoning of Jesus – Jesus asks Peter three times to affirm his following to reverse his three-fold denial in the courtyard.

As followers of Jesus today we are no different to his first companions, but we do have the benefit of hindsight, the Church and the Holy Spirit. We all have our Judas and Peter moments where the temptation to stop following is very real. In our failures we must take the un-despairing Peter as our role model.

Read Luke chapter 23

We come to the end of our Lenten journey and the end of Jesus’ earthy life. In this final night and morning of the Lord’s life we notice another transformation. This one is subtler than the dramatic mountain top transfiguration but is very real nonetheless. The New Testament scholar WH Vanstone pointed out that from the moment of his arrest in the garden, Jesus becomes passive and silent. When Jesus is questioned by Pilate he makes a short elusive response (Luke 23.3). Pilate sent him to Herod who questioned him at length, but he made no reply (Luke 23.9).

He is well and truly committed to his course of action and does not seek to escape from his present moment; he is fully engaged in living his destiny. He now appears more an object than a subject. Where Jesus was always the powerful centre of activity in his Galilean ministry and his private companion time with disciples, he has become a silent shadow of a man. He surrendered himself to the worldly authorities and allowed them to do as they wish – but more importantly he has surrendered himself to God the Father for God’s will to be done. Vanstone notes that almost all the verbs associated with Jesus are, from the moment of his arrest, passive in nature. Instead of Jesus doing, going and speaking, he is done-to, he is taken, he is spoken to. He is submissive and cooperative and almost seems to be hastening his end, aiding his captors, accusers, judges and executors to carry out their talk. He was condemned at a particular time and in a particular place. People screamed their rejection in the, there and then.

Jesus’ ultimate surrender happened in the moment of the cross. This is the supreme here and now. The nails, the laughter, the gambling; his crucifixion, pain and death all happened on a particular hill near Jerusalem in chronos time. “Father into your hands I commend my spirit” was the ultimate kairos moment for Jesus, humanity, creation. Nothing would be the same any more. Jesus had lived faithfully between birth and death and everything was changed now.