

Night Prayer and reflection for Holy Wednesday

The Gathering ...

Welcome and introduction

O God, come to our aid,
O Lord, make haste to help us

**Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning,
is now and ever shall be,
world without end.
Amen.**

Song / hymn

Just as I am, without one plea
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, thy love unknown
has broken ev'ry barrier down,
now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Charlotte Elliott, taken from HON 287

Scripture reading

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples – the one whom Jesus loved – was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So, while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'

John 13: 21-25

Tina Beattie in her beautiful book 'The Last Supper According to Martha and Mary' explores the tension that arises in our search for love and justice. She places Judas in the Zealot tradition – people who fought for the oppressed Israelites under Roman rule. They had a vision of love, freedom and justice, and saw the only way forward as active – and violent - opposition. Jesus shared this vision, but his way was of non-violent love, of rejecting the hate and violence that in the end consumes itself, with a love that grows slowly and brings justice from transformation. The vision was the same as Jesus', but the Way was so different. It is the shared vision that brings Judas to Jesus, and the difference in way that pulls them apart.

We are invited tonight to stand in their shoes – to wrestle with them. To search our hearts as to where we stand, do we really believe we can love the world into transformation... do we believe in that as an active force in the world?

We are invited to stand in the dark tonight, and yet as we stand there, we stand in the presence of the light.

Words from Tina Beattie....

Judas has just entered the room in anger and distress, and punched Jesus in the face.

'Traitor!' Judas screams. 'Traitor! We followed you. We believed in you. For three years we've starved with you, wept with you, trampled the desert with you, waiting for the moment when the

time was right. When? In the name of God, when will the time be right, Jesus. Our people are dying.

You talk of the kingdom of God? Come with me, now. Come out onto the streets where men are gathering and arming themselves in the darkness. Come and fight for the people you claim to love. Take hold of the sword and show us your courage. Show us you're willing to die for what you believe.

Blood seeps down Jesus' face from a graze on his cheekbone. His eye is bruised. He raises his arms and grips Judas, just as Judas grips him. The two men begin a slow and monstrous wrestling, as if they are performing some strange rite of initiation. Judas rips away Jesus' robes, so that their naked torsos writhe and coil together like serpents. I cannot tell their limbs apart.

But as I watch, something happens to the shape and mood of their struggle. They begin to make huge circling movements, locked in one another's arms, swaying and undulating with a unity of purpose that is incomprehensible to the rest of us. Slowly, quietly, they subside into stillness, and Judas puts his head on Jesus' shoulder and sobs as I have never heard a man sob before. Not even Lazarus, fresh from the horror of the grave, sobbed like that.

'Judas, Judas,' says Jesus, and cupping Judas' face in his hands he raises his head so that their eyes meet. 'What have you to do with me?' he says.

Judas is a man in torment. His mouth is contorted with grief and his eyes blaze with fury and terror.

'I don't know. Tell me, what have I to do with you?' he wails.

He falls to his knees and wraps his arms around Jesus' legs. Jesus extricates himself and pours water into the bowl. His palms bear the marks of Judas' blood. He takes the towel and kneels down beside Judas. He washes his bloodstained hands, and then he dips a corner of the towel into the water and gently wipes away the blood from Judas' face.

'Judas, you must do what you have to do, he whispers.

Jesus stands up, ties the towel around his waist and picks up the water bowl.

'Come,' he says, 'we must wash our feet and begin our meal.'

It is easy to look back, and to blame Judas, as he falls under the weight of confusion, and pressure, good intention, and mis-direction. We forget the uncomfortable shifting around the table – and the question of the disciple Jesus loved... 'Who is it?'

Words now from Bishop Stephen Cottrell:

...it is convenient to dump the blame on Judas, even when the truth is far more complicated, far more uncomfortable.

Because I have betrayed him.

I have betrayed him in a thousand little ways by all my acts of egocentric self-promotion; by my failure to love, and by my refusal to wash feet; because I want things my way, not his.

He taught me that I will gain life by losing it. But I can't accept that. I still cling on to what I've got. And I'm ready to dump him if necessary.

And there's truth in that, if we are honest, as we stand here in the night tonight and look into our hearts.

And yet! We have a faith in a Lord of unending grace, mercy and life. The Lord who stands in the mess of broken alabaster, of accusation, fear and betrayal – the mess of this holy week. And makes something from it. Makes Easter. Resurrection. Transformation. Sheer Love. The Lord who kisses Judas, who kisses us... who dies for us. Just as we are.

At the end of the day we all betray him. Judas, Peter, us. We stand in the camp-fire and our courage wavers, we are confused, afraid. And that's us at our best; sometimes we just sleep in our beds, ignorant of his call, or perhaps we run away and try to make our own way.

What is the difference, in the end, between Peter, Judas, ... between us? In the end, Judas despairs. He cannot accept grace and forgiveness.

And Peter, faces into the Lord's love... faces the hurt and humiliation, the grace and joy of forgiveness ... and begins again. Peter, the rock on whom the church is built. We, the church, are called this night to face our failure... and to be ready ... for tomorrow the Lord washes our feet, and prepares to die for us... and to raise us with him to new life.

And remember – Peter goes on to try to live a life of love. He gets it wrong, often, if you read the book of Acts... and yet... he is integral to the coming of the kingdom.

All we are asked to do, is to keep standing in the light. In honesty, integrity, and reach out for grace. Do not despair, do not be afraid, Jesus keeps saying... you are my beloved. Come, come, follow me.

I close with some words from Fr. Malcolm Guite...

*Though we betray him, though it is the night.
He meets us here and loves us into light.*

Prayer response

Christ our undying star
We offer you the lightless places of our lives.

In poverty and exile
Mary gave birth to you
And it was night

In fear and longing
Nicodemus searched for you
And it was night

Come to us
In the pain of birth
And the fear of falling

Come to us
In the pathless dark and the shadow of seeking

Come to us
In the cold of loss
And the time of crisis

Bring us to your table laid
And feed us with yourself
Find in us the ember light
And breathe it into fire

For the darkness is not dark to you
For the night and the day are yours
As are we.

Fr. Steven Shakespeare, shared with permission

Bidding Prayer...

A time of stillness, to bring all that we bear on our hearts to God, to commend to him our onward journey. To give thanks that, just as he stood in the mess and confusion of holy week, lifted it up, and brought comfort, healing... and ultimately new life.... So he stands with us and with all people. Today. And Always.

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father,
which art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive them
that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.**

Amen.

Blessing and departure

Give us grace, almighty God,
so to unite ourselves in faith
with your only Son,
who underwent death
and lay buried in the tomb
that we may rise again
in newness of life with him,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

**May the Lord bless us, protect us from
all evil, and bring us to everlasting life.**

Amen

Goodnight

*Gathering and Final Prayer taken from The Divine Office,
the Liturgy of the Hours
Published Collins, 2016, pp. 435, 452 – 455
Reflections taken from:
Tina Beattie, 'The Last Supper According to Martha and
Mary', Burns & Oates, 2001
Cottrell, Gooder & North, 'Walking the Way of the
Cross', CHP, 2019
Malcolm Guite, 'Word in the Wilderness', Canterbury Press 2016*

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