

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

3 April 2022

Welcome

The Gospel just read is like a short story, intense and graphic, a complete drama in miniature. Even though it is concise, it touches the core experiences of accusation and guilt, the individual and the group, tradition and innovation. Like many powerful stories, the Gospel is fraught with background. We would like to know more but much is left unsaid and a great deal is implied. Great stories work like that: they flash upon the inward eye and, somehow, they lodge in our hearts and in our imagination.

Topic

This attractive Gospel can speak to us today.

Steps

The first message is one really needed in our time: while our past may shape us, we need not be burdened by it our whole lives long. In the Christian vision we do not have to carry the burden of our guilt forever precisely "because God in his forbearance had passed over the sins previously committed." (Rom 3:25 NET) In the current idiom, "we do forgiveness" and so we should! Mercy without measure and forgiveness without frontier: the heart of the Good News. In a word, it is possible to begin again and again and again. St Paul puts it well in the second reading:

All I can say is that I forget the past and I strain ahead for what is still to come; I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus.

The second message is for our society in a more general way. Of course, we need investigative journalism, as part of a liberal society. But the rush to judgment—so evident in our public discourse—is matched only by the resistance to forgiveness. Endlessly, we investigate, accuse, judge. But where is absolution? In the hymn *Praise my Soul the King of Heaven*, we sing of God as slow to chide and swift to bless. We are often the opposite: slow to bless and swift to chide. Some people are, of course, to blame but a culture of blaming can conceal a self-deceiving outsourcing of responsibility and a refusal to look at ourselves. As we all know, what we all need fundamentally is forgiveness, the word grace that sets us free—but where do we find it?

The third message is for our church. Often the church, in its cultural and institutional presentation, comes across as a bastion of traditionalism, a kind of canine dinosaur guarding the past, often a dark past of sin and judgment. But the Gospel message in Jesus' day was life-giving and novel, revolutionary and even dangerous. He was not at all afraid to challenge life-less traditions. As we heard last week in the prelude to the Prodigal Son, Jesus was accused of eating with tax-collectors (effectively Roman collaborators) and sinners. As we will here in Holy Week, what he did in the Temple was understood correctly as a fundamental challenge to the religious establishment of the

day and it was the final trigger leading to his arrest and execution. Jesus made his own the words of Amos: *spare me the din of your chanting, what I want is justice!* So, we should not be afraid to think of the Gospel as always new, leading to change, both regenerating and, in critical times, revolutionary.

As we begin to walk the synodal pathway and learn to listen to each other and to the Spirit, let us dream, as the title of Pope Francis' last book is entitled. How would we really like to the community of faith to be? How do I see myself as this new way of being "church" evolves? How much of the past is really essential – Gospel, as we say. How much do we need to change so as to stay true to the inspiration of Jesus' message and person? To take up the earlier phrase: the past does shape us but it does not have to be a burden which prevents us from moving forward. Jesus was prepared to break with the past so as to be true to his God and his Gospel. We cannot do other than what he did. The synodal pathway is an invitation courage, hope, change, evolution and even revolution.

Courage

So, it turns out the intense drama of today's Gospel retains its power at several registers: accusation and guilt, the individual and the group, tradition and innovation. It sets the individual free from the crushing burden of the past. It invites us to move beyond facile judgement towards courageous forgiveness and freedom. As a church, setting out on the synodal pathway, let us dream anew, having the courage to set aside whatever is no longer life-giving, whatever no longer serves the Gospel, having the courage to listen together to the Spirit. In the words of Isaiah,

No need to recall the past,
no need to think about what was done before.
See, I am doing a new deed.