

Sixth Sunday in Lent

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Introduction

Recommended for today is the story of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus as given in Matthew 26:14–27:66. Reading the whole story through, maybe once or twice before preparing for this week's journey towards Easter might allow different aspects of the story to come into clearer focus. For the purpose of this week's Spirituality of Conflict worship material I would like to take one idea, and that is the sin of envy and look at the ways in which jealousy enters the story of the crucifixion.

Envy is a particularly hard sin to define within ourselves, it is easy to see when another is jealous, or ascribe envy to be the motivations of another's actions, but very hard to see it within ourselves. This lack of ability to self-diagnose jealousy as a motivating factor is one of the reasons it is such a dangerous sin. We could see a jealousy of the other disciples in Judas's betrayal of Jesus – it is easy to read into his willingness to sell his Lord for 30 pieces of silver a perverted desire to love Jesus; expressed as a feeling of disappointment that he did not get as close as he wanted. When we are feeling jealous, and we are crossed, then human beings can be very dangerous indeed.

Have you ever felt jealous?

What was the cause? How did it feel?

Is there a time you acted badly from a place of envy without realising it? What were the consequences?

Is there a difference, for you, between envy and jealousy? how would you express that?

Text

Full text is Matthew 26:14–27:66 whereas here we have offered the text of and reflections on Matthew 27:15–23

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

Comment

If we focus, for one week, on one verse, 'For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up.' Pontius Pilate has been able to see a truth in this text that the Jewish leaders, and Judas, and the crowd cannot see. The enemy of the people, the foreign ruler and judge has seen a truth which is vital to understanding the whole picture of what is happening to Jesus. Crucially for the rest of the narrative, Pilate does not share the knowledge of the sin that he sees. He does not tell the leaders that he thinks they are acting out of jealousy.

Indeed, one could argue that jealousy is a very difficult sin to name, partly because we are all guilty of it, it is a sin of degrees. Also, and in this context maybe more importantly, jealousy is a sin that the person being envious is often blind to and yet which it is very damaging to their self-esteem to name. When we accuse another person of being jealous we bring them down twice. Firstly because jealousy is a nasty thing to be accused of, and secondly because we are opening up the reality that the jealous person is acting out of the belief that they lack something another person has. To suggest openly, as leader of the Roman presence in Jerusalem, that the Jewish leaders might be jealous of Jesus would be to suggest they compared themselves to Jesus and found themselves lacking.

Surely it is too easy, from our armchairs, bible in hand, to argue that we all find ourselves lacking when we compare ourselves to Jesus – our Jesus who is a stained glass window, a character in a book, a son of God who has lost his flesh and blood over 2000 years of analysis, love and prayer.

Pilate was standing with a real man in the room; a wandering preacher, a man who had impressed Pilate with his wisdom and self-control. This was a thinking man, a man of prayer, and Pilate could see with human eyes, just comparing Jesus and the religious men before him; that the Jewish leaders were jealous.

So he asks a different question, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?" And we don't know what the reply was at that moment because he is interrupted. A note is brought in presumably by a house slave who has been sent by his wife (nowadays he'd receive a text, imagine the tension in the room as everyone hears the alert, and then Pilate draws his phone out of his pocket). "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream." This warning takes us back to stories of Joseph and Pharaoh, all the old testament tales where the interception of the Esther, or Sarah, or the royal daughter are key to God's purpose in the story. However, this is not an Old Testament tale, the note is to no avail.

It almost seems strange that it is mentioned at all, Pilate's wife has no other role, features in the story in no other way. Perhaps it is evidence that Pilate had

opportunities to think better of what he was doing, an insight into the chat in the bedroom as they got between the sheets that night, there will be no comfort for him in his wife's opinion of his actions.

Or maybe it is simply mentioned because it happened, a note came into the room, a moment of tension was broken and those who might, just might, have been persuaded to think about their actions another way were able to regain their composure and argue for Christ's death. Often when people are acting badly, a pause can be uncomfortable as they feel that moment of unspoken criticism in the room – very rarely do we have no idea of the wrong we are committing, but we can hold down the thoughts when we are speaking, acting, or nursing our own self-righteousness.

It is very rare to meet a person who is knowingly jealous, and rarer still to meet someone who will admit to being a bully. People acting out of jealousy often use bullying behaviour to bring down the person who threatens them, the person they have judged to be better than themselves in some unreachable feature, and so to be a threat. The Jewish leaders could never accept that jealousy was the root motivation of their bullying. But the bullying itself is, oddly, to them, a justification which wipes out any hint of jealousy. The need to kill Jesus becomes an end in itself, motivation and causation are not discussed. The issues of 'guilt' or 'innocence' are not on the table. It is not that he has done something wrong, and must be punished, but rather he *is* something wrong. His goodness is showing up their jealousy and petty envy and so cannot be tolerated. This is why there is no punishment for Jesus which is enough for the crowd, it is not his actions which are being corrected or balanced by a punishment fitting a crime, it is his person-hood created by God, which is an affront, and so it must be obliterated.

Response

This Sunday is not about what we can do for others. Nor is it a Sunday about how others could improve their lives, or what could be done better. If you have been a victim of bullying or conflict caused by jealousy, this Sunday is not about that experience of victimhood. Today the response is to think of those people of whom you are, or have been, jealous. To identify that feeling and how envy motivates you personally. What are the antidotes to jealousy? A theology of personhood? An improved self-esteem? For some it is seeing faults in those we idolise, for others it is improving how we view ourselves. In his ministry on this earth Jesus tended to expect his disciples to focus more on what they could change about themselves than what they could change in others. Have there ever been times for you when jealousy has led to behaviour others might feel was bullying? What can you do about that? What did you do then?

OR

Carol Anne Duffy is well-known for her poems giving the wives of famous men a voice. Why not write your own poem or word-art giving Pilate's wife a voice? What does it feel like for her to be right but for her husband to allow the wrong thing to happen anyway? Could she have done more to prevent the injustice of the crucifixion? Should she have? Is there a time when you have 'sent a note' instead of getting personally involved? When do we just have to accept playing second fiddle? Or is this never the case?

Prayer

God of all the injustices

I never thought I was a jealous person

As if that was a kind of person

One that I could safely say I was not

Until I realised the envy I felt

And was moved by its power

Seeing that jealousy is strong enough

To send Christ to the cross

Makes we wonder at the force of my own sin

I am sorry for my jealous thoughts.

I am sorry for my actions which stem from envy.

I am sorry for trying to take others down to my level.

Forgive me merciful God,

Forgive me Jesus, as you forgave

Those who killed you, in rage and jealousy

For they knew not what they did.

Thanks to you, gracious God, who has made each human

Unique, precious, a single individual

Living in community, living in society

Of worth and of value found in being

Not in achievements or goals.

Gather me in, with all the souls you have created

Into your holy presence which starts here on earth

And in heaven finds its never ending purpose

Of worshipful joy.

AMEN