

Truth is One-Faced

St Jude's Halifax

8th April 2009 Wednesday in Holy Week

As a young lad at grammar school, I travelled each morning and evening to and from school by train. That's doubtless where my continuing fascination with railways originated, watching the Gresley Pacifics hauling the afternoon *Talisman* from Kings Cross to Edinburgh. I loved going by train and it was made the more fun since there was a good crowd of boys who did the same – 'The train crew' – they called us. Yes, I really did love those journeys – even the ten days of my life when I was a smoker – nine *Woodbines* between Harringay West and Enfield Chase – quite an achievement!

But without warning, one afternoon, those idyllic days ran out. That afternoon a bunch of the lads set on me on the homeward journey. I was not much of a boxer. I did my best and flailed around, but against six others there was no hope of victory. Out of this, however, came something much darker. For the news got round about my ignominious efforts. As from then on I was ostracised, almost entirely cut off, from the train crowd. Just two or three lads stayed loyal – the most unlikely ones at that. Within a day I exchanged the friendship of fifteen or twenty for isolation bar two or three.

It was one of those defining moments that we all – in one way or another – experience. Reflecting upon it even now brings on an odd set of emotions – fear, shame and a sense of loneliness.

Of course, all that is part of the process of growing up. Each one of you could tell your own tales. But it was also a key moment of learning for me. It was not the pain and bruising of the fight; it was not even the shame or loneliness. It was instead the feeling of betrayal. How could those erstwhile friends be so two-faced? It made me so much less trustful.

Tonight's gospel, in a far, far darker way, takes us down into the deepest darkness, but into those same emotions. Here they speak, not of one individual's experience, although of course they do do that, but they speak too of profound themes, which describe the workings of our innermost humanity. Listen to the gospel text again. Remember that the apostles were Jesus' closest friends and confidants:

Jesus says: "Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me."

Now that formula in John's gospel '*Truly, truly I say to you,*' is the most solemn formula of all. Each of the great 'I am' sayings is prefaced by these words: '*Truly, truly I say to you....I am the bread of life, I am the true vine.....before Abraham was, I am.*' Truth, as in those *truly* sayings, as in the prologue 'we behold his glory – full of grace and truth' and as in the passion with Pilate 'What is truth?', lie at the heart of the mystery of the passion: For truth is descriptive of Jesus. Jesus, the Lord, *is truth*.

In this passage, then, John's penchant for irony surfaces once again. One of those closest to Jesus is to exhibit the very antithesis of truth. One of them will betray trust; he will be two-faced; he will act out the polar opposite of truth. But how does the story unfold? Peter asks John, the beloved disciple, who has the ear of the Lord.

' "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks?" Lying close to the breast of Jesus, the beloved disciple asks: "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered: "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So, when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.'

The narrative is so careful throughout. For the closeness of Jesus' disciples is emphasised *through this common meal*. Eating together bound them closer than any kinship. Jesus himself takes the bread and dips it. The bread of life becomes the token of death. Judas could have turned and forsaken betrayal at

that moment. But the scene is set. Judas' personality is formed. He takes on the obverse of the truth. He is the very personification of the two-faced one, the betrayer of trust.

Now that, you may remember, in that childhood or youthful experience is what had cut to my heart. Truth was betrayed, trust destroyed, friendship was shown to be two-faced. But here in the passion narrative it takes on *more than simply* the character of childhood fickleness, of an outflow of bullying. Here it presents mortal danger and certain death. In ominous tones, Jesus mutters to Judas: 'What you are going to do, do quickly.' He knows Judas' character is set undeniably to evil.

At this moment, we see John's supreme narrative power. For the next sentence that Jesus utters, following that proxy death- sentence via Judas, the next sentence runs:

'Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.'

This is not simply unexpected - it is already preposterous. The two-faced deadly move by Judas is said to glorify the Son of man – and, more than that, in glorifying the Son of Man, to glorify God. The very depth of evil, the heart of darkness, *darkness visible* as William Golding put it, becomes an instrument of glory. This is the pivot of John's irony. For Jesus will certainly die, but in that very same moment God will be glorified and humankind redeemed. It is the most extraordinary transformation. It is a statement about the nature of God, and also of our own being. Jesus – who is truth, light, grace, the Word made flesh, the living water, the bread from heaven – this same Jesus is the promise of our humanity in its fullness. He is, as in our second reading, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Here is humanity transparent to God himself. Truth and trust is undoubtedly one-faced in human terms, but in cosmic terms it shows us also the face of God.

Amen

READINGS

Isaiah 50: 4-9

Hebrews 12: 1-3

John 13: 21-32