

Storms and Picnics Week 6

Sermon

As we come to the end of our six week journey through the sixth chapter of John's Gospel try imagining setting it all as a film.

-What would the backgrounds and the moods of each scene or section be?

We began with the bright sunny hillside, an expectant group of people longing for life, with the warmth and energy of Jesus's presence.

As stomachs grumbled and were filled, we may have sensed, beneath the excitement and joy of the abundant picnic, the foreboding presence of deeper needs: the oppressed crowd in need of a king to lead them to freedom and plenty.

Then the scene changes: Jesus withdraws and the dark begins to set in. The need for security and solid land grows as the storm gathers around the disciples threatening to overwhelm them. Jesus's absence and the darkness which accompanies it leaves them directionless and under threat.

As Jesus appears they find their destination but, unlike other similar gospel stories, there is no mention of the storm being calmed or the darkness being dispelled.

In fact, in the conversations that follow, it is as if the storm echoes around them in the noise of debate and argument. The storm's dark clouds billow around them in Jesus's audience's struggle with his words and their implications and with the contrast of the claims he was making with their memories of the boy they'd watched grow up and his upbringing.

(At the end of last week's reading we learnt that the conversations took place in the synagogue in Capernaum - Jesus' home territory.) It's as if the buffeting winds of the storm have been brought on shore and still echo around them in the arguments and emotions that follow.

Now, as this episode draws to a close, we get a sense of the bewilderment and mixed emotions of those closest to Jesus. As the scene shifts to become more intimate, we may imagine that the

noise of the storm is heard safely kept at bay outside and yet as we read it becomes clear that the disciples too carry it with them. If you find yourself heavy headed and aching as thunder storms threaten then maybe you know the feeling.

After the energy and pace of the conversations which precede this passage, it almost feels as if we are stopped in our tracks, dumbfounded by all that has gone before.

The disciples' words say it all:

'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'

The word they use for 'difficult' is powerful and can also mean 'harsh' or 'unpleasant'.

As they speak the disciples make it clear that they, like those who argued earlier, find Jesus' words unpalatable. They are faced with food they find hard to stomach or even chew on.

Their question makes this even clearer and more powerful. It is best translated

"who can hear it?"

rather than

"who can accept it?"

It's as if they've run into a wall so thick and dense that it's impossible for Jesus's words to get through. It feels as though the disciples are so repelled by it that it is almost impossible for them to relate to it at all. They are like the child behind the sofa, fingers in ears singing loudly so as not to hear or see the scary film on the TV.

Jesus's response is striking:

"if you're scandalised by this, how are you going to cope with the full immensity of who I am and what I offer?"

"Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

The word that our passage translates as

Does this offend you?

Can also mean 'scandalise you' but it can also mean 'cause you to stumble' or 'cause you to sin'.

Again, the powerfulness of the word gives the feeling of people being repelled by Jesus's message and the life he offers.

It's quite difficult for us to get a sense of this shock. Jesus's words have entered our liturgy, become hymns, been the subject of paintings. We've made them into books for children and used them to comfort us.

We've made Jesus's divinity such a central foundation stone of our faith that to remove it, or imagine a time before it, is unthinkable.

We've heard his words so often and developed so many theories to make them palatable that the initial shock and disgust may be beyond our grasp.

It maybe that our domestication of these words makes them as difficult for us to hear and take in as their freshness and shocking qualities made them for the disciples.

Are we so surrounded, comforted and cosseted by the familiarity of communion shared countless times that we fail to experience these words in all their power?



Look for a moment at the painting by Jacques Iselin.

The familiar elements of Holy Communion are all there.

Indeed, the cup seems to take centre stage in shining whiteness at the picture's core.

And yet each item is also partly hidden or obscured.

It's as if the artist is inviting us to concentrate on the mystery and to realise how much it is impossible for us to fully grasp.

But the painting also echoes with light and warmth.

Even partially obscured and not fully understood the elements offer the chance of life Jesus speaks of earlier in the chapter, the chance of life Peter perceives in today's reading

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

These words seem to echo with Moses's challenge to God's people in the desert

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

The choice is there too in the contrast of Peter with Judas (who is mentioned here for the first time in John's Gospel).

Both have been chosen by Jesus and loved by him.

Both have been given the chance to hear the words of eternal life and to choose life through Jesus.

Yet one will accept the life he offers and follow and the other will reject it and walk out into the darkness.

One seems repelled by the gospel message, the other attracted to it.

We're left to wonder at the difference of their response with little or no hint in the Gospel, either now or later, of a reason.



Just to the left of the centre towards the top of Iselin's painting is a blurred and faded image that might possibly be imagined to be a person peering in at the rest of the picture. It seems almost as if the figure sits within a ray of light. The painting almost feels to be inviting them, and us, into the mystery of the life that surrounds them. The line on their right drawing the eye down to the cup.

When seen in person this invitation is echoed by the fact that the size of the painting means that, standing before it, we can feel completely surrounded and absorbed by it.

So what is our response?

Do we step into the life and light offered?

It will not be without storms or threats -

Just as the storm lingers once Jesus reached them on the lake, so Peter's declaration of faith is surrounded by the threat of betrayal.

But in dark and sunshine, storms and picnics God's abundant love and plentiful life will sustain, challenge and continue to require our response.

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."