

**18 April 2019**

**Maundy Thursday**

**Reflection 1 – Luke 22.14-30**

This evening I want to use two iconic works of art to help us reflect on the events of the Thursday of Holy Week.

Firstly, Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper. The original is a fresco painted on the wall of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

(The image I am using this evening is an enhanced reproduction for clarity.)

Because of its location and theme it is clearly a religious work of art. And yet what comes out in this painting is the humanity of the scene.

What would have been striking at the time of painting ... and possibly controversial ... is that none of the characters are given haloes.

But it is also the moment that da Vinci captures in his scene that emphasises its humanity.

He doesn't capture the moment when Jesus prays in thanksgiving, or when he breaks the bread, or elevates and blesses the cup – any of the key sacred moments that are repeated whenever we sit around this table.

Rather, he seeks to capture that moment when Jesus reveals that "the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table." (22.21) ... and all pandemonium breaks out.

Da Vinci divides the disciples into four groups of three, embracing the whole gamut of responses.

On the far left Bartholomew, James and Andrew look on in surprise and disbelief. They are silenced by it all.

On the far right, Matthew, Thaddeus and Simon the Zealot break off into their own sub-group, discussing with consternation what Jesus has said.

Just inside them, we have Thomas, James and Philip – all in different ways confronting, even challenging Jesus.

And then to the left of Jesus, Peter, John and Judas himself. Three contrasting responses.

- John, turning away from Jesus seemingly in utter sadness.
- Peter looks stormy – notice the dagger he is holding behind his back.
- And Judas (holding the money bag) – the only disciple who is in the shadows – taken aback by Jesus' revelation

A whole range of human emotions are portrayed in this scene. This is a scene of tension, of shock. Da Vinci has managed to portray movement and dynamism, the beginnings of a kind of disintegration as the disciples turn with suspicion on each other.

This is a scene of fractious human relationships.

And what a contrast between this scene on the wall, and the serried, orderly ranks of nuns and monks gathering for worship day by day.

And what a contrast between this scene, and our own gathering here around the table.

- Civilized
- Controlled
- Ordered
- Serene even

No outbursts of emotion. No arguments. No looking daggers at one another.

Yet what is remarkable is that when Jesus institutes this meal, it is not in the context of orderliness and piety,

- where human emotions have been left at the door,
- where the fractiousness of human life is forgotten
- where betrayal, suspicion and competition are neatly swept under the carpet, as if they have no place in our lives.

The sacred moment of breaking bread and sharing wine is given in the context of the very human moment of confronting broken trust and fractured relationships ... and Luke tells us of conversations about who is the greatest.

When Jesus gives bread and wine – when Jesus gives of his very self – it is to people in the midst of their turmoil ... and to people who need his gift because of their turmoil.

So if we come to this meal from the turmoil of shattered hopes, broken relationships, unresolved anger, with the hurt of having been betrayed, or the pain of having betrayed others, with the failure to rid ourselves of the need for power and recognition ...

... then we can find with thankfulness and relief ... that all of that and more was represented in that first upper room.

And even if this is not in our immediate relationships, we do not have to look very far to see this kind of turmoil all around us in our world.

And it is to people caught in all of this that Jesus says, 'This is my body, given for you.'

This is Jesus giving himself to those caught up in the turmoil of fractured human community.

This, I suspect more than we would like to admit, is us.

And so this is for us ... and HE is for us in all of our turmoil.

## Reflection 2 – Luke 22.39-46

The second work of art is the painting by Edvard Munch, *The Scream*. On the right we have the lithograph that is currently in an exhibition at the British Museum.

Edvard Munch describes the experience that gave rise to the original painting.

I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.

There is something of an ambiguity in the picture. Is the figure echoing the infinite scream in his/her own scream? Or is the figure closing their ears in horror at the scream that they have heard?

If Da Vinci's painting portrays turmoil in community, Munch's art portrays that deep turmoil within – an aching anxiety that all too easily overwhelms us.

And Munch's painting has become something of a symbol of our era – of humanity overwhelmed by anxiety.

And as the Extinction Rebellion protestors are expressing so resolutely in central London, never before have we been so aware of what Munch terms the "infinite scream passing through nature," as our very existence on earth appears to be threatened by ecological catastrophe.

Now Munch's painting would not be described with Da Vinci as a religious painting.

Yet a contributor to Radio 4's Thought for the Day last week pointed out that there is something in the background of Munch's lithograph

that is not nearly so clear in the original oil painting. The contributor noted how the masts of the boats on the fjord in the background make the shape of crosses.

The speaker asked whether this was a coincidence, or whether there was after all some residual Christian symbolism here?

It is, of course, not important what Munch intended. Perhaps those with eyes to see can see in Munch's art echoes of the cross.

What I think we can say, is that in the story of the passion of Jesus, Jesus enters into this deep anxiety of spirit.

He moves from the social turmoil of the upper room, into the inner turmoil of the garden ... the agony of facing the cross. From the blood-red clouds of Munch's painting, we find Jesus sweating drops of blood.

And so we can place the image of The Scream next to an image of Jesus in the garden, in deep agony.

The obedience of the garden leads Jesus to the cross, where we hear the echo of the scream as he cries from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Jesus, we might say, is not closing his ears to the scream, but giving voice to the scream in an aching prayer of lament.

If Jesus gives himself to us in the turmoil of broken relationships, he also gives himself to us as he takes into himself our inner turmoil. He plumbs the depths of primal human anxiety ... facing the fear that nothing at all makes sense ...

The problem with anxiety is that it is so isolating ... Munch paints this figure as an isolated figure.

And Jesus in the garden is alone and isolated ...

And yet the garden is the place where Jesus comes to be with us in our anxiety ... so that we never have to scream alone.

This is the place and this is the time for those in turmoil.

- those who are aware of the turmoil of fractured relationships
- and those who know that deep gnawing inner turmoil, that eats away at us, because we know the world is not as it should be – we are not as we should be.

And Jesus, in the garden and on the cross, makes the place of turmoil a place of meeting, a place of encounter.

He cries out with us ... so that we can cry out with him.

But in company with Jesus the scream becomes not an expression of isolation, but a reaching out in trust.