

First week of Lent 15-21 February

Introduction

During the long existence of the church, there were several ways of remembering the traumatic events that took place in Jerusalem with the condemnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. In nearly every Catholic church in the world, you will “see a series of simple crosses or fourteen images depicting the passion of Jesus” (McBride 2016 :1)¹. This is known as the “stations of the cross”. In the Protestant world a different approach was taken focussing on the grace of God’s forgiving love on the cross. The Reformers emphasized and looked at the traumatic events before, during and after the crucifixion through the lenses of the Resurrection. In the Resurrection event of Jesus God’s forgiving powerful love triumphs over violence, sin, trauma, and death. Amid violent trauma, and injustice Jesus does not stop loving humanity (see Borg & Crossan 2008: viii)². He does not strike out with violence or curse his persecutors. “In a way it’s as though trauma, the violence, tries to imprison him and fails” (Jones 2019: xvii)³.

Currently we live in turbulent and traumatic times as well. Covid-19 is disrupting and threatening our lives, livelihoods, and existence. How do

¹ McBride, D 2016. *Stations of the Cross then and now*. Hampshire: Redemptorist Publications.

² Borg, MJ & Crossan, JD 2008. *The last week. What the Gospels really teach about Jesus’s final days in Jerusalem*. London: SPCK.

³ Jones, S 2019. *Trauma and grace. Theology in a Ruptured world*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: WJK.

we make sense of it? Tom Wright (2020:1-2)⁴ says in his book *God and the Pandemic* "And suddenly there was no safe space on the planet. There is no neutral zone. No medical equivalent of wartime Switzerland, where you could escape for a while, relax, and ponder what ought to be done". One mistake that we can make is to underestimate the traumatic nature and impact Covid-19 is making on our lives, livelihoods, and existence.

In the light of all the above, I am sure that the passion narrative of Jesus can become a powerful message of faith, hope, grace, and love to all those who suffer from trauma, violence, and injustice.

Setting the scene:

If we look at the events that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane through the lens of trauma, we can indeed understand the gravity of Trauma experienced by Jesus and his disciples. Michael Paterson (2020)⁵ defines trauma as "A normal response to an abnormal & inescapable experience or set of circumstances that overwhelms our usual coping mechanisms, adversely affects our functioning and poses serious threats to our wellbeing". Modern studies on trauma teaches us that Trauma can

⁴ Wright, T 2020. *God and the Pandemic. A Christian reflection on the Coronavirus and its aftermath*. London: SPCK.

⁵ Paterson, M 2020. Presentation at the Scottish Regional APSE group on 5 June 2020.

be physical, social, mental, or spiritual or all four, be short lived or enduring. The effects of trauma can:

- overwhelm our normal resources to cope,
- disconnects us from our sense of self,
- shatters our assumptions,
- renders us powerless,
- make us feel hopeless.

The problem with trauma is that people often do not realise that they are “traumatised” by events. It is only when we stand back and reflect or feel it in our bodies that we realise something is going on. I am sure that this was also the case with Jesus, the disciples, Judas, and the members of the “crowd” that came to arrest Jesus. I do not think they have realised the full extent of their traumatic experiences. If we look at our Bible reading carefully, we should be able to identify the trauma being experienced especially when we highlight in different colours the traumatic occurrences and its effects.

Bible reading Mark 14

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ ³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be **deeply distressed and troubled.** ³⁴ **‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,’** he said to them. ‘Stay here and keep watch.’ ³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the

ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ 'Abba,^{fi} Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' ³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Simon,' he said to Peter, 'are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour?' ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' ³⁹ Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ Returning the third time, he said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!' ⁴³ Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. ⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' ⁴⁵ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. ⁴⁶ The men seized Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷ Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸ 'Am I leading a rebellion,' said Jesus, 'that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?' ⁴⁹ Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.' ⁵⁰ Then everyone deserted him and fled. ⁵¹ A young man, wearing nothing but a

linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him,⁵² he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Questions to ponder on?

1. Do you identify with any of the characters in this passage?
2. What would you have done after they arrested Jesus?

Reflection

In our reading Jesus is on the brink of collapsing under the weight of His calling. He says his soul is "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" He even prays that God will take away His cup of suffering. Jesus is indeed facing trauma on all four levels, physically, socially, mentally, and spiritually. In his case, He knew that it will be short lived but enduring for His followers.

The disciples on the other hand experienced the traumatic events differently. They did not know what was going on. According to the Gospel of Mark, they did not understand or grasped Jesus' mission and ultimate sacrifice (Borg & Crossan 2008:93)⁶. They experienced the entry into Jerusalem with the great crowds cheering whilst fearing the

⁶ Borg, MJ & Crossan, JD 2008. *The last week. What the Gospels really teach about Jesus's final days in Jerusalem*. London: SPCK.

consequences of Rome seeing this as a Revolutionary *coup d'état* (Borg & Crossan 2008:2-5) They have heard Jesus say that He will be betrayed. A lot of different traumatic things were happening with, in and around them. To sleep could have been a coping mechanism after all the unsettling things they have witnessed up until this point. The strain of all the uncertainty that surrounded them affected them in a real and personal sense. Trauma is often a "bodily experience". In the end, when things got out of hand, and the situation escalated they reacted instinctively by fleeing/running away from the scene. One was even prepared to run away naked. Nakedness was frowned upon by the Jews and was regarded as shameful in the eyes of society. For this man – not to think of the harsh reality of what his society must think of him – nothing else mattered. He just wanted to get away as soon as possible. Trauma often triggers an instinctive reaction, fight, flight, or freeze. In this case they fled.

Contemporary lesson

The disciples experienced trauma that most probably stayed with them until they died. As believers, we must acknowledge the severity of the traumatic impact that Covid-19 has on our lives, livelihoods, and existence to make sense what we as individuals and as a collective group

of believers are experiencing on a mental, social, physical and spiritual level. We may experience⁷:

- Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness,
- Acute disruption of daily existence,
- Extreme discomfort,
- Shattering of assumptions.

These feelings are not new. When we look at the reading in colour again, I am sure we all can identify with Jesus, members of the crowd, Judas and the disciples' reaction. It is only natural that we will also feel like "Cowards" when we just want to run away from it all. We can take great comfort knowing that we are not alone – the disciples had the perfect teacher, and they could not handle the impact of the traumatic events. It is only natural that our bodies and minds will react in an intuitive way to protect ourselves.

Questions to yourself

1. Draw a picture of how you are experiencing the pandemic at this moment in time? (a "stick figure" will do)

⁷ Conference of Association for Pastoral Supervision and Education, 3-4 November 2021. Grosch-Miller, CA: *Trauma-informed ministry for these times*. Handout.

2. List all the things **(number them)** that make you feel energised and happy?
3. List all your negative feelings? **(number them)**

If you have more “negative feelings” than positive ones, you will feel it in your body, mind and spirit. It will explain to you **why** you are feeling the way that you do. It will help you not run away from it but to embrace them and talk about them to God and others. Repeat this exercise as often as you can.

Prayer

We pray, O Lord, for all sufferers of traumatic events,

For those who cannot express their feelings

of hurt, frustration, pain, hopelessness, and inner turmoil,

we pray for all those who are frozen in their traumatic situations, unable to escape,

we pray for those who are fighting, because they have no other alternative to cope,

we pray for all those who have fled because they cannot face their persecutors or their circumstances.

We pray for your Holy Spirit to give us your HOPE and peace in all trying times, today and also for tomorrow.

Amen