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Triduum: A Drama in Three Acts

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"And to think he called them friends. If anyone ever had a right to say, "With friends like mine, who needs enemies?" it was Jesus Christ. Just look at those so-called "friends" around the table with him that night: There's Peter, who denied him three times. There's Thomas who doubted him -- the same Thomas who told him the night of the Supper he didn't know Jesus was the way to the Father. Philip too was there that night -- Philip who didn't know that by seeing Jesus he could see the Father who sent him. James and John were there as well: the two brothers who vied to be first in the kingdom, though they slept through Jesus' agony in the garden later that night."

Triduum: A Drama in Three Acts

Dr. Rev. John Colacino

(Author's note: These reflections were originally preached as homilies in the course of the Catholic liturgy for Holy Week. They are thus addressed primarily to a Christian audience.)

Act I: A Dinner with Friends (Holy Thursday)

Scripture References: (I) *Ex. 12:1-8,11-14;* (II) *1 Cor. 11:23-26;* (G) *Jn. 13:1-15*

And to think he called them friends. If anyone ever had a right to say, “With friends like mine, who needs enemies?” it was Jesus Christ. Just look at those so-called “friends” around the table with him that night: There’s Peter, who denied him three times. There’s Thomas who doubted him -- the same Thomas who told him the night of the Supper he didn’t know Jesus was the way to the Father. Philip too was there that night – Philip who didn’t know that by seeing Jesus he could see the Father who sent him. James and John were there as well: the two brothers who vied to be first in the kingdom, though they slept through Jesus’ agony in the garden later that night.

There were some unsavory types there at the table too. Like Matthew the tax collector, who collaborated with the Romans, along with Simon the revolutionary, who wanted to overthrow them by violence. And don’t forget Judas Iscariot, who handed him over later that night.

Only by way of exception, do we find the Beloved Disciple there, resting his head on Jesus’ breast: the only one in this bunch of “friends” who would stand near the cross the next day, with the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala (Jn. 19:25).

So you see the Last Supper was very much a DaVinci portrait, disrupted and thrown into confusion by the announcement, “One of you will betray me” (Jn. 13:21). And those present had every reason to say one after another, “Surely it is not I, Lord?” (Mt. 26:22).

Maybe you thought the Last Supper was a gathering of clear-sighted, singlehearted, beyond-reproach types. But I hate to tell you, the Last Supper was a gathering of Jesus’ friends. Like the one he hosts week after week in churches throughout the world. Where he invites the bad and the good, and everything in between to come, just as he’s done since the first Eucharist two thousand years ago. Celebrated for people whose journeys are not complete, whose paths are not always straight, whose destinations are not always clear. That’s who belongs there in church – among Jesus’ friends.

For Jesus knows only too well the kinds of people he calls. He knows only too well our sins and limitations. He knows only too well we’ve nothing

more than a “little bit” to offer. And do you know what? He’s prepared to make do with that “little bit” we have. That’s what he uses, as he did that day he told Philip and Andrew to feed a large crowd with five barley loaves and two fish. For Christ can take our “little bit” and make do with it more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Our “little bit” is never an obstacle to him: anymore than Peter’s cowardice was; or Thomas’ doubts, or Philip’s dullness, or John and James’ pettiness, or Matthew and Simon’s questionable pasts were an obstacle to him. No, their “little bit” was enough for Jesus to take and multiply, so they could go and do as he had done, even to the ends of the earth. For their “little bit” was enough to make them his “friends.”

And it’s enough to make anyone who wishes his friends too: called to be bread and wine for the world, called to wash one another’s feet. Oh yes, the friends of Jesus have their drawbacks and their setbacks, their detractors and their naysayers all around. But they’re no worse than the Twelve who sat with him at table that night. So nothing should ever stop a person from coming and bringing their “little bit” – joined to the bit of bread and wine they receive at the Lord’s table -- signs of their poverty -- which Christ then takes -- to turn into a gift without measure. So everyone may eat their fill.

For God gives this food -- the Bread of life -- to those who hunger. And this drink -- the Cup of salvation -- to those who thirst. A church is not for people already sated and filled, finished products who arrive with their lives settled and their questions answered. A church is for people who come in from the streets of life and who know how famished they really are, how parched their throat truly is: People who find there the strength they need to go forth in love and service, to do as Christ has done, and who could never live without this food and this drink.

So it’s all right to bring who you are to this dinner with friends. To let your shadow mix with your light, your hunger with your plenty, your thirst with your satisfaction. That’ll do just fine. For we receive enough at this meal-- indeed, more than enough -- to hold us until the day we eat and drink anew in the kingdom of God.

Act II: A Dispute among Friends (Good Friday)

Scripture References: (I) Is. 52:13-53:12; (II) Hb. 4:14-16,5:7-9; (G) Jn. 18:1-19:42

God is dead. Who else dares to speak the divine name, *I AM*(G), when they come to arrest him? Who else but God’s kingdom *does not belong to this world?* (G) Yes, Christ was crucified for speaking his truth--in the synagogue, the temple, the garden, before Annas, Caiaphas and Pilate--the truth of his divinity. Yes, God is dead.

But why should God die? Why should the Author of life sleep in death? “To forgive our sins,” you say. Indeed, to *save us all from the death we*

inherited from sinful Adam (Alt. Op. Pr.). But is that all? Does this “forgiveness” travel a one-way street? Doesn’t a priest serve as mediator between two parties? And don’t these parties have grievances against each other? The binding arbitration of the cross, does it seek redress from God’s side only? Has our *great high priest* (II) won from God no concession? Has God the only right to a just settlement, making the price of this Man’s blood the perfect offering for our sins?

Surely, God has every right to make such demands. We hear them on Good Friday as we kiss the cross on which God died while, in some places, the “Reproaches” are sung as God argues the case against us. They begin with this question: *My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!* And the list of complaints begins: *I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom, but you led your Savior to the cross. . . .For your sake I scourged your captors and their firstborn sons, but you brought your scourges down on me. (Rep. I) I led you from slavery to freedom and drowned your captors in the sea. . . .I opened the sea before you, but you opened my side with a spear. . . . Answer me! (Rep. II)*

And is there no response to these Reproaches? Like, “Why, God, make us Jews slaves to begin with? And treat your people so badly? The people you call your own. Where were you, O Holy, Immortal One, during the Holocaust, when another pharaoh enslaved your people? And what of others, like the people of Tibet or Palestine? Do you hear their cry? What about Christians killed in Pakistan, India and Iraq, even while attending church? Or what of the civil war in Iraq? What about other kinds of bondage? To disease, disaster, and drugs? Yes, you led us out of Egypt. But the suffering goes on. Answer us, God! Are you dead?”

But God continues. *For forty years I led you safely through the desert. I fed you with manna from heaven and brought you to a land of plenty; but you led your Savior to the cross. (Rep. I) I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud, but you led me to Pilate’s court. . . .I bore you up with manna in the desert, but you struck me down and scourged me. I gave you saving water in the desert, but you gave me gall and vinegar to drink. . . . Answer me! (Rep. II)*

And to these Reproaches, is there no response? Like, “Why, God, should your people go hungry and thirsty in the first place? Why should they wander the desert forty long years? And look at the world we live in, O Holy, Immortal One! Wasn’t one tsunami enough without another swallowing up innocent lives? Children still die of hunger in many places. People still wander about homeless in this city of ours, where they are tossed between shelters and hospitals. What of the poor, the refugee, the desperate? Too many are still lost in deserts, hopeless and afraid. With no pillar of cloud to guide them. Answer us, God! Are you dead?”

But God proceeds. *What more could I have done for you? I planted you as my fairest vine, but you yielded only bitterness: when I was thirsty*

you gave me vinegar to drink, and you pierced your Savior with a lance. (Rep. I) For you I struck down the kings of Canaan, but you struck my head with a reed. . . .I gave you a royal scepter; but you gave me a crown of thorns. . . .I raised you to the height of majesty, but you have raised me high on a cross. . . .Answer me! (Rep. II)

And could we not respond to these Reproaches too? “But God, the Promised Land is still up for grabs. The blood of your people is spilled there still. And the people of Canaan, do they have no rights to a homeland at all? Others too seek to live in land of their own, O Holy, Immortal One. Like the warring parties in Iraq, the Armenians in Turkey, the desperate people of Darfur. Have you already forgotten the ethnic cleansing that took place in the Balkans? And what about our own “promised land” struck by terror and threatened by violence? Answer us, God! Are you dead?”

“Enough of these reproaches! I hear your complaints, and you hear mine. It’s true, the innocent suffer, the guilty prosper, children die. But don’t you see? I bleed for the world. I give you myself in the *Man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity* (I). I suffer for all that is wrong in the world I made. I atone for every sin, every crime, that hurts the human race. I know your pain and your fear, your shame and indignation. Yes, I have died for it. And I descended into hell for it – where I have taken all of your own hells with me. So yes, *I am an object of reproach* (RP).

And what more could I do? I have *sympathized with your weakness* (cf. II). Assumed your burden. Paid your price. So let my Blood seal a new covenant between us. For it’s not human Blood only, but God’s Blood too. Let us be friends once more and put blame aside. Approach and kiss the cross to close the distance between us. The reproaches end here. For God is dead.”

Act III: A Friendship Renewed (Holy Saturday)

Readings: (I) Gn. 1:1-2:2; (II) Ex. 14:15-15:1; (III) Is. 55:1-11;(IV) Ez. 36:16-17a,18-28); (V) Rm. 6:3-11

This is the night for senses to feast:

On words that make ears listen,
and signs that make eyes open.

This is the night for sight and sound, taste and touch,
to waken for God who comes in word and sacrament.

This is the night for God’s people to tell their story,
from the beginning
when God created the heavens and the earth,
to the dawn of a new creation,
when Jesus rose from the dead.

The main characters are all here:

Adam and Eve, made in God’s image.

Abraham and Sarah are here, ancestors in faith.
Moses and Miriam, leading and singing.
Isaiah, Baruch, Ezekiel and Paul too -- prophets and apostle,
Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are here, Salome and Joanna too:
the first to announce the One
who stands at the center of the story:
the Risen Lord.

But others are here as well --
Catechumens and candidates.
Yes, they're part of the story!
As the rest of us are,
and we all have a part.

For this is the night
*to recall how God saves his people
throughout history,
and, in the fullness of time,
sent his own Son to be our Redeemer.*

Yes, indeed, ears feast on words of good news tonight!
Stories of Scripture woven together with our stories.
All telling how God
speaks and acts in lives awakened by faith.

But eyes too must see what ears hear.
And skin longs to touch the word of life.
So symbol is joined to story,
that our whole being might share
in the wonders of this night:
Light plays with darkness.
From a fire, candles are lit, piercing the night.

Water and oil mix:
One for plunging, the other for sealing.
Bread is offered with wine,
In remembrance and thanksgiving:
Symbols to see the story of God-with-us.

In all this richness, though,
water draws special attention:
It's the thread running
throughout the tapestry
of story and symbol
woven this night:

For on water, the Spirit breathed *in the beginning*);
In *the days of Noah. . .the waters. . .[went] over the earth* (I);
And when Israel marched to freedom
the waters were divided (II);

While the prophets say:
Come to the waters (III);
I will sprinkle clean water upon you. . .
and from all your idols I will cleanse you (VII).

And in the past few weeks,
we heard a woman from Samaria promised living water
by a strange man who knew her life's story.
And a man born blind washed in the Pool of Siloam
to see the Son of Man.

So water, indeed, lets us see the things that we hear.
And never more so than tonight:
When the font is opened:
and God's Spirit breathes once more on the waters.

When people throughout the world enter the water this night,
leaving an old life behind
like a garment that no longer fits:
A life buried and left for dead,
while a new one takes its place,
For they will be clothed with eternal life --
dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (IV).

And the rest of us too
are sprinkled with this water:
to remind us --
Just as Christ was raised from the dead
by the glory of the Father,
so we too. . .walk in newness of life (IV).
After we profess once again --
I do believe! --
in the God who saves us,
in story and in sign.