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Meditation 1: Invitation

"Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard." (Isaiah 5:1)

There is, in a sense, only one thing that matters as we stand at beginning of Holy Week: it is a question of invitation. Think of it first, perhaps, as an invitation to a drama. Shall I this year attend this drama of love and betrayal? Shall I bring to it all the anguish and ecstasy of my own loves and betrayals, or shall I stand at a distance, protecting myself awhile? Perhaps I can just be part of the chorus and do some suitable garment-rending for the purposes of a nice bit of "purgation of pity and fear"? Or is it that something deeper is required, something that costs not less than everything? I hover at the edge, uncertain at the alternatives set before me.

Let us admit that for some of us, in some years, this invitation actually offers no choice: we are already at a place of pain, grief or loss such as to make talk of an "invitation" to Passion fatuous: we are already in the vineyard of love and violence, the garden of betrayal and testing, where life and death contend, and meaning itself seems threatened with obliteration. We don't need to be invited, because this is a place to which we have already been consigned. The problem is that we would much rather get out of it. The apparent contradiction of divine love and divine judgement has become unbearable to us. There is seemingly no escape from the stuckness of despair that we already know too well. We are deep in the agony of the Passion, whether we like it or not.

In other years, and for others among us, the vineyard, the garden, has been contaminated in contrast by a sort of banality, a loss of meaning in a different sense. The story has become too familiar, the sight of tortured dead bodies a

pornographic regularity of the evening news, which does not even put us off our TV dinner. Our Christian meaning system has lost both its power and its glory: we subscribe to it with our lips, but when asked to go up again to Jerusalem we find ourselves too tired, too busy and - underlyingly - too fearful to face it. There is indeed an escape by means of aversion - and we can choose to take it.

But then, finally, there are the years - perhaps it is this year? - when we sense that we stand at the edge of some new discovery, either because Jesus beckons us for the first time into the deeper, mystical meaning of his death, or because our narrative and liturgical repetitions have, over time, broken down even our most resistant inertia: we step in, this time ("well in" as Lewis Carroll once put it as a joke, but with profundity); and now the waters close over our heads and we stand with and in the narrative of the mystery of redemption over these days in all the darkness and hopelessness of those first disciples who loved Jesus just as much as they also betrayed him.

In this third way, the pulsing chronology of despair and new hope are vitally related because they press us inexorably forward: the unbearable contradiction of divine judgement and divine love is to be resolved, not by clever argument, not by falsely-anticipated theological resolution, but by entering, waiting, enduring, undergoing, these days of passion and salvation.

To all these conditions - and all these are our conditions, the conditions of the human race in the face of death, and of life - the invitation to re-enter the vineyard of love comes again this year. Shall we find a way back in? "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard." So Isaiah describes the primal erotic intensity of the drama of God's love for his people, Israel. Here is a God who creates all the lush conditions of fulfilment that one might ever desire, and even sets up a tower of defence in the vineyard against the intruding enemy. But the people repeatedly rebel in a terrible amnesia about this primary truth of love: the divine love-song falls on deaf ears, and the prophets such as Isaiah recall and excoriate the people in vain. Then Jesus of Nazareth, approaching his own passion, explicitly recalls these lessons of Isaiah, but with a new twist: it is not only the prophets who have been ignored in the primal vineyard, he tells the crowds and the Pharisees, but the very son of the vineyard-owner who has been beaten and killed by its own tenants. Here is the final betrayal; and God has seemingly run out of options. Or has He?

Only in Matthew's account of the parable (Matthew 21:33-46) does Jesus turn to the crowds themselves and ask them what should be done to resolve this new vineyard crisis of the cruel murder of the Son. It drives home to us, in Matthew - the most consciously Jewish of the gospel writers - that the dilemma, the opening of our Passion drama, is every bit an intra-Jewish one as it is an intra-Christian one, and a perennial one too - no mere matter of a flip supersessionism of Christianity over Judaism, as we might be tempted to read Matthew's text.

Indeed, the key question of the drama, about love and punishment, love and justice, brings Jews and Christians painfully together, and not apart, for we remain joined at the hip, and it is the same issues with which we all perennially struggle as dutiful religious people: what is the relationship of love and justice? The answer from the crowd to Jesus's question in Matthew is unambiguous, and what we might well expect: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants ..." Judgement must follow from

disobedience to love's commands; the books must be kept, the economy of order and calculation respected. Love and justice must be seen to be in alliance. The vineyard of love can surely only belong to the righteous. How significant it is, then, that Jesus - in Matthew's account, of all people's - does nothing to endorse this response from the crowd. For this is but the start of the unravelling of the Passion, in which, as Jesus himself says, quoting the Psalms, everything is going to be turned upside down, including everything we think we know about love and justice: the very stone which the builders rejected, is to become the chief cornerstone.

Think of this entry into Holy Week, then, as an invitation: perhaps not to a mere drama after all, but to a Passion to end all dramas; not to a story of justice and deserts, but to a story of divine love so exquisite as to exceed and upturn all justice as we know it; not to a theological conundrum to be solved, but to a dangerous and life-threatening journey: a journey of pain, death, discovery and new Life. This is a journey that can only be undergone, and our undergoing it can only start with a profound lament for our ongoing resistance and aversion to its strange meaning. "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard." The invitation lies before us: come, this year, into the vineyard of love and betrayal and discover afresh over these sacred days the meaning of divine love in Jesus's Passion. Amen.

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