

Holy Week 2021 Monday

Address given by The Reverend John Summers
Chaplain at Trinity College, Cambridge

Disruption and time (Mark 14.3-9)

It's a pleasure and privilege to be here and to preach over the course of this Holy Week in this magnificent building. It is a particular joy to be able to be here in person! I thank the Cathedral Chapter for their kind but probably overly optimistic invitation.

I propose to take disruption as a loose theme for my thoughts over the coming days. Disruption is a phenomenon that has been much in our minds recently, not just during the past 12 months but also the past few years, with political upheavals around the world and, going back further into the first decade of the century, economic shocks and global conflict.

It's a natural human instinct to recoil from disruption. Etymologically, the word means breaking up. Few people are happy to see their lives broken up. We expend most of our energies in trying to build up, not knocking down.

Notwithstanding that, in the coming days I want to treat disruption sympathetically. I want to suggest no less than that disruption is at the heart of Christian life. As our Lord said in Matthew's gospel:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ... I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus is the great disrupter. We see this not only in the passage I have just read, but throughout the new testament. We see it in the impact he had on the lives of those he met, such as the successful fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, casting their nets aside to follow him. We see it in the discomfort which his teaching

caused among those who espoused comfortable religious orthodoxies. We also see it in the simple fact of his incarnation: in the breaking into the world of God in flesh, in the upending of long held assumptions about where and how messianic power would become manifest, in the inversion of normal social and political hierarchies. We see it, finally, in the confusion of his Passion: the inconstancy of his friends who could not stay with him, the inability of human structures to contain him, the inability of death to end him.

If embracing disruption is a great virtue of Christianity, it is not unique in being more honoured by many in the breach. Much like humility and forgiveness, being willing to live in disruption goes, as I said earlier, against all our instincts. But this week of all weeks, I invite you to join with me in trying to open yourself to disruption's purgative power, its insightful properties, its proximity to events in the life of Christ and its affinity with the way in which God has acted in creation. We might try to stop seeing it as something which interrupts our life and find in it, instead, a force which allows God to resonate deeply in our experience.

Tonight I offer a few thoughts about disruption and time. Our observance of Holy Week is itself temporally disrupted. We cannot access the story of Christ's passion in the way that Jesus' contemporaries did in the Jerusalem of his day because we know how it will end. Surely our sense of sorrow and reflection as we approach and inhabit Good Friday is subconsciously compromised by our being, fundamentally, resurrection people - a church which has confidence in the miracle of Easter morning and a faith that that day is coming. How, then, can we inhabit the Passion story authentically if we've already read the final chapter?

We need to be clear about the problem of thinking about time just as a series of linear events - I'm put in mind here of what various wags have supposedly said of history, that it's one damn thing after another. Thinking of time in a linear sense is exhausting: we see ourselves on some sort of inexorable airport conveyor belt towards the future. If we are dissatisfied with the present we are given to dreaming of what might lie over the horizon. If we regret the past we are demoralised by a sense that it is gone and no longer recoverable. The present becomes an ever shifting moment in which we try to grapple with the world but we mostly never quite get hold of it. As soon as we try to deal with the present it becomes the past, laden with nostalgia or regret. And even if we can grasp the present it is never as satisfying as our idolised version of the future.

A breakthrough comes if we disrupt our linear assumptions about time. How can we do this? Well, we might ask what the *end* of time is. To many the end of time means the final day. But another sense of the word 'end' is *purpose*. So to ask what the end of time is can mean to ask what its purpose is. What is time *for*?

Time is part of creation. What that means is this: there was no day *before* God decided to create the universe, because time (which is a relationship between things) makes no sense if there are no things to have relations with each other. Accordingly God is outside of time. He is not constrained by it and does not perceive creation in the temporal way that we do. Time, then, is part of what is given to us. It is not God but it is from God. The end - in the sense of purpose - of time is therefore a gift, just as creation is a gift.

What would come of it if, disruptively, we actually treated time as gift? Some clues lie in the story of the anointing of Jesus. This is a story where our linear, valueless assumptions about time are disrupted. The entry of the unnamed woman into the dining room disrupts the convention that the men would eat first without women present. The economic logic which says that the value of the ointment lies in what it can do in the future in a notional sale is disrupted by its prodigious consumption. The complacency of the onlookers who invoke the needs of the poor is disrupted by what I have always thought is a rather arch remark by Jesus: you always have the poor with you ("not", we might infer him to say, "that you ever turn to their needs in the present"). Finally, the temporal logic which says that Jesus' death lies in the future is disrupted by Jesus proclaiming his anointing as if his body were dead and needed to be anointed at that moment.

Amidst this disruption, Jesus and the woman treat time as gift. The woman offers her solicitude and attention to Jesus in what we might call the deep present: time for her ceases to flow in linear movement and takes its significance from the depth in which she can interact with Christ in the here and now. Layers of meaning are discovered in what otherwise seems like a fleeting moment by turning into it, and giving that time to God. By taking time, the anointing woman lifts herself out of its confines: she can anoint the crucified Christ even while the living Jesus sits before her (and we should note that attempts to anoint Christ in linear time fail when the body cannot be found on Easter morning).

Crucially, God reciprocates the gift of time: the woman's faith is returned to her as proximity, union and acclamation in with, in and by Jesus. The world of the scene around them, which continues to fly along into the future, struggles to grasp the layers of this encounter because it doesn't treat time as deep, only fleeting. Christ, instead, calls us into deep communion with him, into communion with a God who is not confined by the temporal, who beckons us to something beyond this world and its experiences but which is glimpsed in this moment of attention, in this daring reimagination of *time as prisoner* as, instead, *time as gift*. Jesus' remark about the poor always being with us might be understood as a warning not to become slaves of the quotidian: their needs matter, but the everyday must not blind us to the treasure available in the deep layers of the moment. Jesus explains that what the woman did will stand as a timeless memorial to her: her focus on the depth of time reimagines the significance of its broad linear expanse.

In April 1967 Martin Luther King spoke about the confusions of time thrown up by his recent resolution to protest against the war in Vietnam. Meditating on his historic willingness to put off action and criticism, he spoke like a man awaking from a stupor:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The "tide in the affairs of men" does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late." There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect.

The anointing woman saw past the whenever-ness of the poor and encountered Jesus in the fierce urgency of now. By taking herself out of her normal interaction with time she meets God in a way which recasts her sense of value and her sense of self. Without saying a word, she is the one who speaks most profoundly in this story about deep presence with the divine.

Can we do the same? Physically and biologically we can only inhabit the present. But we must abide in it in such a way that shakes off our comfortable patterns.

We must find, outside of enslavement to linear time, urgent divine mysteries and desires in the depths of the present. We must be open to them and allow them to recast everything. The scriptural stories of Holy Week are not lacking in moments when deep time invites us to disregard the easy calls of the linear. The question is whether we can treat time as gift this week and explore them.

Amen.