

Trinity +13

3 September, 2023

Jer. 15.15-21; Rom 12.9ff; Matt 16.21ff.

This week, I was In the Room where it Happened.

On Monday, I was in London, and at last saw Hamilton.

Whether or not you have seen Hamilton, you probably know of it. It is a phenomenon. One of the those plays that reshapes theatre for a generation.

It tells the story of one of the previously lesser known founding fathers of America: Alexander Hamilton, who wrote most of the Federalist Papers and who set up the banks and the financial reserves. The story is told in ways that rethink the founding story of America, and it asks big questions about what America should be and what it is.

All will an amazing book, score and stunning choreography.

What I saw on Monday was a remarkable piece of theatre. There was depth in the cast, the dancing was brilliant, and one or two characters truly shone. But it was also disappointing. The emotional landscape of Hamilton in huge, and significant parts of the story are carried in a glance, a touch, a gasp – things that can't be written down or taught but must be understood and felt.

The actor who plays George Washington has a key song when he is explaining why he is going to step down as president. He sings, 'scripture says: everyone will sit under their own vine and fig tree. I want to sit under my own vine and fig tree'. And if he gets the tone right, the whole landscape of salvation unfolds before you. If he misses, it's just random. He missed.

Hamilton's last song maps mental disintegration. It is the chaos and swirl of emotion as a highly complex mind unravels under the weight of grief. It is wild and tormented; the antithesis of every other movement in his life – only it wasn't.

And Eliza's last gasp – it is almost impossible to express. The actor who first shaped the role somehow created a moment each night that held together anguish and redemption – all the pain, and all the love. The first glimpse of heaven.

On Monday, it was a light bright chirp of glee – and the audience felt robbed, confused, betrayed.

All the notes were sung beautifully. All the words were spoken.

All the choreography nailed.

But the emotional complexity was not there.

I'm telling you all this because it made me realise how easy it is for a great story to fall if the actors don't plumb the depth of it.

It reminded me how easy it is for us to fail to communicate the gospel - to fail to connect and open up the landscape of salvation if we avoid the emotional complexity of it.

The emotional landscape of scripture is the landscape of trauma. Our faith is forged first in dispossession: the call to Abraham & Sarah to leave all that they know and go blindly to a foreign land. Then there are the years of slavery, the wandering in the desert, exile after exile, war after war, failure and betrayal, and finally, the brutality of the cross.

Trauma is all around - and a core part of the teaching of scripture is mapping out a way of life that survives trauma and still finds blessing, that can live with emotional and intellectual honesty, through things we would all rather avoid - and still have our deepest story be shaped more by love than by pain.

Trauma is difficult - it messes with memory, and when the trigger comes, we feel All The Things - so that then and now come in a jumble, and we are overwhelmed.

Take, for example, today's gospel.

This is one of the great Passion Predictions. A passage so familiar, we might read it without noticing emotion at all:

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

It is possible to read this coolly.

Jesus teaches about suffering.

Peter doesn't like what he says.

Peter rebukes Jesus.

Jesus tells Peter off.

If we play this game too well, avoiding complexity, the story becomes a cock fight, where Peter - the Rock - oversteps his mark in challenging Jesus, and Jesus puts him in his place, before going back to his teaching, calmly and confidently, always in control.

Or we can let them feel something. We can let them feel a lot of things.

What we have here is not a cock fight, or a clash of wills, but a friendship.

Two friends, flaring at each other because they are both,

in the same moment, seeing, and feeling, and processing the clash of emotions that are present as they turn, together, towards the cross.

For they will make this journey together -- even though Peter slips away for a while -- even though Peter's cross is to carry the weight of betraying friendship -- they will make this journey together, and Peter will be the rock on which the church is built, and the cross will be the shape of its building.

But first, Matthew records the pain of friendship.

Jesus begins to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and Peter can't bear it. He has just a moment before found the courage to say the thing that he has been getting ready to say for years: You are the Christ.

Peter puts his heart on his sleeve:

Jesus, I know. I understand. You are the Christ.

And Jesus returns the gift:

You are Peter. On this rock I will build my church.

And while the air still sizzles with the sudden communication of love and truth, Jesus begins to speak of suffering and death, and Peter cannot bear it:

"God forbid, Lord." This cannot happen. I will not let it. It isn't right.

And Jesus answers, "Get behind me Satan."

and Peter flinches, out of sight.

It is brutal.

Did you spot the trigger?

Because we have now entered the trauma narrative, the story of anguish.

The trigger for Jesus is the emotional escape Peter offers him.

"God forbid, Lord. This must never happen to you."

And we are right back in the wilderness:

"If you are the Son of God, save yourself.

If you are the Messiah, rise triumphant."

"If you are all powerful, you don't have to do this. You can choose."

The way out that Peter offers Jesus pushes Jesus right back to the trauma of the desert. We don't usually talk about it that way. We call it the temptation. But for forty days, Jesus wrestles with the blessing and call he has received. He is alone. He is hungry, He is in the wilderness. And the devil taunts him.

Jesus calls Peter Satan,
because for Jesus, this is what Satan feels like:
first, the knowledge of love,
then the knowledge of suffering,
then the offer of a way out.

The whole point of the temptation is that the temptation is real:
Jesus could escape all this -
there is every temptation to escape all this.
his adrenal system screams 'fight or flee'—
but he chooses a different road.

He chooses the way of the cross.

In this moment, Peter gets the hard end of it - the moment of brutality,
the flash of anger.
And all those sizzling emotions are then used to inform
the image that Jesus creates;
the landscape he gives the disciples to inhabit:

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves,
and take up their cross, and follow me.'

The gospel is written, of course, after the brutality of the cross has seared the
Christian Imagination. We cannot 'get behind' that moment to hear this as the
disciples would have - but even in the first telling,
the emotional clash between Jesus and Peter
sets the emotional landscape for the cross.

You must walk the way of the cross --
in the midst of betrayal, in the midst of roiling emotions,
in the midst of every human instinct that is triggered by the memory of pain:
to lash out, to cry vengeance, to flee.
You must walk the way of the cross -

Without retaliation,
without harming the other,
without using your power for your own gain,
or forcing the world to conform to your desires,
because
this is what you are called to do
as one who is loved
without measure, and without bound: beloved,
and called to embody God's love
in a world that will reject it, but will be beloved anyway.

The dry mouth and bitter taste of adrenaline
that Peter has when Jesus, his beloved,
calls him Satan?
That's what it will feel like,
to walk this road,
and do what must be done,
because God has called you to it.

And we are all called to it.

There will come a time, for each one of us --
many times, for most --
that we will be faced with the same choice those actors in Hamilton had.
Shall I put in the time, learn the back story, try to stretch my imagination so that it
can come close to one of the world's great minds?
Shall I try to inhabit the space of the other, do the emotional work,
and bear the pain?
Shall I be all that I am called to be?
Do what I have been given the opportunity to do?
Or shall I avoid it? Find an easier road.
Find a way to escape the call, and the pain?

For the actors, it may seem like a small thing: what's one night?
They still got a standing ovation, after all. But the choices we make become habits,
and our habits define the shape of our lives.

It is possible to form the habit of seeing Christ devoid of feeling,
to make faith an intellectual game,
a set of right beliefs, or decent actions.

But that is not the way of the cross.
The cross is living through the trauma, but not letting it be the end of the story.
Accepting the pain, and letting it be eclipsed by God's love.
It is to go through every betrayal, and failure, and disappointment,
without losing heart in the sheer fact of our existence:
through death comes resurrection
through loss comes life
you are loved, always and forever,
even and especially when that love hurts.

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