

The Thoughts of Our Hearts (Luke 4. 1-13)

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Some of you will be familiar with a series we've shared several times at Benedictus – Poetica Divina – in which we read a poem alongside a biblical text and see how they mutually illuminate each other. This Lent, we're doing something similar, but instead of a poem, we're going to be 'reading' an image. Some call this 'visio divina' – holy seeing or holy looking. Our images will be drawn from the extraordinary series, Australian Stations of the Cross, painted by First Nations artist, elder and spiritual leader, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr. Here is the First Station.



We're going to explore this image in more detail shortly, but let me offer some context first. Miriam-Rose, as many of you know, is from Nauiyu or Daly River in the Northern Territory. In 2021, she was named Senior Australian of the Year. She's an educator, artist and community leader and has worked all her life to promote cross-cultural understanding and to advocate for First Nations people and especially children and young people. As well as for her art, she is perhaps best known for her

teaching on *dadirri*, 'inner deep listening and quiet still awareness' which, she has said, is the gift Australia has been waiting for.



The images we'll be contemplating over these next weeks were painted by Miriam-Rose at the beginning of her long career. In 1961, a new church was built at Daly River Catholic Mission. When it was being redecorated in 1974, a young local artist was commissioned to produce the Stations of the Cross from an Aboriginal point of view. Miriam-Rose was then just 24 years old and it seems to me the depth of spiritual understanding already visible in this series is truly astonishing.

Let me say one more thing, by way of introduction, since not everyone will be familiar with the notion of Stations of the Cross. Also known as the Way of the Cross or the Way of Sorrows, the Stations of the Cross are a series of images depicting Jesus' journey on the day of his crucifixion. The stations grew out of imitations of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, which is a traditional processional route symbolising the path Jesus walked to Calvary. They're often hung around the walls of churches or in walks through the grounds of retreat centres and monasteries. There are usually fourteen sites or stops depicting particular incidents along the way of the cross, which invite the faithful to reflect not only on Jesus' journey, but their own. 'The objective of the stations is to enable a spiritual pilgrimage through contemplation of the Passion of

Christ'. A devotion of the Roman Catholic church, the Stations of the Cross are also used in many other denominations. And though traditionally 'walked' on Good Friday itself, they can also focus the whole Lenten journey, as we seek to accompany Jesus and deepen our connection with his way.

So let's return to the First Station: Jesus is condemned by Pilate.



I wonder what strikes you here? In a booklet that was published of these stations in 1984, Miriam-Rose offers a brief interpretive comment about each image. Here, she tells us, Jesus is the figure on the right and the outer circle in his head represents his divinity. I notice too the short lines at the top of his head, radiating upwards and out. The inner circles, says Miriam-Rose, are God's eye; his incarnate knowledge. 'He knows each and every one of us (the small dots) and he knows what Pilate is thinking too. In Christ's body, his heart is large and sad. Pilate is washing his hands of Jesus' death, but inside his head he is crying, because he knows he is weak and what he is doing is wrong'.¹ And notice that in Pilate's chest, there is no heart – just lines crossing back and forward, closing the space. In Miriam-Rose's depiction, the inner and outer worlds are seen to be integrally related.

¹ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, *Australian Stations of the Cross* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1984), p.4.

This image depicts an event near the end of Jesus' ministry. The reading we just heard from Luke's gospel comes from the beginning. But the thread that connects them is clear. Who we are, how we see and act, what is possible through and around us – it's all connected to the state of the heart, or what the bible often calls 'the thoughts of our heart'. In the book of Genesis, for example, prior to the flood, God is depicted as being angry with the peoples of their earth because, says the text, 'every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually' (Gen. 6.5). Generations later, when she sang of God's promised goodness to those who honour him, Mary, the mother of Jesus, imagined God 'scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts', bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly (Luke 1. 51-52). And so it is that, at the outset of his public ministry, it's the thoughts of his heart that Jesus is called to sift and discern.

The story is told like this. When Jesus had returned from his baptism in the Jordan River 'full of the Holy Spirit', he 'was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil'. The temptations represent impulses that 'scatter the heart', that close us down and drive us away from proper relation to God. How so? Thomas Keating, Cistercian monk and one of the founders of the Centering Prayer movement, suggested that the three temptations represent three root needs for human beings: security and survival (the bread temptation); power and control (the temptation to rule over all the nations); and affection and esteem (the temptation to prove himself special). What is depicted in the gospel story is a process by which the 'devil' tries to inveigle Jesus into securing these necessities for himself. Yet each time Jesus responds by refusing to grasp hold of them, explicitly entrusting himself to the promise of gift. Jesus will not be scattered or drawn away from the true source of his life, although the gospel is realistic in recognising that in a human being this is never a one-off victory or transformation. 'When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time'. Again and again, Jesus will be called to renew his trust in the grace of God.

And at this First Station of the Cross, at the moment of his condemnation, we see how this matters. Because in Luke's narrative, the devil's temptation of Jesus is almost recapitulated in Pilate's own story (Luke 23. 1-25). You'll remember that when Jesus is first brought before Pilate, Pilate doesn't really think he's guilty of the charges laid against him. He then realises that Jesus is a Galilean, under King Herod's jurisdiction, and so (perhaps) seeking to sidestep responsibility he sends him off to Herod. Herod is at first glad to see Jesus because, says the text, 'he was hoping to see him perform some sign'. But Jesus refuses to perform on demand or to win esteem ('Do not put the Lord your God to the test'). Herod is frustrated and joins in mocking him, but then sends him back to Pilate without condemning him. And somehow in this transaction, this mutual honouring of each other's power over life and death, Pilate and Herod gain value in each other's eyes. Writes Luke: 'That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies'.

Pilate again declares his view that neither he nor Herod believes Jesus to be guilty. But the leaders and the crowd all shout out together – demanding his crucifixion, getting louder and more urgent – and, says Luke, 'their voices prevailed'. Ultimately it seems, for Pilate, the need for security, the need to maintain his power and control, trump all. Where Jesus refused again and again, year after year, the temptation to possess his life for himself, Pilate succumbed to the devil.

All this shows in Miriam-Rose's image. The heart of Jesus is huge. The thoughts of his heart have remained fixed on God and now, near the end, he can see as God sees, he can encompass and redeem worlds by his faith and love. But the heart of Pilate is closed, invisible – maybe even scattered for good. Although if, as Miriam-Rose suggests, he can still weep inwardly 'because he knows he is weak and what he is doing is wrong', then perhaps there is hope for him yet.

We have begun our Lenten journey ... and we too are invited to become present to the thoughts of our hearts. What are the ways in which we too are prone to seek our security, possess our meaning, control our future apart from God? How are we tempted to live separate, self-referencing, self-sufficient lives? What happens

within and without when we succumb to this temptation? What happens when we refuse it and turn again in faith? As we contemplate this first station of the cross, this first stage of our Lenten journey, may the large, sad and open heart of Jesus encourage us to join him in his way of truth and trust.