Yesterday I did something I’ve been thinking about for some while, especially when I’ve come up against Sunday readings in which I can find no toe-hold. Don’t get me wrong: they’re perfectly good readings (I’m sure the biblical authors are breathing a sigh of relief to have my favorable judgment). The fault for not finding a place of traction lies not in the readings but in my stunted imagination.

Anyway, the thing I’d been thinking about was reading John’s gospel start to finish in one go as a way of situating the day’s reading. Even then, didn’t really do it; I skimmed the gospel and jotted notations for each chapter. Once again, I was struck by how quickly John gets to the Passion. His gospel is very nearly 50/50—50% (a little more) leading up Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem and 50% from that point until the end.

Of 21 chapters, John devotes nearly eight to the Passion, almost one third of the book. And it’s not just the Passion material. The whole of his gospel recounts a story of conflict, a kind of storyteller’s dream, holding his audience in the palm of his hand.

We’re real murder mystery fans at home. Sometimes, if the action in a film starts too slowly (and if the acting and directing aren’t good enough to override that), we’ll say something like, “Doesn’t this seem to be dragging?” and switch it off. If a jogger trips over a dead body in the first five or ten minutes, though, and the production values are above average, one of us will say, “I’m in!” and we stick with it.

John, even in that soaring and beautiful prelude (“In the beginning was the Word . . .”), plants the seeds of conflict right away. By verse ten he’s saying, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;” and here it comes, the first leaning into the realm of conflict, “yet [the little three-letter word, yet] the world did not know him.”

I’m in.

Just like that, you can almost hear those low, brooding notes of movie soundtrack signaling something mysterious, a sense of foreboding. John delivers on this early promise, wasting no time before Jesus’ cleansing of the temple.

That certainly begins to put him at odds with the powers that be, upsetting the smooth operation of the money-lenders.

By chapter four Jesus and his band are headed back to Galilee by way of Samaria and the story of the woman at the well. Once again he is thrown into problems with prejudice and hierarchies. The prejudice is akin to state-sponsored discrimination.

There are healings and other miracles all along the way, of course, with Jesus pushing the envelope, saying things like, “I am the bread of life” and referring to his own body and blood as the food and drink of eternal life.

The authorities are going from a low simmer to a rolling boil by now. John tells us by chapter seven that angry leaders are looking to kill Jesus. Referring to my home-made Cliffs Notes I see that Nicodemus makes his second appearance in order to tell them that they can’t make any judgment against Jesus without a trial. Turns out to be prescient.

After halting the near-stoning of a woman, healing a blind man, and narrowly avoiding attempts on his own life, he goes to the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha to raise Lazarus from the dead.

I’d forgotten—and that’s one reason this exercise yesterday, my faulty memory—that the raising of Lazarus is the tipping point in this drama. That action is just too much for the religious leaders seeking to maintain their positions of authority and—to give them their due—to guard against what some of them saw as the dilution and destruction of their religion. It’s in chapter eleven that the real plotting of Jesus’ death begins. The Pharisees are recruiting informants to mount a trumped-up case against him.

The day after the Lazarus incident is what we commemorate on Palm Sunday. And we pretty well know what follows that, since Holy Week was only about a month ago. That brings us to today’s reading—the last supper—which we’ll leave for the moment.

In John’s telling of the passion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about making it through—no, how to be truly alive in—the midst of ongoing conflict. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he tells them, “But take courage; I have conquered the world.”

He warnts them that they’re up against people trying to determine the nature of truth, that some of them, as I hinted earlier, want to kill the disciples because they “will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.” Now that’s the kind of stuff straight out of a serial-killer or horror movie. Through out this period Jesus also reassures them with the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit—the spirit of truth.

In John’s account the crucifixion looks like a violent end to the ongoing conflict between the rule-bound authorities and those who are called to love everyone, as we see in both today’s passage from John and the one from Acts. It appears as if the conflict has been brought to a horrific close by the triumph of the powers of darkness. Those who tell Pilate, “If you release him, you are no friend of the emperor” have won. Jesus is taken from the cross and buried in Joseph’s tomb.

But the next-to-last chapter seems Mary Magdalene going to the grave to make sure every thing is in order. When she sees the stone has been rolled away she panics and runs to tell Peter. More drama: “How can this be?!” The three (John is now with them) see the empty tomb, and the mean go home.

Mary stays, sees two angels and then the gardener, who turns out to be the resurrected Jesus.

The risen Lord appears that evening and again a week later (to accommodate the doubting Thomas) and once more on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius. That was the reading from two weeks again in which Jesus tells Peter, “Feed my sheep” and “Follow me.”

That’s really the end of John’s gospel—there’s just a brief gloss about the author after that.

Returning to today’s reading—as I said I would—we can see that this is the crux of the whole thing. By “the whole thing” I mean the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the real resolution of the conflict in which we can still find ourselves.

How do we make our way in this beautiful, sometimes terrifying, world, God’s creation that somehow is still fraught with dilemmas and difficult choices?

It’s simple . . . but, as I’ve said many times before, it’s not easy. It’s in Jesus’ parting words to his disciples before he was hauled off to kangaroo court and assassination dressed up as a legal execution.

It could hardly be more straightforward: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another.” + + +