

## Theme: - Palm Sunday

At the beginning of chapter 26 Jesus had made it plain to his disciples that he was about to die; he said, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” And a little later on while in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and Jesus told his disciples that by pouring the ointment on his body she was preparing him for burial. Jesus was also preparing his disciples for what would be his horrific death.

We pick up the story just after he had eaten his last supper and had given us this simple but beautiful Eucharistic meal, which is now celebrated in every parish in this country and around the world in remembrance of his wonderful sacrifice. We are told that Jesus and his disciples went to a specific garden on the mount of Olives called Gethsemane. Now Gethsemane means ‘Olive Press’ a very appropriate name because Jesus was about to be put under considerable pressure with the reality of his imminent betrayal.

However, the reading never mentions the stress or emotion that the disciples must all be feeling at Jesus, ‘matter of fact,’ declaration of his imminent death, which of course was to be the death of a very dear friend who they had been living with for two years or more, and who they loved and looked up to in awe and amazement. So, what was going through our minds when this passage was being read, because Jesus is also our dear friend for as long as each of us have come to know and love him.

I know from my own experience, that the passage of time deadens our emotions of sadness, otherwise sadness would dominate our lives for ever. But nevertheless, we need to pause and at least say from our hearts thank you Lord for what you did for us all those years ago, because his suffering was not only on the cross, it was also in the fore knowledge of the approaching reality of the cross, and the mental and spiritual agony which that knowledge generated.

On arrival at the garden, he asked his disciples to sit while he went on his own to pray, now we don’t actually know how many people were there, in all probability the majority of his apostles were there, but by now the number of disciples could well number hundreds, I’m not suggesting they were all there, but a number of them could well have been.

But not wishing to be alone when praying he took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee James, and John with him, and it was also those three, who were with him at his transfiguration. So, these three were clearly special to him, indeed tradition has it that Zebedee’s wife was Salome who was Mary’s sister making John and James Jesus’ cousins..

It is when he starts to pray that he began to grieve and be agitated. Jesus had held himself in check for such a long time, probably for the benefit of his disciples, but now as he started to talk to God his Father in prayer his deep emotions bust to the top and he is seen grieving and agitated, the mental and spiritual strain had now all but overpowered him. We can almost feel the agony that he must have gone through, his imminent death had now come home to him, nobody wants to die an horrific death, nor in their early thirties.

And it is then that he found that he needed his three particular disciples to give him strength, because in verse 38 he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” Then in verse 39 we read, “He threw himself on the ground and prayed. ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’” Drinking the cup is a common metaphor in the Old and New Testament for the wrath of God, for example in Jeremiah 25 we have in verse 15, “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath.” and in the New Testament in Revelation chapter 14 verse 10 we read, “They will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into his cup of anger.”

The cup that Jesus prays he will not have to drink from contains the wrath of God, for all the sins of the world, a huge burden to carry on his own into death. Also, when Jesus said, “If it is possible. Let this cup pass from me.” Shows that he had realised the enormity of what God was asking of him and momentarily didn’t want the burden of it, but also in the same breath, gave his assurance of his obedience to God his Father.

Jesus will suffer betrayal, abandonment, arrest, imprisonment, torture, beatings, mocking and crucifixion; but worse than all that, Jesus will experience the burden of the wrath of God as he takes on all our sins on his shoulders. “Yet not what I want but what you want.” That was also a sign of the weakness of Jesus’ humanity but also of his great courage as he overcame his weakness, knowing full well what was before him.

Jesus of course has no sin for which he should experience the wrath of God. However, Jesus came to set the sinner free. He came to redeem the lost souls. He came to pay the penalty for sin. He came to be the ultimate Passover Lamb. The only way he could do that was to drink the cup of God’s wrath. Jesus would and did take the punishment for our sins on his shoulders.

We need to dwell on that at this Easter time to appreciate the enormity of what Jesus in his love for us agreed to do for each of us. Taking the cup was also a defining moment in Jesus’ life, a moment when Jesus’ obedience to God his Father despite everything was absolute, and that was also the moment that our salvation was all but guaranteed; the final act which saved us of course was the cross at Calvary.

In verse 40 we see the contrast between Jesus’ endurance and his three disciples who are clearly tired and understandably so, they have been celebrating the Passover, learning about when and how they are to celebrate the Eucharist in the future as a memorial to him, and also hearing of Judas’s betrayal.

Verse 41 is interesting because it contains the saying, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The disciples’ spirits were willing to do what was right. In fact, just a few minutes earlier, all of them had pledged their lives to Jesus: “Peter said to him, ‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And so said all the disciples.” Matthew 26:35.

But, as it turned out, they couldn’t even pray with Jesus for any length of time. Their flesh was weak. They fell asleep because of their physical human weakness. By affirming that “the spirit is willing,” Jesus was saying that He knew the disciples wanted to stay awake and pray, but the weakness of the flesh had overpowered the spiritual desire to pray and watch. Jesus was not scolding them but urging them to beware of the weakness of the flesh.

The Lord Himself was fighting the same struggle against the flesh, but He had overcome it verse 39.

In verse 42 Jesus just makes sure that he has to drink from the cup of wrath by praying, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” I have to say that had I been in Jesus’ position, I too would have double checked.

Again, he checked on his disciples and again found them asleep, but this time left them to sleep and prayed for a third time the same words as before. But after praying for the third time, he realised that his betrayal and the process to crucifixion had started so he woke his disciples and prepared them by telling them that his betrayer was at hand.

As the days progress towards Easter reread this passage from Matthew’s gospel and dwell on the enormity of what Jesus agreed to do for you and for me, and if this sermon helps in any way then you will find it on our web site.

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