

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Tuesday of Holy Week, April 7th

8: *Prayer in Gethsemane*; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 2; Collects 3,4,5

Tonight, I'd like us to think about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the site of Jesus' agony, betrayal, and arrest. I find it interesting that, whereas in many other places the four gospels differ quite significantly in the detail and focus of the narrative, in this section they are almost identical. I'm going to leave out the cutting off of the ear of the high priest's servant because it tells us little except that violence against an innocent bystander should never be a reaction in times of stress.

The word Gethsemane is derived from the Aramaic word for an "olive oil press", so Gethsemane was clearly an olive grove. It was situated at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem which is separated from the Temple Mount by part of the Kedron valley. This explains why Luke refers to the place simply as the Mount of Olives and why John refers to it as 'a garden across the Kedron valley'. Four different locations have been claimed by the various religious groups in Jerusalem, but the exact location of the NT Gethsemane is unknown. Whatever its exact location, possible sites have been places of pilgrimage since at least AD 300 and three of the olive trees in one garden have recently been dated as more than 900 years old. Furthermore, those ancient trees are genetically all derived from the same parent plant, which could indicate an attempt to perpetuate an even older olive tree from the time of Jesus.

Why did Jesus go to the olive grove? It was apparently a place that he and his disciples, including Judas, often visited, away from the hub-bub of the city. So, it was a very familiar place. On the way to the garden, Jesus told the disciples that they would all desert him. This was the point at which Peter asserted that, even if all the others deserted Jesus, he would not; only to be told that, before cock-crow that night, he would have disowned Jesus three times. Peter, so sure of himself, persisted "Even if I must die with you I will not disown you" at which, all the others, shamed by Peter's bravery and insistence, said the same. This certainly has a message for us all, not to over-rate the strength of our own faith. I can only really speak for myself when I say that there have been few times when my faith has been really seriously challenged, and it has never been challenged to the point where I risked losing my life by maintaining my beliefs. I guess, however, that for most of us the same may be true.

When Jesus and the disciples reached Gethsemane the first thing Jesus did was to make most of the disciples sit down while he took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him. The choice of Peter is obvious. The two sons of Zebedee are the James and John who ask Jesus if they can sit at his right and left in his kingdom, who were present when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, and who were with Peter at Jesus' transfiguration. These three, then, were the inner, inner circle of the disciples and perhaps the strongest and most proper to witness Jesus' agony. It may also be important in the gospel writers mind that three was the number of witnesses required for certainty in a Jewish civil trial. Having moved apart from the other disciples Jesus told Peter, James and John that his heart was ready to break with grief, and to stay awake while he was praying. Two things in particular stand out for me in this passage. First that Jesus' heart was 'ready to break with grief' – this made me ask why "grief" rather than "terror"? Terror would seem the more natural emotion in this situation. What was Jesus grieving for? – presumably all the sins of the world which weighed so heavily on his divine shoulders. Second is Jesus' command to "stay awake". Humans can't stay awake 24/7 so I think of this as "stay alert" – stay alert both so that we can spot and resist temptation, and also so that we can hear what God is asking of us. And, when alert, to pray that we might recognise both the temptation and God's quiet call.

Returning to Peter, James and John after his fervent prayer, Jesus found them asleep and chided them “Could you not stay awake with me for one hour”, adding “Pray that you may be spared the test”. This, some gospels suggest, happened three times. In his prayer, Jesus asks “My father, if it is possible, let this cup (this test) pass by me” but, after this request, he continues “Nevertheless, not what I will but as thou wilt”. In these two phrases Jesus shows both his humanity in his terror of what was to come, but then his divinity by his complete acceptance of the will of God his father. Only Luke says that, in his agony, an angel appeared bringing additional strength to Jesus’ human body, and that the added strength he gained from the angel’s visit made Jesus pray even more urgently. We could have a long discussion about angels at some point, but this is not the moment. It was immediately after his final wake-up call to the disciples that Jesus says “Enough, the hour is come, The Son of Man is betrayed. Let us go forward” So, for Jesus, even the time for prayer had ended and it was time for action. Sincere prayer should always lead us to rightful action.

So Judas appeared, with a crowd armed with swords and cudgels, sent by the religious hierarchy. At the last supper Jesus had already told the disciples that one of them would betray him. Both Matthew and John tell us that Jesus identified Judas as his betrayer by giving him the piece of bread dipped in wine, but the other disciples did not catch on. In Luke’s account, Jesus’ statement provoked a debate as to which of them it might be; and in Matthew they all exclaimed “Surely not me, Lord?” I note that this is a question rather than a denial; they didn’t say “It’s not me, Lord”. It seems that, even after spending so much time with Jesus, the disciples were then still unsure, and it was not until after the resurrection, ascension and the coming of the holy spirit that they were prepared to and often did die for their faith. This must lead us all to question the strength of our own faith – most of us have never been so severely tested – and pray for the strength of the holy spirit when we are tested.

The last point I’d like to consider is that Judas identified Jesus to the guards with a kiss. How would the guards have known which of the group in the garden was Jesus? Even a pointed finger could have been misinterpreted in the melee. According to Matthew it was a prearranged signal. But why a kiss? A kiss on the cheek was, in 1st century Israel, not a symbol of love, but a common greeting (much as in modern France) and also a sign of deep respect and honour; something that one might well expect of a disciple to his revered teacher; a sign of trust among friends. So perhaps it was a signal that was not only unmistakable but also one designed to reduce the disciples’ suspicion because they commonly greeted their master in that way. For us, now, it seems an indication of the worst sort of treachery. Jesus, however, was well aware what was coming; he even says to Judas “Friend, do what you are here to do”.

Gethsemane, I conclude, teaches us that, whatever challenge we face, we must pray earnestly, we must hold fast to our faith and must continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit in all our actions.