

Holy Week

Maundy Thursday 7.30pm

28/3/24

Sermon

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In the Garden - Gethsemane

Matthew 26:30-46

The bread has been broken, the cup has been drunk, the betrayer has melted into the darkness, the psalms have been sung. Jesus leads His disciples through the darkened streets of Jerusalem. How many other late-night walkers did they pass on their way out of the gates, and out into the surrounding countryside? Just outwith the city walls there were olive groves at the foot of the precipitous Mount of Olives, reaching up the slopes away from the city. To this day a few olive trees remain. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years, some as many as a thousand and more. Who knows if the trees one can see beyond the city walls are descendants of the ones Jesus knew? The name Gethsemane, unknown in other ancient Jewish sources, means 'oil press', as in the device where one wooden wheel turning within another crushes olives, forcing the liquid oil into a trough. To produce olive oil, intense pressure is placed on the olive. There may have been an olive press or the memory of one at Gethsemane.

A few of us here tonight have been to a spot where olive trees still grow at Gethsemane. There is a church, whose interior is dark and purple, and right beside a few ancient olive trees, all that are left of the groves from ancient times. It takes only a few moments now to walk through them on the pathway. In the daytime you are conscious of the busy road that runs along the Kidron Valley beneath the ancient walls of Old Jerusalem, with the Temple Mount above. I went once at night-time, when the pathways are lit and the traffic quieter, and sat on one of the seats amidst the olive trees. In the stillness and coolness of that evening it was one of the most spiritual moments of my life.

Somewhere, near that spot, over two thousand years ago, Jesus knelt and prayed.

Somewhere, near that spot, over two thousand years ago, disciples slept.

Somewhere, near that spot, Jesus poured His soul out to His heavenly Father. *"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."*

Somewhere, near that spot, Jesus went to the disciples and found them asleep, and woke Peter briefly and asked that he try to stay awake.

Somewhere, near that spot, Jesus prayed again, and steeled His nerve to face what lay ahead, and discovered His disciples asleep a second time, and a third time.

Somewhere, near that spot, Jesus kept on praying, and woke the disciples a third time, to tell them that the hour had come, His betrayal was imminent, and Judas and the guards of the Chief Priests were on their way. In fact, they were already there. And the disciples fled, and Judas came forward and kissed Him, and He was arrested and taken away.

Being in that tiny space now at Gethsemane with its few olive trees left you can *feel* the cosmos of Jesus, the universe of Jesus, narrowing down and down and down. The pocket-handkerchief of land with its few trees were all that was left of His freedom. And then arrest. And then being betrayed and abandoned. And then trial. And then beating. And then death. All in a matter of hours. This distilling of divinity and humanity into tears and heartfelt words and a kiss and darkness.

The place of Gethsemane as told in this Bible story is almost too much. It is a place where we can only watch and wait. It is a place which calls us to suspend our ordinary rationality before a situation too deep for our everyday thoughts and words. It feels like the presence of God is turning into the absence of God, to be heard finally in the bitter words on the cross, "My God, my God,

why hast Thou forsaken me?" It begins at Gethsemane, and we can't pretend to understand it, or like it, or believe in it easily. What parent could do this to a child? Was this the only way?

There must be no easy answers. What we are left with is the sense that for a badly broken world, that is still showing its brokenness, it was a response of such awfulness and magnitude that this was the only way to begin the painful process of turning things around. Alongside a Jesus Who can look us in the eye when we are broken or breaking or betrayed and say, "I understand." There is nothing more to offer than this.

Sometimes it is important, if painfully uncomfortable, for us to sit with this, and not explain it away, or theologize it. There are times for explanations and theology, but tonight, in the raw darkness of Gethsemane, is not one of them. We sit with it, and we bring our questions, and our hurt, and our disbelief, and our anger, and all our own triggered emotions to God, to Jesus, tonight. Might He be saying to you, to me, tonight, "I understand"?

A couple of days ago Julia and I were leading the South Morningside Primary School Easter service. The first section that Primary 4B did as the Easter story – from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday and *everything* in between. We take a week to do it as grown-ups in Church, Primary 4B can do it in ten minutes. It was magnificent. A simple telling of the story, everyone had something to say and do, and the school children took it all in as we fast-forwarded salvation, through riding into the city, to the Last Supper, to Gethsemane and betrayal, to crucifixion, to emptiness on Holy Saturday, to resurrection and hope on Easter Sunday.

A youngster I know spoke to me afterwards. "Why did everyone hate Jesus so much, He was only trying to make things better for everyone?" People have received theological doctorates for less profound questions.

If we are to get beyond the snapshots of Jesus' life in Holy Week – especially the horror and the awfulness and the incomprehension – we should not ignore these things or sweep them under the carpet, or explain them away, or pretend they weren't, somehow, real. Of course we should think and wonder and question, and maybe accept, and maybe reject.

But the perspective of an 8-year-old child spoke into my attempts to understand and believe what this week, and in particular this heart-numbing Gethsemane part of the week might, just might, be about.

“Why did everyone hate Jesus so much, He was only trying to make things better for everyone?”

The bread has been broken, the cup has been drunk, the betrayer has melted into the darkness, the psalms have been sung. Jesus leads His disciples through the darkened streets of Jerusalem to Gethsemane. The praying and the sleeping and the praying and the agonising and the praying. The betraying and the kissing and the fleeing and the arresting. The scourging and the nailing and the dying. The burying. The rising.

Why?

He was only trying to make things better for everyone. **Amen**