

JOURNEYING THROUGH HOLY WEEK TO EASTER WITH MARK'S GOSPEL

MAUNDY THURSDAY 01 April 2021

*The second section below on **The Events of the Night: Betrayal, Arrest, Blasphemy and Denial** can either be taken on this day, or on the next (Good Friday).*

Focus your attention on God and become aware again of God's presence with you, and of joining with other worshippers (as in the Introduction to this series).

Thank God for bringing you safely to this day. Ask God to inspire you.

Then read these passages, paying attention to them as you do. What catches your imagination? What puzzles you? How do they make you feel?

THE LAST SUPPER AND GETHSEMANE

Mark 14:12-31 (NRSV)

¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' ¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' ¹⁵ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.' ¹⁶ So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

¹⁷ When it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸ And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' ¹⁹ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' ²⁰ He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'

²² While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' ²³ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

²⁶ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."

²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.' ²⁹ Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.' ³⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' ³¹ But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.

Reflection

Shared meals are important. They do not just fuel the body, but also deepen relationships and nurture the soul. Elements of them and actions at them can take on great meaning and huge emotional significance. Jesus shared meals with the crowds [eg Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-9], and with individuals and groups, including his disciples. These culminated in a last supper with his disciples before he was handed over and crucified. At a Passover meal Jews then and now use the elements of the meal to remind them of how God freed them from slavery in Egypt to be his people, and of the hardship and the cost, but also the sacrificial love involved. Jewish people have always thought that the stories in the Bible tell them what God was like for their ancestors. But they also think that, since God is always the same, the stories also tell them what God is like for them in the here and now. The story becomes their story. And they become part of the story.

Sometime in the Passover season Jesus held his last supper with his disciples. He began by commandeering a room like he commandeered a donkey on his entry into Jerusalem just a few days before. He saw the Passover story coming true in his own story. He knew that within days he was going to be betrayed, condemned and killed. He believed that, through this, God would release people from what held them captive and bring them to new life.

He then went beyond the Passover imagery. He went on to identify his body with the bread and his blood with the wine, separated as in a sacrifice. He was prepared to love God and other people even at the cost of his life. In sharing the bread and wine with his disciples, he invited them to share in that with him, to take up their cross and follow him – and to find that he was with them as they did so.

He knew that Judas would betray him, Peter would deny him, and they would all fall asleep or run away or fail him in some way. Yet he still welcomed them to share the meal. Such grace and forgiveness! Do we sometimes take it too lightly, when we share the meal and he comes to be with us?

Mark 14:32-42 (NRSV)

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' ³³ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴ And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' ³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' ³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?' ³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' ³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰ And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

Reflection

After their Last Supper, Jesus asked his disciples to pray with him in Gethsemane, and pray that they not be brought to their breaking point. The phrase echoes that in the Lord's Prayer which we sometimes say as "Save us from the time of trial" or "Lead us not into Temptation". That is what he was praying, and what he wants us to pray. In Gethsemane notice how he keeps going ahead of

them until he is left on his own. He acknowledged that his own will was for the cup of suffering to be taken away from him. But he prayed that God's will be done in and through him on earth, as it is in heaven [Mark 14:36]. That is the Lord's Prayer again. Can we stay with him and pray it this Easter, weak and frail as we are?

Prayer

God our Father, you have invited us to share in the supper
which your Son gave to his Church.
Nourish us, we pray, by his presence,
and unite us in his love;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Methodist Worship Book p. 537

The Lord's Prayer

THE EVENTS OF THE NIGHT: BETRAYAL, ARREST, BLASPHEMY AND DENIAL

Mark 14:43-52 (NRSV)

⁴³ Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. ⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' ⁴⁵ So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. ⁴⁶ Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. ⁴⁷ But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? ⁴⁹ Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.' ⁵⁰ All of them deserted him and fled.

⁵¹ A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, ⁵² but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Reflection

In a crisis, as we are discovering in the Covid-19 pandemic, momentous events can seem both to come incredibly quickly and at the same time last for ever. The events in this passage occur "immediately" (to use Mark's term) after the ones at the Last Supper and in Gethsemane. No sooner has Jesus said that his betrayer is at hand than that betrayer arrives on the scene. It is Judas. In a sense we expected that, because Mark 14:10-12 has already told us that Judas had begun plotting to betray Jesus. But in that passage and now again here Mark emphasises that Judas is one of the Twelve. This betrayal is not by a chance outsider or a fringe player, but by a member of the core group of Jesus's followers. Jesus had said that they would all fail and desert him in various ways [Mark 14:26-31]. Yet he had not rejected them, and still shared his last supper with them. Does that mean that there is hope for you and me, who try to be his followers and constantly fail?

Judas is a quintessential example of that desertion. Jesus had seen into him and through him. He knew that he was plotting. Judas had been to see the authorities before he came to the supper. At the supper, he is not mentioned by name, but is simply there with the rest of the Twelve. Jesus says that there is a betrayer among them, but does not identify him in any way. In a sense Judas is

anonymous, fading for a moment into the background. At some point (Mark does not tell us when) he slips away altogether. He is not amongst those who go with Jesus to Gethsemane.

Now he has reappeared. He is accompanied by a crowd or mob of people, so presumably not an organised group of troops or what we might call “agents of law enforcement”. They have come at the informal instigation or incitement of people in authority (chief priests, scribes and elders), who have not come themselves. It is worth pondering whether there are echoes of this in such recent events as the invasion of the Capitol in the USA.

The mob are looking to arrest Jesus by surprise, and out of the public gaze. Identifying individual people is hard, though, when they are not in the context where you have seen them before, when it is dark, and when they are in a group of others. Judas therefore indicates which one is Jesus by going up to him and kissing him.

The mob move to apprehend Jesus. He says they need not have done it secretly, under the cover of darkness, because he has been openly teaching in the Temple each day. They are treating him as if he were a clandestine terrorist or bandit. That is ironic when you remember that in Mark 11:17 Jesus had used the same term to accuse people of turning the Temple from being a house of prayer into being a bandits’ or terrorists’ den.

In any event, the mob who have come with Judas are carrying weapons. This is presumably to give them courage, and because they are afraid that they might meet violent resistance. In that, they are not completely wrong. Someone standing nearby who is a disciple or sympathiser with Jesus has a sword and slices off the ear of one of the high priest’s slaves. That, though, is not the way of Jesus. He implicitly rebukes the use of violence on all sides and offers no resistance. Instead, he talks of letting the scriptures be fulfilled. Mark does not explain whether particular texts are being thought of here, and it is hard to think of any which would apply. The Hebrew scriptures do, however, have a general theme of servants of God who suffer alone in order to fulfil their vocation and mission. Isaiah 53, for example, talks of a suffering servant. Jeremiah’s life in many ways exemplified that theme – and it was Jeremiah who had talked of a bandits’ den in relation to the Temple!

Moreover, in Gethsemane Jesus had prayed that God’s will and not his own be done. As we saw earlier, that sentiment is echoed by a phrase found in Matthew and Luke in what we know as the Lord’s Prayer (“Your kingdom come; your will be on earth as it is in heaven”). Mark’s story from this point onwards shows what it means for that prayer to be embodied in practice. The mob apprehend Jesus and hold him fast. The Twelve (other than Judas) and his other followers all desert him and run away. That may not be an exact fulfilment of a particular biblical text but it is very much in line with what Jesus himself had said at the Last Supper.

What would we have done? As we have read or listened to Mark’s story we have gradually been drawn into the scene. Although we were not part of the historical band of Jesus’s close followers, we are onlookers – and some of us might be wanting to follow him at least a little in the circumstances of our lives.

The wonder is that we have a representative in the story that Mark tells. A young man who is not in the core group tries to follow him (both physically and in terms of more general discipleship) and not run away. When people try to apprehend him, though, unlike Jesus he tries to resist and evade arrest. He fails to carry through his desire to follow Jesus. When it comes to the crunch, he finds it less embarrassing and shameful to be seen running away naked than to be taken to be a disciple of Jesus. What would you have done?

priest asks him directly whether he is not just God's anointed agent (i.e. the Messiah/Christ) as Peter had recognised at Caesarea Philippi, but also whether he is the Son of God, as the voice from heaven had declared at his baptism and again at his transfiguration. This makes sense if the high priest has begun to recognise what is implied by Jesus's words and deeds in the Temple and his challenges to the religious structures and those in authority over them. So because this is now perhaps the time, and because the Spirit moves him to speak, for the first time Jesus directly accepts the description, although he does not say the words himself. He does, though, go on to talk in his preferred way of himself as the Son of Man, whose role as suggested by Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1 is to come and judge the world in God's name - and therefore, implicitly, to judge those attempting to judge and condemn him [14:61-62].

If you were there listening and watching, what would you expect the high priest to do next? Technically, blasphemy involved pronouncing the divine name, which Jesus has not actually done. But the high priest decided that there is enough implicit in what Jesus has said to justify treating it as blasphemy. The chief priests, elders and scribes all agree. They state that Jesus deserves to die. The cruel mockery and beating begin (14:63-65).

Jesus had repeatedly said that he would be handed over and condemned to death. Each time that he said it, he had quickly gone on to say that anyone who wishes to be one of his followers must walk with him on the same way. So why are we surprised that our attention is suddenly switched back to Peter? There we are with him in the inner courtyard as he warms himself by the fire amongst the guards. He is suddenly recognised by one of the high priest's servant-girls as being one of Jesus's disciples. He denies it, and goes back out into the more public forecourt, noticeably moving away from Jesus as he does. Twice more he is challenged. Twice more he denies his connection with Jesus. As Jesus had predicted, despite Peter's protestations that he would never desert him, when things come to a head, he completely fails him. At each denial a cock crows. Peter bursts into tears [14:66-72].

As you look on, what are you doing? Are you condemning Peter? Or empathising? Like him, are you bursting into tears?

Prayer

Gracious and eternal God,
look with mercy on this your family,
for which our Lord Jesus Christ
was content to be betrayed
and given up into the hands of sinners
and to suffer death upon the cross;
who is alive and glorified with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Methodist Worship Book p. 538

The Lord's Prayer