

Jesus and the apostles

In the garden at Gethsemane

Matthew 26:30-46, Mark 14:26-42, Luke 22:29-46

This has been for me one of the most difficult chapters to write. I found it so hard to go with Jesus into the garden at Gethsemane. I wanted metaphorically to stay out of the garden just as the disciples, as we shall soon see, wanted to avoid the situation by going to sleep.

After his initial temptation in the desert Jesus had in many ways lived on a “high”. He had demonstrated the power of God as no one else before him. People were right to ask the question: “When the Messiah comes will he do greater things than this?”. Yet it was not a demonstration of naked power such as is often seen in modern television heroes. The power Jesus demonstrated always related to human need. As I hope this book shows Jesus acted in relationships with people. His power was used for human benefit. That was much harder than a naked demonstration of power. It required Jesus to meet people and interact with them in their own human need as individuals or as groups, and with it came the anguish of human interaction with people who have their own freewill.

So Jesus had lived “on a high” for several years in meeting the people. He had also “wiped the floor” with the religious leaders. They could not stand up to his arguments. They were immensely jealous because Jesus was always one step ahead of them in the argument. He pulled the carpet away from under their beautiful theological structures by questioning the assumptions on which they were built.

Now they were about to catch up with him. He always knew they would, but that day had always been in the future and Jesus was able to live with it without being over-burdened by it. We all know that experience when we are faced with something fearful in the future. Perhaps an unpleasant coming interview or some frightening school exams. Sometimes we do become over-burdened, but mostly we survive.

After supper that evening, the last Jesus would have on earth, as he told his twelve disciples, he went out of Jerusalem with them. It was a beautiful full moon (Passover was always at full moon). The full moon was by now quite high in the sky (a full moon always rises about as the sun sets on the opposite side of the sky) and several hours had passed since sunset. Behind them were the last flickering lights of Jerusalem from the oil lamps and candles in the homes of people who were still awake - and of course the high priest’s palace was still very much awake. As they went on the moon cast their moving shadows on the ground and they wove their way through the shadows of the trees thrown onto the ground.

They had sung their last song in the upper room at the end of the Passover meal. Now it was time for the eternal Passover to be killed.

Jesus then made clear to the remaining eleven disciples what was to happen. (I cannot bring myself to call them apostles at this stage.) “Tonight you will all be caught unawares and fall down because of me.” But Jesus could still see them as his apostles. “After I have been raised up I will lead you into Galilee.” Led by Peter they all pledged their allegiance.

But we are delaying entering that garden. [*1]

“Sit down here while I go over there to pray.” Sitting on the ground is so much more difficult for us than it is for those who are used to it. We do not know whether to put our legs forward and lean back on our arms or tuck our legs backwards. Either way we are uncomfortable. But in the Middle East where people are accustomed to sitting on the ground they can sit with their legs tucked back for a long period of time without tiredness or discomfort.

Eight of them sat down, but Jesus took three of them, Peter, James and John, with him to pray. These were the three who had been with him on the mountain top when they saw his glory and Moses and Elijah appeared to them. Now they were to see their leader in anguish.

They were desperately tired. Not for them were the late rises at seven o'clock or later in the morning with bedtime at eleven o'clock! Where artificial lighting had not yet been developed beyond the candle and the oil lamp people rose well before dawn at first light and called it a day not that long after sunset and supper [*2]. The disciples had had their supper and had now left the city. It was already past their bedtime!

Reams have been written about the anguish Jesus felt. "I am almost dying from the strain," he told them. "Stay here and remain alert." That for them was easier said than done.

Jesus then went on a little further to pray. [*3]

We mostly pray silently unless we are praying with a group and wish the others to join in. But a number of places the New Testament suggest a tradition of praying aloud, even personal prayers [*4]. So it would not be strange for Jesus to have prayed aloud.

"Father, if it is possible let this cup be taken away from me." Jesus knew what was going to happen to him. He knew that Judas had gone out to betray him to the priests. He knew that they wanted him dead because he had made them so angry and made fools of them in the temple in front of the people they had always impressed with their false dignity. He knew that he would be charged with being a false prophet for which the penalty was death. He knew the rule imposed on the Jews by the Romans that the Jews could not legally carry out a death penalty. So he knew that he would be brought to the Roman governor, Pilate, for sentence of death and execution. He knew well the barbarism of the Romans, who were not satisfied with simply carrying out a sentence of death - they would beat and mock the prisoner before they killed him. And he knew the method of execution used by the Romans - that most barbaric method of crucifixion [*5]. He knew all this because many so called bandits (often freedom fighters by another name) in his lifetime had suffered that fate.

So he prayed: "Father, if it is possible let me be saved from this fate." "But may your will be done, not mine."

Theologians will of course go on to talk or write about the atonement and additional pain suffered by Jesus resulting from that, but our purpose here is to talk about Jesus and his relationship with the disciples as seen in these events.

Jesus came back to his disciples and found them asleep. True they were physically tired and had eaten a large meal. But perhaps too they lacked the energy to share Jesus' suffering with him. Sleep was their way of baling out. We too so often lack the energy to share other people's suffering, whether we are physically tired or not. When that suffering lasts for a long time, months or maybe years, we so often bale out by blaming the sufferer for his or her own misfortune. It is we who cannot cope so we leave our friends or relations to cope alone. Charming! But we all do it. Don't you?

"Did you not even have the strength to stay awake with me for one hour, Peter?" "Stay awake and pray so that you don't fail the test. [*6] You may have an eager spirit but the body is weak." How often we fail the test in a tricky situation because we have not prayed that morning or not prayed before entering upon the situation. We are eager to do the right thing but our own particular weakness or our common human weakness overcomes us at the critical moment. Have pity on Peter, an hour is quite a long time for most people to pray. And there is perhaps another whole hour or two of prayer in front of him. Peter had

been warned to pray in readiness for the coming test. He failed to pray and later failed the test. Isn't that a familiar story in our lives? It is in mine.

"Father, if indeed it is not possible for this to pass me by so that I do not have to suffer it, may what you want be done." The faint hope Jesus expressed in the earlier prayer: "if it is possible" has now gone. Jesus himself had to come to terms in stages with what was going to happen to him the next day.

Jesus returned again to the disciples and found them asleep. They were so ashamed they didn't know what to say.

A third time Jesus went away and prayed as he had done the second time.

Could any of us have stayed awake for perhaps three hours praying with Jesus in his distress? Could any of us pray for three hours faced with such danger and such a threat as Jesus did? The closest of Jesus' disciples failed him at this time of need. We have looked into the garden briefly for a few minutes. Do not we want to flee from it?

Some detailed notes:

*1 Only John tells us that it was a garden John 18:1. The name means "oil press" so we are led to suppose that it was an olive orchard where the olives were grown and the oil pressed out from them.

*2 We reckon days from midnight to midnight. In the Middle East days finish at sunset! Then a new day starts. For example, eight o'clock on a Friday night is already Saturday in the Middle East. Hence the Jewish Sabbath starts at sunset on a Friday.

*3 Jesus lay down to pray here. People pray in different postures. When overcome with stress or limp in God's hands lying down is the only possible posture.

*4 People in the Middle East often read aloud as well - even when there is no one to hear them.

*5 As far as I know crucifixion is only used today in a few Muslim countries like the Sudan. It is one of the methods of execution laid down in the Quran for those who fight against or wage war on God and his prophet (Surat Al-Maida, verse 33). Such barbarities were of course common throughout the world in times past, including England, and still flare up from time to time in most places. Not satisfied with just killing an enemy there was a tradition of inflicting maximum pain before and during the means of execution. People of all religions and none have of course been disgraceful in the way they have accepted and used such extraordinary methods of killing their enemies. From the Romans the church adopted burning for its enemies. It is so easy for the enemies of religious authority to be dubbed "the enemies of God" and punished "on behalf of God".

*6 Literally "do not enter into the test", but the implication is almost certainly "do not fail the test". "So that" after "pray" and similar words should correctly express a wish. However in the New Testament in particular the word is often used for the result rather than the wish.

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