

Good Friday, April 18th, 2025

2.00 pm Meditations, All Saints Oakham

John 18.1-11

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Tonight we walk with Jesus and his disciples as they begin what was to be the final stage of his journey to Calvary. He left the house in which they had eaten the Last Supper on what was or John on the day before the Passover rather than the Passover itself. They then make the short walk through what would have been a very busy Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley to a place that they knew well. John doesn't name it, but the other gospel writers do – the Garden of Gethsemane. It was somewhere familiar, an enclosed garden where they often used to go for periods of rest and prayer. And of course it was known by Judas, who had left the Last Supper in somewhat mysterious circumstances after Jesus had told him to "Do what you are going to do", and left the disciples thinking that he was to go to prepare for the festival, or to give alms to the poor. The meal that they had just finished would have been a sombre occasion, and no doubt there was little jollity on the short walk to Gethsemane.

When they arrived, we know from the other gospels that Jesus was in deep anguish and prayed earnestly – that if possible, that

My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want

Most of the disciples slept, although clearly one or more of them was awake to report these words. He prayed like that three times and came to the acceptance of the situation.

My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.

We see here Jesus, in full control of the situation, effectively determining the place and time of his arrest, in full knowledge of what was going to happen.

Then he rose up from prayer and Judas approached with a band of soldiers, and temple priests, with the religious leaders following on behind. The words used suggest a very large band of people, and they came well armed with lanterns and torches. The secular and the religious authorities coming together – and more modern history shows that such times are hard indeed for believers. In the story of the creation, the first man, Adam, met with the representative of Satan in a garden, and was tempted and fell. And now Jesus, referred to by Paul as the last Adam, met the devils' representatives in another garden. But this time the last Adam was to emerge victorious.

Jesus stepped forward, making no attempt to hide. The other gospels tell us that Judas kissed him as a mark of recognition. The pain of being betrayed by a close friend was sharp. The words of psalm 55 come to mind.

It is not enemies who taunt me - I could bear that; But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.....My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me, with speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords.

He confronts them and asks

For whom are you looking?

They reply "Jesus of Nazareth" to which he responds

I am he

Then we have the curious incident of at least some of the band stepping backwards and falling to the ground. Some commentators would say that Jesus, in using the phrase "I am he" – the ambiguous phrase that echoes the Jewish name of God YAWEH "I am what I am" – allowed his divine glory to shine out briefly that caused his assailants to stumble backwards. I can't help but think that this is altogether a little too pious. Just for a moment put ourselves in the shoes of those who came to arrest Jesus. They would know that they were coming to arrest someone who seemed to be doing remarkable things; healing the blind and the lame; with power over natural events such that even the winds and the waves obey him; the casting out of evil spirits resulting in the death of a herd of pigs in Galilee, even raising the dead. And there might have been even more outlandish stories going around – we only have to remember how fanciful legends built up around Jesus in the middle ages. A man of power they would have thought. Was he going to turn that against them. I think they fell back and stumbled, because they were scared and afraid, and when Jesus came out of the darkness of the enclosed garden, and used the words "I am he" which they would have understood only too well, they fell back in shock. Even here Jesus was in control of events.

But Jesus repeated his question, simply with words rather than with some display of power, and identified himself as the one they had come for. And in giving himself up, he asked that those who were with him should be allowed to go. Even here he was intent on fulfilling his promise to his Father, that he wouldn't lose any of those given to him. He had to walk the path ahead of him alone.

Peter however, being Peter, couldn't leave it at that. He lashed out with a sword at the servant of the High Priest, named here as Malchus, which is just one of many suggestions in the gospel that the writer, John, was very well connected to the Jerusalem religious hierarchy and all its machinations. What on earth Peter was doing with a sword after listening to Jesus' teaching for the past three years is anyone's guess. Again the more pious commentators suggest it was simply to keep robbers at bay on their long journeys through the Judean wilderness. I am more inclined to think of it as Peter's own back up, his security blanket if you like. But Malchus' ear, or part of it was cut off. The other gospels tell us that Jesus stretched out his hand to heal it. Again, we see him perfectly in control as the situation escalates. It wasn't a particularly wise move on Peter's behalf after Jesus has tried to secure the safe passage of his disciples. And he received yet another rebuke from Jesus.

Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?

But what was this cup? On one level it was a simple foretelling of the agony and death he was to suffer. But there is a deeper meaning. To my mind the cup can only be identified with the cup of God's wrath that is mentioned many times in the prophets, and particularly in the book of Isaiah which meant so much to Jesus.

Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering

The concept of God's wrath is a difficult one for many people these days – it doesn't fit with the concept of God as a God of love. We are constrained by language of course, but it seems to me that God's wrath is a way of expressing his feelings towards the sin and evil that prevails in the world – for which human anger is I would suggest, at times a very appropriate response. And Jesus was about to take responsibility for that evil and sin. He was to face not merely the pain of separation from his Father, but the full force of God's wrath as he bore the sins of the world on the cross. This was the cup he had to drink.

And there our passage ends. Elsewhere we are told that Jesus was bound and taken to the High Priest's house. In a sense it was at the point where Jesus lost control of events, and from then on he was led by others. But in reality, even bound captive, he was still controlling the situation, still in charge of his destiny. Bound by the cords of love for us all, bound by the cords of the world's sin he was taking on himself. But still fully intent on draining the cup of God's wrath.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen