

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**Mark 14:26-52**  
**Jesus' Last Night**

We're approaching the end of our series in Mark's Gospel, and today we find ourselves with Jesus on the Mount of Olives immediately after the Passover Feast ended. We read from Mark 14:26-52.

**[Read Mark 14:26-52]**

*26When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

*27'You will all fall away,' Jesus told them, 'for it is written:*

*"I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be scattered."*

*28But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.'*

*29Peter declared, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'*

*30'Truly I tell you,' Jesus answered, 'today – yes, tonight – before the cock crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.'*

*31But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the others said the same.*

*32They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' 33He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.'*

*35Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'*

*37Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Simon,' he said to Peter, 'are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? 38Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'*

*39Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. 40When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.*

*41Returning the third time, he said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. 42Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'*

*43Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.*

*44Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: 'The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' 45Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. 46The men seized Jesus and arrested him. 47Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.*

*48'Am I leading a rebellion,' said Jesus, 'that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? 49Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.' 50Then everyone deserted him and fled.*

*51A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, 52he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*

**[Pray]**

Generally, when people tell stories from their own lives, they paint themselves in a positive light, or, if they do include their failures, they do so in a *comical* way. Few people openly tell of their failures in a serious way. So, the fact that the Gospels record the disciples' failures is one of their authenticating marks. For the Gospel writers gained much of their information about Jesus' life directly from his first disciples. For instance, the early church held that Mark learned about Jesus' life and ministry from *Peter*, whilst he was acting as his interpreter. Yet many of Peter's failures are clear for all to see. But it is possible that Mark's knowledge of this *last* night of Jesus' life was even more personal. Some believe that the young man who ran away from the garden naked was Mark himself, since he does not appear in any other Gospel, and the detail seems to serve no clear purpose if it is not Mark's personal signature. That is, of course, unprovable, but if it *was* Mark, then he also showed *himself* in a negative light – as one who also deserted Jesus out of *fear*.

Of course, Jesus had already told his disciples that they *would* desert him: “‘You will all fall away,’ Jesus told them” (v.27), and he illustrated the truth of his prediction with a quote from the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, of how the sheep (the followers) would scatter when the shepherd (the leader) was struck. But Peter simply couldn't imagine himself *capable* of abandoning Jesus like that! Perhaps he thought himself more faithful than the other disciples, or perhaps he was simply incredulous at Jesus' assumption that he would fail him. “Even if *all* fall away, I will not.” And the other disciples lined up behind him to insist upon their own loyalty.

Yet, the truth was as Jesus later declared, “The *Spirit* is willing, but the *flesh* is *weak*” (v.38). The word *flesh*, here, does not carry connotations of “sinfulness” so much as simple “human weakness.” Their intentions were good. But Jesus knew their humanity to be too weak to fulfil their intentions when their resolve was put under this most extreme of tests. So, there is a degree of gentleness in Jesus' warning – akin to Psalm 103, which says of God, “he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). Jesus understood their humanity.

But their failure still came at a significant personal cost to him. For this was Jesus' most vulnerable moment in his entire recorded adult life. It was the only time he asked his disciples for support – to keep watch and pray for him, while he prayed through the terrible decision he would have to make this night to follow his Father's will to his end. Mark captures something of the turmoil and anguish Jesus felt, as he records his words, “My soul is *overwhelmed* with sorrow *to the point of death*” (v.34). In other words, the extreme sorrow he experienced at the thought of what was to come was almost too much to bear – it was almost killing him!

It wasn't the physical pain that Jesus dreaded – though that would be excruciating enough – nor even the ridicule he would endure from the mouths of his enemies and the unthinking mob. No, the prospect that caused Jesus such anguish was the knowledge that he must bear our sin; that he who had never known the guilt of sin would become sin for us, and experience that shame (2 Corinthians 5:21); and that the filth of that sin would cause him to be separated from his Father, even to feel his Father's wrath, for the first time in all eternity!

Jesus was desperate for support at this moment. But what did his disciples do? They fell asleep! Even Peter, who had so emphatically insisted that he would *die* with Jesus, yet he couldn't even pray with him for an hour! Jesus was left to face his turmoil alone, not just physically, but spiritually. The disciples couldn't even pray for themselves that *they* would not fall into temptation! Do you recognise this feeling? How easy it is to promise to pray and then to forget to do so, or to allow ourselves to become “too busy” to do so! How easy it is to pledge to God our service or devotion, but fail to follow it through! It is a comfort to know we are not alone in this experience, but let us not let that comfort excuse us from striving to do better.

But this night it didn't get any better for Jesus. True, one disciple – Peter himself, according to John – struck out with a sword at the servant of the high priest in a completely misguided attempt to defend Jesus. Never could such untrained men succeed in such a way against a detachment of trained and armed soldiers, even if Jesus had *wanted* them to try! But once that rush of blood to the head had subsided, they *all* simply “deserted him and fled” (v.50)! And still to come was Peter's own famous triple denial that he even knew Jesus!

And all this is before we even talk about the calculated callousness of Judas' act of betrayal. To betray Jesus was one thing! And maybe in the dark among so many people a clear signal would be needed for such an act. But to use such a close friendship-gesture as a kiss to mark out the man for slaughter takes a particular kind of treachery! To act like a friend, whilst plotting to destroy is like sticking in a dagger and twisting it for added pain!

So how did Jesus face this most fearsome of nights? Quite simply, through prayer! Real, honest, wrestling prayer. I don't believe we have anything like the totality of Jesus' words recorded, but we have the true essence of his communication. And what he prayed (v.36) is so rich, it is worthy of far longer meditation than we can give it today.

Even his first word is incredibly enlightening: “Abba!” Translated: “Father.” We are so used to this term, we forget how revolutionary it was for Jesus to address God as Father! And the Aramaic word, “Abba” is far more intimate than our word, “Father,” which can sometimes imply a degree of aloof coldness. Imagine the way that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's little girl would say the word “Mummy” or that Anoosheh Ashoori's adult children would say the word “Dad” on meeting them this week, and you get a sense of the intimacy of the word, “Abba.” Even at this most troubling time – perhaps especially at this most troubling time – Jesus addressed God as “Abba.” I love the simplicity of this address at this moment. There was no qualification or sense of formality – not “Our Father in Heaven” or “Father God” – just simply, and beautifully, “Abba.” Their relationship is all he has, but also all he needs at this time.

Then there is a simple, but profound statement of truth: “everything is possible for you.” This qualifies Mark's prior summary: “he ... prayed that *if possible* the hour might pass from him.” It was not possible, not because God lacked the power, but because without the cross our salvation could not be won. Jesus did not pray in resigned defeat to a God unable to save him. He prayed to his Father, who he knew *could* save him from this terrible ordeal as Matthew 26:53 makes explicitly clear – twelve legions of angels could have been dispatched to rescue him if he but asked.

And Jesus came very close to asking! “Father ... Take this cup from me.” The cup of suffering, the spiritual torment he was about to endure. He knew the resurrection would follow, but he was honest about what he wanted. This was a real and desperate cry from Jesus' humanity, longing for a way out of the ordeal he must face, longing for another way of fulfilling his Father's mission. Something, anything, but the cross! “Please, Father! Anything but having to bear the world's sin and your wrath!” Jesus truly wrestled with his destiny, and at that moment, our salvation hung in the balance.

In fact, it was probably far more than a moment. The truncated nature of this account could give the impression that Jesus prayed for the cup to pass and ten seconds later, he'd resolved to do his Father's will. In reality, given his question to Peter when he found him sleeping, Jesus may have taken anything up to an hour of wrestling back and forth in prayer, before reaching that decision. Maybe he had to say those words over and over again before they stuck as a fixed resolution. “Yet not what I will, but what you will ... not what I will, but what you will

... Father, take this cup from me ... No, not what I will, but what you will ... There is no other way; what you will ... This is what I came to do; what you will ... I'll do it ... not what I will, but what you will!"

And in that moment of final decision, our salvation was sealed. There was now no going back. Jesus' decision was momentous and hard, precisely because it was freely reached. He had a genuine choice. God the Son, while in heaven, had co-formulated this plan to be incarnated as a human and to offer his life as a ransom for us. But God the Son, in human flesh had to make that choice afresh and for the last time in this prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He would fulfil his and his Father's plan. He would endure Judas' callous betrayal, and his other disciples' cowardly desertion. He would accept the rigged trial and the taunts from those who hated him without reason. He would face the agony of crucifixion. He would bear our sin and its terrible consequences. He would stare into a horror of evil he had never before personally known or even imagined. "Yes, Father! Not what I will, but what you will." He did that for you, and for me, and for all those people out there who don't care a jot at this time that he did it for them. And he calls to each one of us, "I died for you; will you live for me?" Will you?

**[Pray]**