

The King in the Garden - Matthew 26.36-46

Date: 12 March 2023, 3rd Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: Genesis 3, Hebrews 4:14-5:10, Matthew 26.36-46

Crucible moments

Some years ago I did a leadership course in which we were asked to share about crucible moments in our lives. The picture is taken from the chemistry lab. You put something in a crucible, put the heat under it, and see how it responds. It's a refining process, where the heat melts the impurities to hopefully leave the pure element. A crucible moment is where you're put in the furnace. You're under great stress or pressure, and your character, what you're made of comes out. One moment for me was here at St George's back in 2015. I was 2 years out of college, we were looking after the parish of the Southern Midlands, we'd just had a part time youth minister start and John, our rector, fell off his balcony while building his house and was out of action for 4 months. God was gracious to carry us through that period. Parish council were a great support. But it was also a moment where I had to step up under pressure.

We're walking with Matthew through his account of Jesus' passion. Today we come to what you could call a crucible moment for Jesus. Here in the Garden of Gethsemane we see Jesus under the greatest pressure, and this brings out his true character. We'll look at what this scene teaches us about Jesus and his suffering for us. And we'll look at what this text teaches us about discipleship, what it means to be a Christian, to follow Jesus. For me, this is an incredibly powerful scene in Jesus' life and ministry. We are in the very deep waters of who Jesus is and what it means for us to be human.

First, a little context. Jesus has shared his last meal with his disciples, the Passover, which he has said is about his body broken and blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He has also named Judas as the one who will betray him, and said that Peter will deny him, and the others will desert him. Now Jesus leaves the city, walks across the Kidron Valley a short distance up the Mount of Olives to a garden called Gethsemane. The name comes from the Hebrew word for olive press. He leaves the 12 and takes his closest friends, Peter, James and John, further in the garden to pray.

Jesus

Jesus says to the three, *My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.* He goes a little further, falls to the ground and prays. *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.* Why is Jesus overwhelmed with sorrow? He knows his friends will desert him. He knows one of them will betray him. He knows he will soon die, and that by crucifixion, a form of execution so painful that it has entered into English to describe the most intense pain - excruciating. These are all cause for intense sorrow. But Jesus' prayer reveals what it is that overwhelms him.

What is the cup that he prays may be taken from him? This cup was spoken of again and again by the prophets as the cup of God's wrath, his righteous judgement against the sin and wickedness of humanity. So Psalm 75.8 reads:

*In the hand of the LORD is a cup
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth
drink it down to its very dregs.*

This is the cup that is held out to Jesus, the cup of the Father's judgement. He has said that he will give his life as a ransom for many. This is what Isaiah foretold, that he would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, and that it would in fact be the Lord God who would crush him, and make his life an offering for sin.¹ Paul writes, *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.*² It is this that overwhelms Jesus with sorrow: that he would bear all the sins of the world, your sin and my sin, making them his own, and so then drink the cup of his Father's righteous judgement when, for all eternity, he had known the warmth of his Father's love.

Traditionally, the scene is called the Agony of Christ. While we appreciate Jesus' great mental and emotional distress in the garden, the term comes from the original Greek meaning of the word, which is struggle or contest. We see this in Jesus' prayer.

*My Father, **if it is possible**, may this cup be taken from me.* In Luke's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, he concludes by saying, *When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time came.*³ Now, in the garden of Gethsemane, the opportune time has come. Facing the cross, Jesus is tempted to choose any path other than his Father's will. This is the great contest, the great struggle, whether or not to do his Father's will. If there was any other way for God's will to redeem the world could be accomplished, now is the time for that to be done. But even more than this, Jesus' greater desire, out of love for his Father, is to obey his will. And so he prays, *Yet not as I will, but as you will.*

When I visited Israel several years ago, I went to a recreation of a village from the time of Christ. One of the things they had there was an olive press. The guide told us that in Jesus' day, olives were pressed 3 times. The oil from the first press was of the finest quality and would be dedicated to God, and used to make the anointing oil in the temple. The oil from the second press would be used by the family for cooking. The oil from the third press was the dregs, inedible and was used for lamps or making soap. The guide pointed out that Gethsemane means olive press, and that, as we saw in Matthew's account, Jesus prayed this prayer 3 times.

Isaiah had foretold that Jesus would be a sin offering. We saw last week that he is the Passover lamb, sacrificed on our behalf so that God's judgement might pass over us, and we might receive life

¹ Isaiah 53.5,10

² 2 Corinthians 5.21

³ Luke 4.13

instead of death. But the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is also our high priest. What is the job of the high priest? In Hebrews 5:1 we read,

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. **2** He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

This was the case for Israel's high priests. But what about Jesus? Just a few lines earlier we read,

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.⁴

What sweet comfort these words are to us. Not only is Jesus the sacrifice for our sins. He is also our high priest, who understands our weakness and temptation, *because he himself has experienced it to the full*. He has been in our shoes. He knows exactly what it is like to be human and to be tempted. And so he is able to sympathise with us, and deal gently with us in our struggles and temptations. Therefore Hebrews says,

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.⁵

Suffering. Trial. Temptation. These are times not to turn away from God, but to run to him, indeed to pray, even as Jesus did, because through him we will receive mercy and grace to help us. What sweet, sweet comfort these words are.

Hebrews goes on to say a few verses later,

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. **8** Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered⁶ ...

I take it that this is primarily referring to Jesus' prayer in the garden. Paul speaks about that obedience in Romans 5. And he compares Jesus' act of obedience in going to the cross to Adam's act of disobedience in eating the fruit in the garden of Eden. Paul writes,

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. **19** For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

Here Paul pictures Adam as the head of the human race. Adam's disobedience bequeaths a legacy of sin and disobedience in which we all participate, each person repeating his disobedience in a myriad of ways, and so we all fall under the righteous judgement of God, facing the sentence of death. In the garden of Eden, Adam listened to the lies of the serpent. He doubted God's goodness. He disobeyed God's command. He said to God "not your will but mine be done". But where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. He was tempted in the garden, but unlike Adam, he said to God, "not my will but yours be done." He obeyed God's will, even though it meant his own death. This one act of righteous obedience

⁴ Hebrews 4.15

⁵ Hebrews 4.16

⁶ Hebrews 5.7-8

opens the door to life. First for Jesus' himself, and then for all who believe in his name. God raised Jesus to life, vindicating his obedience, and now all who trust in him share in his risen life.

In the garden, Jesus did what Adam should have done, saying to God, "not my will but yours be done." And in doing so he shows us how to be truly human, because to be truly human is to say "Yes" to God, and "No" to sin, to live in obedience and dependence upon God.

You may have noticed that Jesus' prayer is the same prayer he taught his disciples to pray - "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This brings us to consider, what does this scene teach us about our discipleship, how to be a Christian?

Discipleship

If this is a crucible moment for Jesus, it's also one for Peter, James and John. Jesus asks them to keep watch with him, but as he prays three times, so he finds them asleep. What does Jesus say to Peter and the others?

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

These words also mirror the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. "Lead us not into temptation" is the traditional reading, but it could also be translated "save us from the time of trial." Temptation focuses on the internal threat, and trial, the external. And we can see that both are present here, but I think Jesus' words, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak", suggest that the accent of this prayer is on the internal. Just as Jesus struggled between self preservation and obedience to his Father, so the great struggle we face is between the spirit and the flesh, our desire to obey God, and our own selfish desires, turned away from God. So we read in Galatians 5,

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other.⁷

This text then becomes a crucial window into the heart of discipleship, the heart of the life that God calls us to in Christ. Jesus asks us to keep watch with him. Again and again in the New Testament we're called to watch, to stay awake, to be alert and sober minded. There are 2 reasons given to watch. First, we're to keep watch because we don't know when Christ will return.⁸ Second, we're to watch out against temptation. It seems that this moment in Gethsemane left a deep imprint on Peter, because he writes,

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. **9** Resist him, standing firm in the faith...⁹

It's so easy isn't it, to fall asleep at the wheel of your Christian life. It's much easier to do what feels good instead of what is right. I know I'm at my most vulnerable when I'm tired, physically or

⁷ Galatians 5.16-17

⁸ Matthew 24.42, Mark 13.32-37, cf. 1 Thessalonians 5.1-6, Revelation 3.2-3, 16.15

⁹ 1 Peter 5.8-9

emotionally. It's then that I find it much harder to make good choices. When we're stressed, under pressure, isolated, alone, feeling weak, spiritually dry, they are so often times we're tempted to compromise, to seek support or comfort in alcohol, or sex or maybe an unhealthy relationship, or some other crutch.

It's not only in those moments of clear temptation, we can also fall asleep at the wheel little by little over time. Where we fail to recognise the currents of the world around us that so subtly pull us away from God. We can let church on a Sunday be a choice, not a habit. We switch our brains off when watching TV, and uncritically absorb the morality of Hollywood rather than the Bible. We don't read the Bible and pray with our kids. We compromise to fit in with colleagues or friends. It's all those little decisions that over time mean we drift with the current, rather than swim against it. Discipleship means being alert, awake, eyes on the road.

Jesus shows us how to respond to temptation in the moment and over time. When he was under the greatest stress, he turned to his Father in prayer. He teaches us how to pray - "not my will, but yours be done". To be truly human is to follow Jesus' footsteps, because to be human is to be in fellowship with, to depend upon, and draw strength from God. Through prayer we become awake to God and alert to the world around us. As we engage in prayer, we deliberately walk by the Spirit and not the flesh. We cannot make it alone through the trials and temptations that we inevitably will face in this life. We need to find strength and support outside ourselves. People say that God is a crutch. I say, who doesn't need one? Why not choose to find support and draw strength from the God who knows me and loves me and who knows what is best for me? And what's more, when I fail, he's there to pick me up. His mercy is new every morning.

IN the crucible of Gethsemane Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. He prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done." He's our high priest, able to sympathise with us, because he was tempted in every way, as we are, yet he did not sin. So in him, let us with confidence approach God's throne of grace, so that we might receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.