

The Way of the King

Date: 19 March 2023, 4th Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Matthew's Passion

Texts: 1 Peter 2:11-25, Matthew 26:47-56

In the lead up to Easter here at St George's, we're doing a series on Jesus' passion in the gospel of Matthew. And through the past few weeks we have heard Jesus repeatedly remind his disciples across this 26th chapter of Matthew's narrative that he is going to die: we've seen the anointing for his burial, the prediction of his betrayal, that his body will be broken and his blood will be poured out, his teaching that the shepherd will be struck and the sheep will scatter, and then in the hours preceding our passage today, his closest disciples have seen him troubled and sorrowful in a way that they would never have seen before. Yet despite all they've been told, they simply weren't prepared for this moment, and what was about to go down. What we will be exploring for the next 20 minutes, these 10 verses, could very easily have all happened in the space of 20 seconds, as all the foreshadowed drama which Jesus has been teaching finally comes to a head.

Let's set the scene, who is in the picture? –

We have Judas, who we've been expecting. The 12th disciple has finally arrived in the garden, emboldened by the cover of darkness and the powerful men who have enabled his deception.

We of course have Jesus, the opposite number to Judas in this narrative.

These two men are the only ones explicitly named in Matthew's arrest narrative, as if to frame this as a faceoff, like a game of chess between master and challenger.

On the board stands each side's pieces, ready to play their part in this battle.

We have this large crowd, the armed crowd, they have come along behind Judas. Matthew points out they've been sent along with him. This isn't a rabble who heard there was a fight in the schoolyard and wanted to come along for the action – these are men ordered by the chief priests and the elders to do the work that Judas is leading them toward. As we see in verse 55, they're likely temple guards, equipped for the job, enough of them to put down any resistance.

With Jesus are the remaining 11. The tired 11. They've been caught unaware and unprepared by Jesus, and now they're caught unaware and unprepared by Judas. As Jesus warned them to keep watch, it's Jesus himself who points out that the time has come and so he invites them to stand and advance to meet the threat: "Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" So not only the tired ones, but likely even the bewildered ones, yet to grasp the weight of the battle lines being drawn, seeing their colleague is standing on the other side.

But how will this game unfold?

As verse 46 and 47 say, Jesus anticipates the crowd's arrival. He had spent every minute praying with the Father that he could, but now as he speaks preparing his disciples, the game begins.

Judas makes the first move "Greetings Rabbi!", he says to Jesus, kissing him. An innocuous greeting, as routine as the first piece move.

But the mind games are in play, and this greeting isn't all that it seems. Back at the Passover meal when Jesus warns of his betrayal, the disciples ask "Surely, not me, Lord?" Their words indicating their reverence of Jesus' relationship to them. But Judas breaks from this formula saying, "you don't mean me, Rabbi?", and so also here in Gethsemane, the greeting exposes how Judas sees Jesus. A rabbi whom he no longer has any need for, not a Lord to follow, but a teacher to discard. As Judas kisses Jesus he subverts another custom: the student doesn't kiss the master, but the master first greets his students, avoiding any suggestion of equality. Judas' greeting shows that Jesus is merely a pawn in servitude to his ambition, and this betrayal with a kiss is callous.

Jesus meets this greeting with a classic counter move of his own, replying "Do what you came for, friend." When 'friend' is on Jesus' lips across Matthew's gospel, it is always with a sense of irony. The vineyard contractor in the parable who complains of working a full day for fair wages is called friend as he's mildly rebuked. The man in another parable who has come to a wedding feast inappropriately dressed is called 'friend' while he's invited to make an account of his disrespect. And here Judas, inhabiting both characters in a sense – having received his dues and posing as the inner circle – now has the same ironic treatment.

Being Australians, we of course use the word 'mate' all the time and in so many ways, ranging from your 'best mate' or 'soul mate', through to 'old mate' when you don't remember someone's name. But we use it in ironic ways too, with aggression, insincerity, and condescension.

I had a friend at uni. who, when he was annoyed with you, frustrated, didn't really like what you had to say, he would dehumanise you by using the word "mate". "Yeah, whatever mate." His use of "mate" would increase 400% as his frustration grew. And so, for me, the word "mate" continues to have this negative connotation, even though someone is going, "Hey, how's it going mate?"

If you wanted to contextualise Jesus' reply to Judas here, it'd be something like "Do what you've gotta do, mate, let's get it over with."

As each opponent meets in the middle, white and black pawns face to face, the next move for Judas is his pre-empted strategy. He'd instructed his companions of the signal: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him."

Of course, Judas had simply been commissioned, or rather he offered himself, to be the one that would betray Jesus. Not the one that's calling for his arrest, and yet, here he is instructing those that are with him to do the arrest.

What is at stake for Judas here? Of course, he is concerned, as we saw, that they get the right man, but under the cover of darkness, who would they arrest, how would they know?

"I'll kiss the one and you will arrest him, because, if you don't, what will happen to me?"

They see his move and immediately Jesus is restrained, under arrest. Check.

Well Jesus' disciples clearly hadn't listened to the game plan, because before we know it, the scene has descended into bloodshed as one of the disciples (we learn elsewhere this is Peter) strikes a blow to the head of the high priest's servant.

Chaos might have followed, apart from Jesus' intervention: "Put your sword back in its place". In Luke's gospel Jesus says 'No more of this'. And then we hear the famous phrase: "for all who draw the sword (or live by the sword) will

die by the sword.” Who was Peter to think that his attack would be a match for the clubs and swords that opposed them? Would he get his friends killed also? This was not the place for might. This wasn’t the strategy. Jesus had told them to be prepared, don’t fall into temptation, for the son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.

Like a grand master, Jesus plays with insight. We see in this moment that he’s in complete control. The game has been laid out clearly on the board for all to see if only they would look. There’s no deception, no trap, Jesus could have called on 12 legion of angels to flatten his opponents or slipped away in the kerfuffle as he had done many time before, but he doesn’t. There’s no coercion, Judas makes all his moves as his own moral agent, yet it’s Jesus’ purposes that are ultimately progressed. Jesus addresses the temple mob - you could have arrested me at any time while I was in the temple teaching. I have been openly available. You know I’m not leading a rebellion. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled. Jesus is not the *helpless* victim (although he is still a victim) but the prepared and willing participant. Things were going to plan (as painful as that plan was), and Jesus was in complete control, fully submitting himself to the Father’s will.

Often it can be quite difficult for us to live out our lives as followers of Jesus, to lift our eyes from our personal struggles and successes or to look past the burdens of the world and to see that God is fulfilling his purposes. Moulding us, shaping us, preparing his church for the things he’s set apart for us to do. We can become so focussed on the next chess move, or the piece we’ve just lost that we don’t trust that Jesus sits on the throne, and he has already gone ahead of us. He has already won.

We can so often be tempted to believe the lie that every shift in cultural values or every personal setback has dethroned Jesus. Maybe we’re at risk of losing the kingdom. Will evil prevail in the end?

When I was at Moore college in my second year, the wheels started to fall off for me. My mental health rapidly declined in second semester, and by the time study week rolled around, Angie would find me crying curled up on the bed, or on the staircase, totally paralysed with the task ahead of me. She was at a loss of what to do. I felt so ashamed and alone and so unsure about why God was allowing this to happen. Had everything I had committed to up to this point been foolish and misguided? Not knowing any better, I sat two of my exams (which was disastrous) and I finally plucked up the courage to pull out of my

New Testament exam, the biggest of the lot, feeling like a fraud. But in the depths of despair that I felt, and the decisions that were before us, Angie prayed with me: God may your will be done, and might we see the reality that Jesus is holding us firmly and he is in control.

I wonder what your impulse is in these moments – do you acknowledge and trust that Jesus is now sitting on the throne? To trust his promises that all things are subject to him?

And as a church, as we look out into the world, and we lament the suffering and sin that we see, the cultural shifts and social values, do we still trust that Jesus has already won the victory? That his kingdom will prevail?

Here in the garden, as Jesus is arrested, it would be so easy to see this as merely a steppingstone toward the crucifixion and the forgiveness of sins and nothing more. But this passage invites us to see the bigger picture, to see that Jesus pursued the fulfilment of God's promises and eternal plan not through the ways of the world, but through a radical ethic of sacrifice and love. This is the way of the King. A victory not gained by violence, nor a kingship brought about by military conquest. The way of the cross is not a means to an end, but a life to be lived in and of itself.

Peter although unnamed here, serves as a foil for Jesus, both going beyond Jesus' instruction to descend into violence, and falling short of it, that once the pressure is on and Jesus' arrest is clearly going to happen, Peter flees along with the rest of the eleven there.

So, what went wrong?

Peter acted with a temporal and political view in mind – Jesus as the leader of the political kingdom that was coming now. Unless Jesus was able to ascend to his rightful place, the kingdom would fail – so at the final moments of tension he reaches for the bluntest tool he has – aggression, and finally, self-preservation.

But this is not the way, Christ's kingdom is not brought through the power of the sword, but through the transformation of hearts.

It's poetic that it is Peter in our 1 Peter reading who provides helpful development of the kingdom values and ethics that Jesus lives out in this

passage. Even as Peter fails in this gethsemane moment, and in subsequent moments, by God's grace, he and the disciples are ultimately committed to the way of the cross in their ministry as they go on to lead the Church and see the kingdom grow.

Peter says you'll suffer unjustly! Still live like Christ, still do good even if it's not recognised.

It's better to bear up under suffering unjustly – not repaying insult with insult. The way of the cross is walking in the sufferings of Christ.

How do we move from 'the way of the cross is the answer' to applying it to modern social/political challenges, when we are tempted to consider that the Kingdom is at risk?

There are some clear paths:

1. Jesus' ethical position is that violence is not a way to live well, nor to bring about God's purposes.
2. Despite the evidence of what we focus in on, the things we're tempted to say are the death knell for Christianity, things are still going according to plan.

Maybe our current temptation as a church is not to reach for violence and force, although across Christian history this has been the case, and we rightfully repent and grieve the action of the Church that has sought to compel people to service of Christ in this way.

But just like Peter, we can still opt for the bluntest tools that we have to instate the kingdom, rather than choosing the way of the cross to win hearts and call people to repentance. How easy it is to think that legislation is the answer.

Governments wield the sword of legislation to administer justice but it's a very coarse tool – and this isn't how we the church do the kingdom. How do people come to obey God? Jesus says, if you love me, you'll do as I command. It's not the other way around.

We want to advocate for the common good. We need to put forward the case for the widow and the orphan, but to do so in humble submission to God's sovereignty, and with respect to the earthly authorities that he has placed over us.

As 1 Peter says: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

“13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.”

It's challenging words for us. In a culture that simply does not respect Christian values, Christian freedoms, Christian instructions and requirements, it is better to suffer for doing good.

But what then does it mean to fight for justice then? What ought Christians do when there’s an injustice? (This example in the Garden of Gethsemane *is* an injustice after all. Jesus is being wrongly arrested.) Do we just roll over and say “well God is sovereign”? How do we marry up what we know would be a bad choice in some instances (turning a blind eye to injustice) with what we see here? How is this different?

- As a church we are called to live with wisdom.
- We shouldn’t expect our view will be upheld and when it’s not, we live such different lives that, although we are accused of doing wrong, that Jesus will be glorified.
- Legislation isn’t the only means of advocating for those that are wronged. We can come along side, we can lift up, we can promote the cause of the widow and the orphan, those who are wrongly suffering, without needing to try and command from the top down.
- We want to live as an example of loving our neighbours

So can I encourage you this Easter, as we look out into a world that does not know Jesus, that does not trust in his ways, that does not see his kingdom as a value to be pursued, let me encourage you to recommit yourselves to the way of the cross. Jesus is in control, his purposes will not be thwarted, trust the King and follow in his way, because this is how the kingdom comes.