

Preaching the Passion

The Rev Barnaby Huish, 1st March 2009

Mark 14: 32-52

Preamble

Today's gospel ends with something of an enigma: after Jesus' arrest a nameless young man following him is seized by the crowd and leaving behind the linen cloth he is wearing, he runs away, naked.

This brief scenario is unique to Mark's gospel. Perhaps the other evangelists found it shocking (nudity was looked on as deeply shameful by Jews at that time). Or maybe they felt that the episode didn't really fit with the rest of the action that is taking place around it. After all, we don't know who the young man is; he hasn't cropped up previously in the story, nor does he appear again; and his brief appearance on the scene appears to have absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the solemn events taking place around him.

Who is he? Why is he there? – why are we told about him? Perhaps, like Matthew and Luke, we'd do better simply to ignore him. But no, this is a question we will return to, later.

The Significance of 'The Passion'

We embark today on a four-week journey of exploration of the events leading up to and including Jesus' Crucifixion – from Gethsemane to Golgotha – as told in the gospel according to St Mark.

The Crucifixion of Christ – coupled with what follows 3 days later – is the defining event of our faith. The various events surrounding it (as described in the gospels) provide us with the human *context* within which this cosmic event takes place. They remind us that the Crucifixion is no mere theological idea or construct, but a real, historical moment of truth.

Today, as he is arrested in a place called Gethsemane, Jesus comes face to face with his accusers (or with men acting on their behalf), setting in train the events of his trials, torture and eventual execution. But before this takes place, we are given a glimpse of something rather different:

The time of *trial* is preceded by a period of *prayer*.

Jesus' Prayer in Gethsemane

The scene begins with a peculiar sense of fragmentation.

“They went to a place called Gethsemane and Jesus said to his disciples,
‘Sit here while I pray’.”

It's the last time the word “disciples” appears in Mark's gospel until after the resurrection. Things are starting to unravel.

We would assume that Jesus is there with the Twelve – except, of course, there are no longer 12 of them; one has already gone his own way. And immediately the group is further fragmented as Jesus takes 3 of the disciples on further with him: Peter, James and John – 3 disciples who have previously been with him at moments of great revelation. And then, they too are told to stop and wait – to ‘stay and keep watch’ and Jesus goes on alone.

And what we then see is an extraordinary outpouring of *humanity*, from the person of Jesus Christ – in *prayer*

If we were coming new to Mark's gospel, this would probably take us by surprise. Up until now, Jesus has only been described as praying on two occasions – and those only very briefly, in passing. Yet here, everything *stops* as Jesus pours out his heart in prayer. The words he uses are overwhelmingly potent and powerful. The translation we have heard read – “deeply distressed” and “troubled” – doesn't really do justice to the original, which conveys a gut-wrenching sense of mental & physical anguish on the one hand, and a profound sense of loneliness on the other.

None of the other gospels use such stark language at this point. (Even though Matthew and Luke, we may assume, have used Mark as the basis of their account at this point, they soften the words that are used to describe Jesus' feelings). Why? Because Jesus (whom we know as Son of God, and indeed as *God the Son*) *here* appears blatantly, almost shockingly *human*.

But there's something very significant about Jesus' humanity at this point: it's really important that we should know that what ensues is no play-acting. The Passion is not just a case of Jesus ‘going through the motions’. In the space of 24 hours and more:

Jesus *actually* suffers

Jesus *actually* dies

We are *actually* saved.

Jesus is deeply troubled and distressed by what lies ahead *because it is real*; and even if you are the Son of God (perhaps *especially* if you are the Son of God) the prospect of death is overwhelming. As Jesus himself says,

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the point of death.”

(...something we might do well to remember if we're ever tempted to believe that people of faith shouldn't be afraid of dying).

Questioning his own destiny

But it's not just the fact that Jesus seems deeply disturbed that should take us aback at this point. Until now, he has been steadfastly *certain* that to suffer and die, and to rise again, is his *destiny*. He knows what lies ahead; and, according to Mark, he has known it for a long time. Earlier in the gospel, when Simon Peter *rebuked* Jesus for suggesting that this was the path he had to follow, Jesus told him "Get behind me, Satan". But now we see Jesus himself praying to the Father:

"All things are possible for you: *take this cup* [ie, the cup of suffering] *from me,*"

before adding: "Yet, not what I will, but what you will."

There really is something like a shift of reality at this point, albeit just for a moment. It's reflected to my mind by the fact that Jesus is described as "throwing himself to the ground". When you think of Jesus, don't you think of him as standing tall? It's probably the influence of countless works of art, which depict Jesus as Lord and teacher. (Even when depicted on the Cross, he stands vertical, rising above the world around him). But here, he throws himself down. This really is an *uncanny* moment – all our assumptions are being thrown aside; the unthinkable is about to happen: our King is about to be made a criminal.

The Disciples

What of the disciples at this point? Previously, when Jesus has taken them with him on their own, Peter, James and John have been *witnesses* to moments when Jesus' power and glory have been revealed (in the raising of Jairus' daughter, and in the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain).

But here, at the very moment that they should be proclaiming that his hour has come, they witness ... *nothing*. They simply fall asleep. And we perhaps realise, with a sense of irony, that these three are the very disciples who previously have had the boldness (or foolishness) to say that they will *share* in Jesus' suffering, that *they* will 'drink the cup that he must drink'. Peter, *only moments before*, has said

'Even if all fall away, I will not.'

Whereas the reality is that in this, Jesus' moment of agony, *they* are *nowhere*. They're out of it; they're asleep – they can't even stay awake for him. It's a painful moment in which their inadequacy is laid bare; Jesus surely knows that this is his moment - and his alone.

Which is perhaps why – at this point – the mood changes. "Time's up," Jesus says. "Come on, wake up – let's go: *the hour has come*" – (and with a sense of *full awareness* of what is about to take place:) "My betrayer is at hand". Suddenly, it's as if the needle has jumped back on to the right track: Jesus is in *absolute control* once more.

His arrest

The fact that it's 'business as usual' once again – that the interlude is over – is signalled by Mark's use of his favourite word: '*immediately*.' And with that, things begin to proceed at Mark's customary inexorable pace once again, and with the old sense of inevitability. The fact is that *now* – when (according to human logic) he should be taken by surprise and under the control of others – Jesus is presented as fully prescient of the events that are about to unfold, and even (in a strange way) dictating what is to take place.

The ensuing description of Jesus' arrest is full of similar contrasts and contradictions:

- a kiss becomes a sign of betrayal;
- priests and scribes (people of God) resort to using a mob with swords and clubs.
- where Jesus has been teaching openly by day, they come by stealth at night.

And when Jesus at the end of the scene, says

'Let the scriptures be fulfilled'

the first thing to be fulfilled is Jesus' *own* prediction: that the disciples will all forsake him and flee.

Postlude

And then there remains this young unnamed follower of Jesus, whose linen cloth is snatched as he is seized by the crowd and who runs away naked. Who is he? And why is he there?

I can't help thinking that this young man in some sense represents us – the readers and hearers of Mark's gospel. After all, in everything that has taken place up to this point, we, like him, have been quietly following Jesus – anonymously, inconspicuously – as we read Mark's account of his life and ministry.

And here in Gethsemane in particular we have been privy to an intensely *private* moment as Jesus has laid bare his soul before God.

Step by step: Jesus has stood with the 12, then with eleven, then with just 3, and then... all alone. And yet, *we* have been with him: hiding as it were in the shadows, privy to his deepest thoughts and fears when even his closest disciples were asleep. Unbeknown to anyone, we have been there.

But now, it's as if to say *there is no more hiding*. We can no longer be a mere impartial observer to the events that are about to take place.

Like the young man who runs away, *we will be laid bare* by the events that are to follow, as we see Jesus tried and tortured, crucified, dead and buried.

In what is to come, none of us can hide. We are *all* left naked and defenceless, ashamed and alone, through the events that will unfold.

And ultimately we too will flee – because we cannot follow Jesus to the grave and beyond (not yet).

We are about to see and experience the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ – not as detached observers, but as actual *participants in the story* (because this is nothing less than the story of our salvation).

We must expect nothing less than to be stripped naked before God: our souls laid bare before him as we acknowledge our own complicity in the timeless themes of betrayal, injustice, oppression, dishonesty, bullying, weakness and so on and so forth, which are about to be played out before our very eyes.

It is no easy path for us to take; and yet we must take it, because it *is* the path which leads to redemption.

If we do indeed step out of the shadows now, and enter heart and soul into the story of the Passion of our Lord, it will enable us to continue right to the very end –
to redemption itself;
to resurrection
and salvation.