

Tuesday of Holy Week

Matt 26: 30 – 46

The Agony in the Garden



After what must have seemed Jesus' strange behaviour at their Passover meal, the disciples follow Jesus out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives, willing to follow him even in their bewilderment, perhaps even their fear, over what might happen next. Judas has already left on his mission of betrayal, but all the others give Jesus their oaths of undying loyalty – which we know will, each and every one of them, be broken in the next few hours. Jesus' answer to his situation is prayer.

Fear and prayer are two themes which are surely much in our minds in today's world as we face the challenges brought by Covid 19. As Christians – or indeed even if we do not naturally put ourselves into that category - our natural response to the fear engendered by the spread of coronavirus is to pray. Perhaps we are not sure about which or what god we might pray to - or perhaps we do not even evince belief in any kind of god – nonetheless when it is our parent who is sick or it us who has the responsibility of making decisions about how to deploy a limited supply of essential health-care equipment, then we may find ourselves reaching out beyond ourselves, desperately and wordlessly, because we know that we have come to the end of our human resources.

Such was the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. It is here, perhaps almost more than anywhere else in the gospels, that we see the humanity of Jesus exposed in all its vulnerability. It is here, therefore, that it is appropriate for us to pause and pray with Jesus as the frightening vulnerability of humanity to Covid 19 is evidenced for us once again on our TV screens, day after day. But it is also here, in his agony of prayer in the garden, that Jesus found the strength to face his coming ordeal – an ordeal that was not removed from him, as if by magic, as some might view the answer to prayer. Rather, this was prayer that enabled Jesus to give his future to God and to find his peace in that giving. It was also prayer that enabled him to take the risk of trusting those who had already or shortly would betray him – to say nothing, of course, of taking the risk of trusting those of us who, down the ages, have committed ourselves to following him and who have nevertheless betrayed his love when the crunch came.

The third verse of W H Vanstone's poem 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense' which we have been reflecting on in this Holy Week gives us these words: *"love that gives, gives ever more / gives with zeal, with eager hands / spares not, keeps not, all outpours / ventures all, its all expends"*. The giving of everything to the world that he loves is poured out into the world by God as Jesus journeys to the cross. The risk that God in Christ takes – the venturing of everything that this represents – is at the heart of Jesus' agony in the garden as he prays. Is it all going to be worth it? Is the risk that he is running with his life really going to bring God's love to the world in a new and final manner – or will it be, like so much that has gone before, seemingly wasted?

Even for those of us who know about the triumph of Easter morning the jury may surely be seen to be still out. The betrayal of Jesus by his friends and disciples on the final night of his earthly life is just a foretaste of the betrayal of love and of relationships of which all of us are guilty in different ways and at varying times.

The exact causes of the outbreak of Covid 19, which began in China late last year, will no doubt be examined and discussed by epidemiologists and others for many years to come – and I am no expert. But already there are voices in cyberspace pointing out that this and other recent epidemics have their genesis in the crossing over of pathogens from animal species to humanity. The pressure humanity is exerting on the animal kingdom by the expansion of our influence across the globe is just one aspect of our betrayal of God's call to us to care for the natural world, but it nevertheless brings us into ever closer proximity with our non-human neighbours and raises the risk of cross-infection. Perhaps we might also reflect on our remorseless addiction to global international travel which has been, in large part, the means by which Covid 19 has spread so fast around the world. The excess carbon footprint generated by the millions of air-miles travelled every year, surely represents a further fracturing and betrayal of the caring relationship between humanity and the rest of creation to which God calls us.

In so many ways we still betray the love of God in Jesus. But in so many ways also, Jesus still ventures the risk of trusting us – and indeed of forgiving us as he forgave those who betrayed him in the garden that night. And as we look around us in the world today, although it is still a world marked by many and varied betrayals, so at the same time it is a world shot through with many and varied and infinitely inspiring acts of unsparing love, of love that runs the risks, of love that ventures all for the sake of the well-being of others, of love that gives and gives ever more as people love and care for one another and for the planet. As they do so they vindicate powerfully the risk that Jesus accepted that night in the garden of Gethsemane and show us, as they do so that 'perfect love casts out fear'.

*A prayer:*

God of love and forgiveness, we pray today with your Son our Lord in the garden on the night before he was killed. We put into your loving arms our fear and our sadness, our anger and our seemingly endless capacity for betrayal as we remember that you poured out all your humanity in love for your broken world. We praise you that even through our betrayals, you are the ever-faithful one. We thank you for the trust that you continue to place in us and for those many places in the world where love, self-sacrifice and service point the way to you - that even in our present darkness, your light continues to shine. We offer this prayer in the garden alongside our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in whose loving sacrifice of himself we continue to place our trust. Amen