

Wednesday of Holy Week

Matt 26: 47 – end

Jesus arrested and taken before Caiaphas



Jesus now begins perhaps the loneliest part of his journey. One of the first things he did when he began his Galilean ministry was to gather around himself a group of friends. Of course, as we know they were not always particularly good friends – they constantly misunderstood what he was about, they asked all sorts of unsuitable questions, they prevented children from approaching him, they vied with one another for power within the group and finally, as today's reading tells us, they all deserted him and fled. Despite all that, until this final night of his life, they mostly stuck with him. But now, as he is arrested and led away from the Garden of Gethsemane and back into Jerusalem to answer for himself before the High Priest, they all run away. To be sure, Peter followed at a distance to see what was going to happen, but even he eventually repudiated his lord and left Jesus to face his fate alone.

Loneliness is a particular theme in our public life at the moment. Millions of people all over the world are shut into their homes to protect themselves and others from Covid 19 and although many are fortunate to have people they love to share their isolation with, there are many who are not so fortunate and for whom the days are long and lonely – or indeed and even worse, stressful and dangerous if they are confined with those who present a danger to them. Many others are doing their best to ameliorate the isolation of those who are alone – and we are all grateful to them – but nonetheless, when the phone calls have finished and the TV has nothing on worth watching, many people's loneliness is acute. And we should not forget that there are other forms of loneliness as well. The loneliness of those in public office who bear the responsibility for making decisions about the way we tackle this challenge, the loneliness of nursing staff who are called to hold the hands of the dying because their relatives cannot be there, the loneliness of those who are ill and who must face the possibility of their death alone and the loneliness of those who must stand alone at a graveside, keeping distance from all others because of the infection risk they may pose. We are a society for whom individualism – the right of the individual to choose their own path through life – has been a guiding star for several centuries now, but when it comes to what it means to be really alone, we are finding at the moment that we need to dig out resources from some rather different places in our communal psyche.

Like most of the other challenges of human living, Jesus knew what it means to be alone. Indeed he had begun his public ministry three years earlier by spending forty days alone in the wilderness in preparation for what was to come. And as he walks away from the garden of Gethsemane in the scene before us today, closely guarded by the armed crowd around him, he faces what lies ahead of him, as before in the desert, in the strength of God but otherwise bereft of human support. And yet, he goes willingly. This is the path, as has been made clear to him in his prayer in the garden, along which God is

calling him, and, although he faces the coming ordeal alone, he faces it also in the knowledge that it is only thus that God's dream for the world can be fulfilled.

The fourth verse of W H Vanstone's poem 'Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense' with which we have been travelling through this Holy Week, runs like this: *"Drained is love in making full / bound in setting others free / poor in making many rich / weak in giving power to be."* As Jesus walks between the armed guards, probably bound at least around his wrists, we see him submitting to the binding of ropes, spears and swords in order that freedom, the freedom that comes from God and that God so longs to give the world, may become a reality. Vanstone sees clearly, as perhaps we might do as we contemplate the figure of Jesus walking away alone to face his fate, that it is only through the pain and loss and loneliness of what Jesus has to go through on his way to the cross that the world will be enabled able to experience the freedom, the liberation indeed, from all that holds us bound.

It is perhaps here that we begin to catch a glimpse of the climax of the story. Perhaps we can envisage Jesus himself, as he walks out of the garden and back towards Jerusalem, setting his eyes firmly on what lies ahead, but gaining strength from the knowledge that what he is doing now, in the loneliness of his walk to the cross, will end in freedom, not just for him but for all the world.

And for us at this time, this is a particularly powerful message. Especially for those of us who are confined to our homes, we can seek strength in the knowledge that our confinement is the means by which not only ourselves but also others will remain free of infection by Covid 19, and indeed that, eventually, our willingness to be metaphorically 'bound' within our households, will bring freedom from coronavirus to all the world. Even as we feel we are 'doing nothing' we can be assured that we are following in Christ's footsteps, as we acknowledge that our loneliness, isolation and surrender of our freedom is the way in which a greater freedom may be found for all.

A prayer:

God of peace and freedom, who in your Son Jesus Christ walked the lonely way of the cross, be present, we pray, with all those who walk a lonely path today in today's world. We pray for all who are in isolation at home, all who have the responsibility of making lonely decisions on behalf of others and all who are tempted, by fear of loneliness, to flout the regulations and so endanger others. We thank you for those who, even at this time of fear and loneliness, are bringing something of your freedom to others, by selfless acts of caring and outreach. Help us to look forward, as Jesus did even as he walked towards the cross, to a world where the true freedom of the knowledge of your love for all creation becomes the guide and strength of all humanity. We ask this for the love of your only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord
Amen