

Sermon: The Prayer of Gethsemane

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 18 March 2018

Bible Readings

Mark 14:32-42

Isaiah 24:4-16

(with photos of the Garden, olive trees and the church, Jerusalem)

I've always been intrigued about this story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane – if all the disciples were sleeping how did what Jesus prayed get written down? It is his very aloneness that is the heart of the story; so who witnessed it? Who heard the prayer that Jesus prayed, that most powerful of prayers: "Take this cup from me. But not my will but yours be done."?

Jesus was alone under the olive tree, in the dark. His closest friends were 'crashed out' under the olive trees, utterly exhausted, in the dark. Who else was there?

It is important to remember as we read all of the gospels that those named in the story were not the only people present. Except for a few stories, when the text clearly states that only specific people were there, like the transfiguration up the mountain, we can assume that there were other people there. Occasionally the gospel writers tell us about some of the other people, particularly Luke who made a particular point of emphasising the role of women in the Jesus's life and ministry. Each of the gospel writers drop clues to show that Jesus and the 12 disciples were normally accompanied by others: women, children, young people, old people, respectable people and scruffy people.

So after the Passover meal Jesus takes his disciples out to pray in the olive grove outside of Jerusalem. This was common enough – Judas knew where they would be because that's where they normally went for a quiet chat and to pray under the olive trees outside the city walls. This night, of all nights, others would have gone with them. Maybe not the women, outside the city gates at night, but I honestly don't know. Maybe not the children, I'd hope they were safe home in bed. But definitely others.

One of the others could well have been a teenage boy by the name of Mark. A man called John Mark is mentioned in Acts and in Paul's letter. From my reading of history, he worked alongside Peter and recorded Peter's teaching about Jesus in the first Gospel. It is not impossible that Mark himself met Jesus, drawn into the group of followers around the disciples. If so he may have been there that night in the garden. There is a curious detail, only recorded in Mark's gospel, of a 'certain young man' who loses his cloak in the scuffle when the guards come to arrest Jesus, who runs away naked. This could have been Mark himself – who else would have known such a strange detail? For the young man to have been so nearly arrested he must have stayed close to Jesus as long as he possibly could. So it makes perfect sense to me that he would also have stayed close to Jesus earlier in the evening, when Jesus went off alone to pray while his best friends collapsed with fatigue.

To me, this draws me into the story. I can picture myself with the young man, leaning against an olive tree in the dark, close enough to Jesus to hear his groans and his cries to his Father. Wrapping his cloak closely around himself with the agony he was witnessing, indelibly marking in his memory Jesus' most intimate and most gut-wrenching of prayers.

Last May I was there in the garden of Gethsemane. It was a warm sunny day, and there were crowds of people from every corner of the world. The power of that place stays with me. The trees there are ancient, thousands of years old, the very same trees that Jesus and his friends sat under. Down near the road the ancient olive trees are set in a beautiful garden with borders and fences. Further up the hill the trees are more wild.

Powerpoint.

The church of Gethsemane is one of the most astonishingly beautiful churches in the world. It is dark. And it is very purple. All the stained glass is purple, large crosses in each tall arched window. Other than one dome filled with light all the roof is painted with the night sky. The church was full of people, visiting like I was, but it was one of the quietest places, full of a deep hush.

Life takes us through gardens of Gethsemane. Sooner or later you will find yourself stumbling in the dark, alone and full of sorrow and stress.

We start, like the young man Mark, by seeing people we care about going through hard times. We see people stepping away from us in their pain, and we do not know how to make it better.

And then, sooner or later, we find ourselves there in that place and we feel so alone. If only we could know, when we are crying out to God and hearing no answer, if only we could truly know that Jesus is right there with us. But God takes us into places where we do feel alone, where we have no sense even of God's presence. That is the prayer of Gethsemane. Only there does our prayer truly become the prayer of surrender.

Last week I talked briefly about the prayer of surrender. I suggested that letting go was the most important prayer, entrusting things into God's hands. For me this is an every-day prayer. Good morning God. Today is your day. Make of it what you will. Make of me what you will.

But stepping into the garden of Gethsemane, in the dark, is a far more serious business. Because it is never somewhere we choose to be. To end up in Gethsemane involves us losing several battles, being hit back, cut down, shaken up.

The prayer of Gethsemane is a struggle. It is a fight. No, Lord! we cry! This is not right. I should not be here! Get me out of here. Anything but this!

We're all too aware of everything everyone else has done to me. It's not fair! It's not my fault. Take this cup away from me!

But God brings us to Gethsemane and there under your ancient tree you have nowhere else to go and no one else to blame and there is only one prayer left to pray.

That prayer is the prayer of surrender. *Not my will, but yours.*

I can identify several times in my life when I was there, letting go in a deeper way than I had done before, giving God more of my life, more of myself.

They were not comfortable places. And there was no quick fix. Surrendering your heart and soul and priorities to God does not magically solve things. It does bring a lightness. It does bring a confidence. Because from the point of surrender it is not all about me and what has been done to me and what I can or cannot do. At the point of surrender I learn to trust. I lay down my insistence that success looks like this and disaster looks like that and I must have this and avoid that.

'*Not my will but yours be done*' opens up a whole new range of options. My fears get smaller because any pain I may go through now has a whole new meaning. My goals get held less tightly because God's agenda for my life or this situation might actually surprise me.

I had a lovely retreat a couple of weeks ago at a Catholic sisters community up in Leithfield, called the Beatitudes. Gorgeous. I was given a little book, by a Father Jacques, which describes itself quite innocuously as "A small treatise on peace of heart".

I definitely felt the need for more peace of heart but I suspected that this little book might be trite or simplistic. Far from it. Father Jacques is ruthless in his teaching. Peace is possible, he writes. Stop living with inner conflict and anxiety. Seek true inner peace, make it your top priority. And how? His answer is simply the prayer of Gethsemane: Complete surrender of ourselves to God. Release everything you care about and everything you are afraid of and everything you want to change or control.

Father Jacques writes:

"Let us learn to abandon ourselves, to have total confidence in God, in the big things as in the small, with the simplicity of little children. And God will manifest his tenderness, his providence and his faithfulness in a manner sometimes overwhelming. If God treats us at certain moments with an apparently great harshness, he also has an unexpected delicateness, of which only a love as tender and pure as his is capable."

But he warns that *"in order that abandonment might be authentic, and truly lead to peace, it must be total. We must put everything, without exception, into the hands of God, not seeking any longer to manage or save ourselves by our own means. Anything that we have not surrendered to God will continue to make us uneasy."*

The measure of our inner peace will be the measure of our abandonment."

Tough words, Father Jacques. Easier said than done.

But enough of the words from me.

I invite you to pause in a moment of quiet

Sit under an olive tree in the garden of Gethsemane.

There the anxieties and troubles are most obvious.

Perhaps you sit there in the garden keenly aware of another person for whom you are concerned. Perhaps, like the young man who sat in the dark watching Jesus cry out in agony, you are praying today for someone you care about who is in pain.

Release this person into God's will. Give them fully over to Jesus, who knows them and loves them. Imagine Jesus kneeling beside them, his arm around them, speaking words of hope.

Perhaps you come to the garden keenly aware of your own pain and fear. Perhaps you are saying to God, "Make this stop!" Perhaps you feel very alone.

I tell you, here and now - Jesus is there in that with you. Jesus knows and feels your hurt.

I invite you to hand it over to God, every bit of it. Believe me when I tell you that God has your best interests at heart. God knows you and cares for you, even in the brokenness.

Jesus will lead you through this, and out into new joy. Jesus has peace to give you. Trust him with everything.

Amen.