



Matthew 26:36–38

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Reflection

It's almost midnight. The Passover meal has finished. Jesus has eaten his Last Supper and is on his way to the Mount of Olives with his disciples. Jesus' disciples are distraught at the news that he is leaving them, betrayed into the hands of the chief priests, teachers of the Law and the Romans by one of their very own. And they don't even know who it is. What's more, they've just learnt, as they've travelled across the Kidron valley that separates Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives that Peter, their courageous leader, the one who'd fearlessly walked a few steps on water out to meet Jesus (Matt 14:29), will disown him, not once but three times, and that before dawn. Jesus has just told them that they'll be scattered, all of them

will fall away before morning – what is about to happen?

It's late, dark and their emotions are in turmoil as they arrive in our passage at a place called Gethsemane. John refers to it as the garden of Gethsemane. The name means 'olive press'. It was a garden or wooded area on the western slopes of the hillside known as the Mount of Olives, an area filled with groves of olive trees, many of them owned by well-to-do citizens of Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples went there often, that's how Judas would know where to find them. The Mount of Olives is also the place that Zechariah, especially, associated with the last things. On the way there, in yesterday's passage, Jesus had quoted Zechariah when he said in verse 31,

“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

“‘I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

Zechariah’s words will come true, this very night, on the Mount of Olives in the garden of Gethsemane. The disciples don’t know when or how, but Jesus does, in brutal detail; he has barely an hour left before his arrest.

Jesus’ disciples are distressed and distraught, they’re almost overcome by emotion at the shock and sadness of what Jesus has told them. It’s late and they’re not coping. But what they are going through

pales in comparison to what our passage reveals about the state of Jesus' heart. On arriving at Gethsemane Jesus instructs the nine to wait at a distance, taking his inner circle, his closest friends, Peter, James and John, to be with him as he prays. We read in verses 37 and 38,

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

The English lets us down. In the original language, these words have the sense of 'terrible distress and misery' as one 'crushed with anguish', suffers from a sor-

row so deep that it almost kills. In perhaps his most human moment in the gospels, Jesus is almost entirely overcome by what the next day holds. Previously he's been so composed, so purposeful, he's spoken about his death with such strength, with such settled resolve. But here, in this, his most human moment, the unbearable emotional toll comes to the surface. Jesus is reeling, he's recoiling at the horror of what awaits him. The Son of God, fully human, is suffering like no human before or since, and he's asked his closest friends to be there with him because he needs their support. Not to do anything, not to say anything, just be there with him. They can't fix it, he's not asking them to, he just needs them.

“My soul is overwhelmed with sor-

row to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Jesus' suffering from sorrow is so deep that it almost kills. He's about to be separated from his Father, he's about to be beaten, humiliated and tortured. He's about to die, giving his life as a ransom for many, bearing their sins, receiving their punishment, for the 'Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa 53:6). But who could bear the wrath of God for the world? Nowhere in the gospels do we see Jesus more pressed down, more human, he's asking his closest friends just to stand there and be with him, to support him in his darkest hour.

They're coming to take him, a whole party armed with swords and clubs are on their

way. This is the final hour. Jesus is living a waking nightmare that is threatening to crush him. What to do? How to prepare? As we'll see over the coming days, Jesus prays. Not once, but three times, and God answers his prayers. These powerful emotions subside, and Jesus is able to look his betrayer and his accusers directly in the eyes, as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords walks triumphantly to his death, and to the salvation of the world.

But for now we're in Gethsemane experiencing the deepest depths of emotional turmoil alongside our Lord. How do we respond to it? Don Carson suggests,

‘As his death is unique, so also was his anguish; and our best response to it is hushed worship.’

Think

Spend some time in hushed worship of Jesus today. Do you see him there ‘overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’ asking his dearest friends just to stand by him for emotional support as he prays? ‘Overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’, suffering terrible distress and misery, crushed by anguish, suffering so much physical and emotional agony that he is described by Luke, the doctor, as sweating blood. For you. For me. Spend some time in hushed worship.

Pray

And then pray. As he prayed. Earnestly. Desperately. Dependently. Perhaps you

too are suffering in this moment. Perhaps you're feeling to some degree the pain that Jesus is going through. You may be asking, 'Why?' Praying that it wouldn't be so. Trying to come to terms with how on earth God's good and perfect plan could include what is happening to you. If this is you right now then pray like Jesus. God will answer your prayers just as he answers those of Jesus.

And if this isn't your situation this morning, then pray for your brothers and sisters at church and around the world who are experiencing similar emotions to Jesus' anguish in our passage today. Be Peter and James and John to them. Through prayer; but also practically. Who do you know who is suffering that you can go and stand alongside? Who can you offer emo-

tional and practical support to in their dark hour of need? If Jesus needed this kind of companionship in his suffering, then how much more do they?

Pray about this morning and then do something tangible about it today. A text message, a phone call, popping over and visiting them, in hushed worship of our Lord. Do you remember his words from just a chapter ago?

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’
(Matt 25:40)