

**Holy Week Reflections 2022**

**Monday – Mark 14:1-11 ‘Extravagant love’**

We’re blessed to be able to worship in a beautiful, inspiring building. Despite being made with wooden scaffolds, rudimentary tools and makeshift mortar, it has stood for hundreds of years, and is likely to for hundreds more. Most of us sucked in our breath and felt a sense of thrill when we first stepped inside it. Many of us do even now. Imagine what it must have been like for the mediaeval peasant folk who lived around it in timber dwellings? Imagine the awe, the sense of glory and mystery – all pointing to the great God in whose name it was built.

The church is really the people, of course it is – and we must beware idolatry of bricks and mortar. But all the same, a glorious building not only inspires worship, but represents an *act of worship in itself*. It’s not often that we think of the cost of building it. How on earth does a poor agrarian subsistence economy finance such luxury? What did it cost each peasant family to pay their taxes over decades to see it built? Yes, it certainly provided much needed employment and a focus for the identity of the village – but I wonder how many times a family went hungry or made some other sacrifice to see it built? What poverty might have been alleviated if the money hadn’t been spent on a building at least ten times larger than anything around it, whose sole purpose was for worship?

When we start to ask these questions, we get to the heart of today’s famous but unsettling story. We love the image of the woman anointing Jesus’ head with this very expensive perfume, but many of us no doubt share the disciples’ sentiments. Jesus had just challenged the financial corruption of the temple officials, and yet here he was a few days later, apparently condoning an act of wasteful, reckless extravagance. Surely there are better ways to spend money wisely?

But Jesus is having none of it. Yes, we should always care for those who need it, as Jesus advises – but he also reminds us that *the first and primary object of our attention is Jesus himself*. Jesus’ own love for us is extravagant, reckless even – the end of this week proves it, beyond a shadow of a doubt – and so, too, he commends extravagant love returned. This woman’s costly worship, done for no other reason than to demonstrate her adoration of her Lord, is ‘a beautiful thing’.

The woman could never have known that Jesus’ prediction would come true: ‘wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’ Just as the poor mediaeval families who made sacrifices for decades to pay for and build our church building could never have known that 700 or 800 years later, people would *still* be gasping as they enter, people would *still* be offering their worship to God with hearts and hands raised in adoration – that their offering of extravagant love would remain powerful, inspiring, enduring. It is a beautiful thing.

As Holy Week begins, take time to reflect on the reckless, extravagant love of God for you – yes, you! The love that led to extraordinary sacrifice. Let’s acknowledge that too often we become people who know ‘the price of everything and the value of nothing.’ Let’s recommit ourselves to extravagant worship, reflecting the wild, reckless love of our Creator. It is a beautiful thing.

*Loving Jesus, thank you for your extravagant love for me. My love for you so often has limits. Help me to love you as you love me. Open my eyes to see what the woman at Bethany saw. Thank you. Amen.*

## ***Holy Week Reflections in the Gospel of Mark***

### **Tuesday – Mark 14:12-31 ‘All fall away’**

The journey of Jesus through Holy Week is, among many things, a journey from crowds to loneliness. The great throng of Palm Sunday becomes the large crowd in the temple; then the smaller gathering at Bethany, moving on to the Last Supper with his disciples; then just Peter, James and John in Gethsemane, until finally Jesus is arrested and is completely alone. Listeners left, followers gone, friends fled.

The narrative becomes more intense, claustrophobic. Today Jesus prepares to eat the Passover (v13), then at the celebration itself talks of betrayal (v18) and his own shed blood (v24). He finishes the meal with an evening walk where he finally comes clean: ‘you will all fall away.’ (v31)

It is a stark and sobering admission, and not surprisingly his friends, buoyed not just by wine and conversation, but an evening reflecting on God’s sovereign activity in history, don’t agree. A tight-knit huddle, they’ve weathered all storms – literal and spiritual – for three years. They’re just not the ‘falling away’ types – especially not gung-ho, have-a-go Peter. ‘Even if all fall away, I will not.’

We all know what happens next, and we’ll reflect some more on it over the coming days. But I’m always struck by the disconnect between words and deeds. Between brave declarations, and craven response. Between intention and action. Or as Jesus puts it shortly: ‘The Spirit is willing’ – it usually is – ‘but the flesh is weak.’

And as we gaze back at these iconic scenes with 2,000 years’ perspective – two millennia of knowledge and experience – it strikes me that the only honest response is simply this: *there but for the grace of God go I*. Go any of us. The disciples are just like us: true of heart and easily scattered. How many times has the rooster crowed for each of us?

And yet... and yet.... Jesus is still Jesus. Still full of compassion and mercy, still slow to anger and of great goodness. Still able to welcome us back with our blushing, tear-stained cheeks. And in this famous meal he gives us, this simple but glorious act of remembrance, we are able each time to acknowledge our weakness, and praise his strength; to lament our faithlessness and rejoice in his faithfulness; to receive mercy and forgiveness again. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s saving death until he comes.

Even as they gather to celebrate the Passover, Jesus knows they will all desert him within hours – and yet he gives them this wonderful sign of his love anyway. That is grace – and it is grace we remember today. As the old hymn puts it so well: ‘When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within: upwards I look and see him there, who made an end of all my sin.’ Amen, thank you Jesus.

*Loving Lord, there but for your grace I would have gone so many times. Thank you for your mercy and love. Make my weak knees strong, and stand by my side always. Amen.*

## ***Holy Week Reflections in the Gospel of Mark***

### **Wednesday – Mark 14:32-42 ‘Not what I will’**

The will – it’s a strange and slightly mysterious thing, isn’t it? We first start to see it when a child is just a few months old, newly weaned – turning their nose up at one mouthful of food only to embrace another.

Wills famously start to assert themselves strongly as toddlers. The battles all of us parents will remember! Usually over little things, but nonetheless important, as ultimately it’s about who’s in charge. And this sense of the will lives on in those who are described as ‘strong-willed’, which is often a euphemism for people who like to get their own way!

*The will is a statement not just of authority but of intent.* When couples get married they don’t say ‘I do’ (sorry to disappoint you), but ‘I will’. Even our last wishes are declared by – you guessed it – a will.

Wills matter. The great spiritual writer Watchman Nee defined the soul as the combination of the mind, the emotions and the will. It differs from the other two precisely because *it defines where (and to whom) our gaze is directed.* If the mind gives us the what and why, and the emotions the how, the will focuses us on the where and to whom. In matters of life and faith, whose will prevails?

All of which leads perfectly onto the heart of this passage today. Here we see two battles of the will, both within a person or people. For the disciples, the tussle is relatively straightforward: their spiritual desire to support their friend Jesus versus their physical desire to sleep on a warm, dark evening after a large meal.

For Jesus, the battle is much more intense, life (and death) defining even. Jesus’ destiny hangs in the balance: he knows what lies ahead, and he faces the ultimate test of the will: his own, human will to avoid it, clashing with what he knows his Father’s will to be.

The struggle is immense: he describes himself to his friends as ‘overwhelmed with sorrow’; in Luke’s account, his anguish is so intense it bursts blood vessels near the skin surface, so he literally sweats blood. Whose *will* will prevail?

As we observed earlier, it all comes down to authority and intent. Ultimately Jesus was completely obedient to one authority, and one alone – his Father’s. And this determined his intention. After hours of wrestling, he comes to the earth-shattering, earth-changing decision: ‘Yet not what I will, but what you will.’ Nine words which change the universe, the course of history, the future of humanity.

The contrast with the disciples is so stark, it’s almost tragically funny. Jesus wrestles for his life while they wrestle with their eyelids. How like us! How wonderful, then, to know that our future rests in Jesus’ perfect obedience rather than ours.

And may that hope of a secure future, thanks to Jesus’ costly obedience – also give us inspiration and courage to surrender to God’s will in the little – and not-so-little – callings of our lives.

*Courageous God, I am in awe of your obedience. Thank you, thank you that you said ‘Not what I will.’ Help me to will as you will, because I know that you are good. Amen.*

## ***Holy Week Reflections in the Gospel of Mark***

### **Thursday – Mark 14:43-72 ‘Witness statements’**

I’ve never yet been asked to give evidence in a court room. Once I almost did: I’d submitted written testimony and was expecting to be cross-examined. It was only a civil case, not a criminal one, but even so, I was so nervous I forgot to put a belt on when getting ready at home, only realising when I was halfway along the street. I had to dive into a shop near the train station and buy one on the way, or I would have had to keep my hands in my trouser pockets throughout to stop a clothing malfunction! Not a good look before a judge....

Thankfully my written evidence was accepted without dispute, and my trousers stayed secure: but it was a sobering reminder of the power of a witness statement. In today’s passage Jesus is surrounded by many witnesses, one after the other – however none of them were the sort you’d want on your side at your time of need. Each witness gave their own ‘testimony’:

A kiss – from his friend Judas.

A sword – to win Jesus’ freedom through terror.

A club – from those crowding round to arrest him.

A garment – left by the young man who fled. Many have often wondered if this was Mark himself, quietly admitting his own failure of nerve.

A lie – from those recruited by Jesus’ enemies to try and smear his name.

A rip – from the High Priest as Jesus quoted Daniel before him, a gloriously true prophecy which sealed his fate.

A denial – from his best friend Peter. Or rather three denials, before the rooster declares his cowardice.

As we reflect on the enormity of Jesus’ sacrifice, we hold in our minds Jesus’ call for each of us to be witnesses. And yet, so often we may feel like one or more of these people, offering faulty testimony. A denial here, a betrayal there....

It is hard to read today’s passage without being humbled. But in the midst of the storm, we also claim this truth: Jesus knows. No failure of ours is new to him: he saw it all in Holy Week, indeed in this one night. And *still* he loves. Still he forgives. Still he speaks a word of reassurance to us, just as he did to Peter.

We will never plumb the depths of his love: but we can marvel in it, and receive it afresh today.

*Faithful Lord, thank you that no failure of ours puts us beyond your love. You were let down in every way: and still you were faithful to your calling. Give us grace to receive your astonishing forgiveness, and to be empowered to be your witnesses, for your precious sake. Amen.*

**Note: Good Friday:** Today, take a few moments to read Mark 15:1-39 and spend time at the foot of the cross.

## ***Holy Week Reflections in the Gospel of Mark***

### **Saturday – Mark 15:37-47 ‘Mary and Joseph’**

It’s a strange coincidence in the gospel narrative that Jesus’ earthly life starts with a Mary and a Joseph, and ends with a Mary and a Joseph – just a different pair. It’s true that Jesus’ mother is also in Jerusalem in Holy Week and John’s gospel records her as being by the cross when Jesus dies. But a different Mary takes centre stage here: Mary Magdalene.

This was the Mary who had been healed and restored by Jesus (Luke 8:2) and who afterwards became one of Jesus’ most faithful friends. This faithfulness was rewarded by the extraordinary privilege of being the first to meet Jesus after his resurrection (John 20:14). But in today’s passage we see her supporting Jesus, watching and waiting both at the cross (v40) *and* at the tomb (v47).

This suggests strongly that she followed Jesus wherever he went that day – even his lifeless body, quickly carried to the tomb by Joseph (and others) as sunset drew nigh. All of Jesus’ twelve closest (male) friends had disappeared: but Mary, and several other women, were still *there*.

Joseph of Arimathea’s story is different. If Mary had likely been a social outcast before she met Jesus, Joseph was wealthy and powerful, ‘a prominent member of the Council’ (v43). But he had been no less impacted by Jesus – we don’t know exactly how, but the text tells us that he was ‘himself waiting for the kingdom of God.’ This is shorthand for a devout faith, but the fact that he took this bold step of caring for Jesus’ body when so many others had fled suggests that he saw in Jesus the fulfilment of God’s purposes for his kingdom.

And so these two unlikely characters, from opposite ends of society, come to play a key role in the story of God at this climactic moment. As Holy Week draws to its dramatic and joyful conclusion, it reminds us that Jesus’ message – and his kingdom – are *for everyone*; and everyone is able to play their part in God’s purposes. Mary’s is a story of healing and presence, Joseph’s a story of boldness and influence; Mary’s friendship with Jesus lasted years, Joseph only appears in the narrative now; but they have one thing in common – they are faithful friends to Jesus.

Holy Week is ultimately about Jesus’ faithfulness to God and to us. But this extraordinary love demands a response. Jesus is our most faithful friend: will we be a faithful friend in return? The way that we express that might be different, unique: but our calling is the same. ‘Surely this man is the Son of God!’ How will we respond?

*Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you did for me. Thank you for the examples of Mary and Joseph, touched by you, and faithful in their love. Help me to be faithful to you, my most faithful friend. Amen.*