

February 22nd, 2014

THE VIGIL

Matthew 26:36-46

The word *gethsemane* means *oil press*. You can imagine the laborers gathering the olives and bringing them to this place. The olives would be placed in large, mesh-like bags, through which the oil could drip to a funnel carved in the stone press, beneath which a clay jar could collect the clear golden liquid. The leftover mash of olives would be fed to the goats. But, in order to press the olives, there would be a thick, strong board, wedged over the bags of olives. At the outside end of this board heavy stones would be tied. The board would press down hard on the olives, crushing the meat of the fruit, squeezing its juices out, and you would have olive oil.

It seems a bitter parallel to what was beginning to happen to Jesus at the time. *"I am deeply grieved, even unto death. Remain here, and stay awake with me."* (Matthew 27:38) The weight of the world was pressing down on Jesus, and He was distressed. He didn't want to be alone. Peter, James, and John were asked to sit nearby, not so much to be on guard as to just be there... to just stay awake with Him. They were also the ones who were selected to be with Christ when He was Transfigured.

Through the darkness of this night, the pain of *my* guilt and the stain of *my* sin was being placed on my Lord. Jesus knew He was going to suffer for my sins in order that I might be made righteous before God. He was innocent, and yet He was going to die for me. He was going to take the punishment I deserve. He would be beaten, flogged, and crucified ...in my place...

And He prayed that this cup of suffering might not have to be taken. And still, He knew His purpose, and so He prayed the purest prayer of surrender: *"Not what I want, but what You want....My Father."* (v. 39) These were not the only prayers He prayed through those hours. John recorded some of what He heard Jesus saying to God in *his* Gospel. But here, in the vigil of our Lord, Matthew records Christ's deepest anguish.

Meanwhile, Judas has gone off to betray Him by leading the powers that be to His location...even though it was never really a secret. Jesus knew that soon the rest of the disciples would desert Him. He knew He was going to be crucified. But... He also knew He would be raised from the dead. That knowledge gave His surrender a bit of sweetness. There was light in His darkness. But, that darkness was very, very deep. Only Luke mentions the true depth of Christ's despair within that darkness. An angel came to strengthen Him as *"He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became like great drops of blood."* (Luke 22:43-44)

He needed His friends. So alone that it hurt, He came to Peter, James, and John and they were sleeping. It was not disappointment that He was expressing when Jesus said, *"So couldn't you stay awake with Me one hour?"* ... (v. 40) It was simply a recognition that He was more alone than He wanted to be. He tried to encourage them, telling them to keep vigil in order to escape temptation. (41a) I'm not sure what temptations Jesus might have been thinking about. Is it the temptation to sleep? The temptation to desert their post? Or, could it have been the temptation to ignore the gravity of that night? And then Jesus made a statement that reveals the divine understanding of human nature: *"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (41b)

Anyway, Jesus went back to His place of prayer and prayed again: *“My Father, if this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, may Your will be done!”* (42) This wasn’t easy for Jesus. Even though He is God-incarnate... even though He is the anointed Son of God... He was taking into Himself my guilt, my sin, my unrighteousness, and it was weighing heavily on His heart.

“Their eyes were heavy.” (v. 43) He knew they would fail Him, but, please, not yet! Not until His arrest... not until the real threat came. Not until *Judas* showed up. All Jesus wanted was for His three closest disciples to stay awake with Him, just so He wouldn’t feel so alone. After finding them asleep this second time, He said nothing, but simply returned to His prayers, praying as He had before.

Jesus knew what was about to happen. Maybe He sensed it before He saw it. Sometimes evil and malice can be felt. Jesus came again to Peter, James, and John after praying a third time. They were still sleeping. But the time had come. *“The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”* (v. 45) They didn’t think they were sinners. They thought they were doing a good thing – defending Judaism against a false messiah. But they were blinded by their status, their position before the people, their power. And Jesus had told them so. Only days before, He had proclaimed their hypocrisy through a litany of Seven Woes against the Scribes and Pharisees. They hated Him for it. But He wasn’t telling the people anything they weren’t already thinking. From the point of view of Christ, the chosen one, the Anointed One, the Son of Man, ...they were sinners.

They were coming from Jerusalem. It was dark. The fire of torchlight guided their path. Jesus, from the overlook of Gethsemane, could see them coming. *“Get up,”* He said. *“Let us be going. Behold, my betrayer is at hand.”* (v. 46)

He could see Judas. Jesus was about to be arrested.

There is a time when we need to deepen our conviction. ...when we need to defend ourselves as we say, *“Surely not I, Lord?”* We all need to examine our lives and see wherein we are betraying our Lord, deserting Him. Is our journey going in the right direction? Is our character being fashioned after the example of Christ? Are we surrendered? Are we faithful to the extent that we are being made perfect in love?

The spirit is willing.....