

Gethsemane

By Jim Seghers

Introduction

The Passion begins shortly after the Last Supper when Jesus, *the* son of David, went with his Apostles to a garden called Gethsemane. To reach the garden he crossed the Kidron a dry stream, except during the rainy season, which separated Jerusalem to the West and the Mount of Olives on the East. Centuries earlier King David fled from his son Absalom across the same stream (2 Sam 15:23) to ascend “the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went” (2 Sam 15:30). David was betrayed by his trusted advisor Ahithophel who, like Judas, subsequently “hanged himself” (2 Sam 17:23).

Prayer

Jesus begins this confrontation with Satan as he does all his important acts with *prayer*. Humanly speaking he, too, is in need of the Father’s strength. All Jesus’ disciples need that same support. “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk 22:40). This admonition certainly applies to us today, just as it did to Peter and the Apostles.

Witnesses

Just as he did at the time of the transfiguration Jesus calls the same three witnesses, *Peter*, and *the brothers James and John*, to observe his agony. They were not chosen to support him, but he encouraged and supported them. Later they would understand that the power and glory that was manifested in Jesus’ transfiguration saves the world, but only through the terrible suffering and humiliations that began in Gethsemane and ended on Calvary.

Jesus' Suffering

It’s to these three Apostles Jesus reveals the depth of his grief, “My soul is *very sorrowful*, even *to death*” (Mk 14:34), that is, my grief is so intense that it is capable of my causing death. Thus St. Luke reports that Jesus sweat drops of blood, and that angels sustained his life (Lk 22:43-44). Bishop Sheen suggests that Jesus’ suffering in Gethsemane was as painful as all the rest of his Passion combined. What caused so great a suffering?

It was the awful realization of the *horrifying suffering on the cross* coupled with the accompanying *betrayal, abandonment, loneliness*, and especially the *terrible weight of our sins*. We are so accustomed to sin that we fail to grasp its horror. Even the utmost gift of His love, the Eucharist, is received with ingratitude and outrage.

The rejection of our age was also painfully discouraging as Jesus foresaw his Mystical Body, the Church, staggering up her Calvary. We have become a people embracing every sin: millions of his babies murdered in their mothers womb; acts of violence and hatred are everywhere; sexual excesses abound; and there is a general loss of faith and apostasy. How true does John’s statement of Love rejected apply to us: “He came to his own home, and *his own people* received him not” (Jn 1:11)

Jesus' Prayer

So overwhelming was the feeling of dread that Jesus prayed, "Father, Abba, if you are willing, remove this cup [of suffering and death, see: Jn 20:22] from me, nevertheless *not my will, but yours, be done*" (Lk 22:42). His poignant plea shows Jesus' true humanity:

"For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sinning*" (Heb 4:15).

Sometimes we experience similar feelings. We, too, are tested with painful trials. They seem senseless. Help seems long delayed. Our cries to God become impatient as the hammer blows fall: poverty, financial stress, illness, death, injustices, rejection, abuse, loneliness, business failures, the loss of job, family troubles, persecution, the ingratitude of friends - the list is long. We feel that both nature and mankind are against us. We are urgent in prayer. We receive Communion. Yet, the suffering continues, perhaps it is even aggravated. Heaven seems far off. "*Where is my God,*" our soul cries out! *Oh doubtful heart* - look to Gethsemane. *There was a prayer better than yours.* The Father loved the Son with an infinite love. *Yet, no part of the cup of sorrow was removed.* No abatement of His suffering was granted.

The Father who views eternity knows what is best for each of us. He created us for everlasting life, not for this flickering moment of time. No mere human has this perspective. Consequently, no man can judge in times of trial and stress what is for his good. "Not my will, but yours, be done." May this become our prayer of surrender. In the midst of trials, *we need the inspiration of Gethsemane.*

The Apostles

Even during this great trial, Jesus thinks of others. Jesus tells his Apostles "remain here and watch" (Mk 14:34). They, too, will undergo an agony in miniature. St. Luke tells us the Apostles were sleeping in *sorrow* (Lk 22:45). Their sadness is evidenced during Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus had told them that *one of them would betray him*; that they would *desert him*; that he would *go away from them*; and that there would follow a *period of great tribulation* before they would be again with him in a permanent union. They wished to be strong, but their natural strength was not strong enough to resist the weariness of their emotions. The same is true today. Many Christians become weary and disheartened. We, too, fall asleep, that is, they become complacent, or uncommitted, or abandon their Lord completely.

Because they relied on themselves the Apostles were in a state of confusion each time Jesus returned to exhort them to watch and pray. St. Mark declared: "They did not know what to answer him" (Mk 14:40). Would that they would have cried out in their weakness as they did once before, "*Lord save us*" (Mt 8:25)!

The sleeping Apostles form an apt picture of human frailty. Jesus warned Peter: "The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mk 14:38). They declared themselves ready to go to prison and to death with their Lord - - - *in the comfort of the upper room.* But on the field of combat they are unable to watch one hour with him. *Such is the reliability of self-confidence!*

When any man is left to himself, the frailty of the human condition is always victorious. Jesus warns, "apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Our most difficult battles are fought

within ourselves against an adversary that is active and tireless, namely, that base part within us which is opposed to our higher self. “He who conquers,” the Spirit said to the church in Ephesus, “shall not be hurt by the second death. . . . to him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:11, 7).

When Jesus came upon his sleeping Apostles for the third time he said: “Sleep on now, and take your rest.” The time for prayer and watching *with its grace* was past. They had failed! In yielding to human nature they missed their opportunity. It could not be made up. There was no need for further exhortations. The time of strengthening is past. “It is enough.” Their trial was now at hand. They will scatter, but Christ’s mercy will follow and reunite them. Will we be asleep like the Apostles and lose our opportunity of grace, or will we respond with a genuine repentance?

Judas

Now Judas comes on the scene. On the day we now commemorate as Spy Wednesday he had gone to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you” (Mt 26:14)? Earlier Judas had expressed his indignation over the expensive nard that Mary Madeline lavished on Jesus’ feet. Judas could peg the price of this expensive perfume, but he didn’t know the price of his soul. He pointed out that this ointment was worth a year’s wage, *three hundred* silver pieces. He called it a waste, not because he cared for the poor, “but because,” as John tells us, “he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it” (Jn 12:6). Judas sells his soul for a tithe, ten percent of the value of that nard. “They paid him thirty pieces of silver” (Mt 26:15).

The traitor shrewdly arranged a sign by which Jesus should be apprehended. Many in the accompanying armed band would not have known Jesus face to face. Then in the uncertain light of night a mistake might be made and the wrong man apprehended. Judas arranged with these assassins that he would identify Jesus by a kiss.

The tragedy of Judas’ life is first revealed in John’s Gospel when, after the Bread of Life Discourse, Judas is called “a devil” (Jn 6:70) because of his unbelief in the Eucharist. At the Last Supper St. Luke writes “then Satan entered into Judas” (Lk 22:3), which may be an allusion to the terrible sin of sacrilege - - the first unworthy Communion (1 Cor 11: 27-30). Judas became the personification of Satan. His diabolical malice is seen in his instruction: “seize him, and lead him away safely” (Mk 14:44).

Arriving before the armed band Judas greets Jesus: “Hail, Master” (Mt 26:49)! However, in the agitation of the moment Judas’ duplicity is revealed. Only unbelievers address Jesus as “Master” or “Teacher” in Matthew’s Gospel. Believers always address Jesus as “Lord.” Then the traitor feigns great love for Jesus, for the word Matthew used for “kiss” means “to kiss much.” This showering of kisses accentuates Judas’ evil motive, which is to finger Jesus to the mob that followed him.

Ignoring His profound feelings of hurt and betrayal, Jesus reaches out to Judas with a loving invitation to faith and repentance. He calls Judas “friend” (Mt 26:50). He used his name, “Judas,” (Lk 22:48) to enkindle their former familiarity. Then he unmasked Judas’ evil design

hidden under the semblance of a kiss of peace and love: with the question “Would you betray the Son of man with a kiss” (Lk 22:48)? Finally, Jesus challenges Judas to examine himself: “Behold, why are you here?” (Mt 26:50), in other words, consider the foulness of your deed and the precarious state of your soul.

Even at this moment, had Judas repented, his apostleship would have been restored. He would have become a great saint and a martyr - a perpetual example of God’s infinite mercy and the transformation of repentance. Instead, Judas rejected the grace of forgiveness. Ultimately, when the full realization of his awful deed crashed upon him, he foolishly considered his sinfulness bigger than God’s mercy. Having already murdered his soul, it was a short step to murdering his body. “He went and hanged himself” (Mt 27:5) and “he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out (literally his insides)” (Acts 1:18). *Judas’ miserable end paints a graphic picture of the consequences of unrepented sin!*

Jesus’ Protects the Apostles

In confronting this hostile mob, Jesus exemplifies how the total submission to the Father empowers one to put others first - even in the most difficult of circumstances. He gives this lesson to the Apostles by protecting them, *but not himself*: “so, if you seek me, let these go” (Jn 18:8). Their danger is primarily spiritual. *They were not yet the stuff from which martyrs are made.*

Peter’s impetuosity

Peter’s impetuous temperament propels him to violent action. He struck a blow with his sword at the head of one of those seizing Jesus. John tells us his name is Malchus (Jn 19:10). The important lesson here is that well-intentioned actions that flow from human motives are ineffective. As a swordsman, Peter was a good fisherman! Peter only succeeds in cutting off Malchus’ ear (Lk 22:50), which Jesus miraculously healed (Lk 22:51). In restoring the servant’s ear Jesus insured that no legitimate charge could be brought either against himself or his disciples.

John’s account emphasizes that Jesus is no passive victim. He offered himself freely and knowingly. Jesus majestically dominates the scene. Cunning plans carried out by evil men with swords and clubs are powerless. Jesus is ready to drink the cup of suffering, because in that work of salvation *the love of the Father is revealed*. Jesus will conquer his enemies, but not with a sword or even with “twelve legions of angels” (Mt 26:53), but by his ignominious death on a cross – the gift of perfect love.

At this point the Apostles flee. Only Peter and John (Jn 18:15; cf. Jn 10:2-4) follow, but at a distance. They loved Jesus, but lacked the courage to share his fate.