

Easter Service - Luke 22:39-53

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- [0 : 0 0] Now you'll find the reading today on the leaflet you have on your seats. Those of you who have been here the last three weeks will know that we've been looking at some of the so-called lament psalms, those psalms where human need, human suffering, human mystery are powerfully brought before us.
- And as we look today at this story of Gethsemane, we find a story where these problems, where these mysteries, and where the solution to that mystery come together powerfully.
- So we're reading from Luke 22, verses 39 to 53, part of Luke's narrative of the Passion. And Jesus came out and went as was his custom to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.
- And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not enter into temptation. And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw and knelt down and prayed, Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.
- Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.
- [1 : 2 7] When he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow. And he said to them, Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.
- While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him. But Jesus said to him, Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?
- And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, Lord, shall we strike with the sword? And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, No more of this.
- And he touched his ear and killed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come out against him, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs?
- When I was with you day by day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me, But this is your hour and the power of darkness.
- [2 : 3 5] This is the word of the Lord. May God bless this powerfully to our hearts and to our lives. On the 16th of October, 1555, according to the records, a dull and drizzly autumn day, two English reformers, Bishops Ridley and Letimer, stood together at the stake in the center of Oxford.
- And Letimer spoke words which have often been quoted since, Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. And we shall this day light such a candle in England that by God's grace shall never be put out.
- An exciting and powerful martyr story. And there are many, many others. Martyrs in Uganda in the 19th century themselves burned in the flames and singing daily, daily, sing of Jesus.

These stories are inspiring. These stories rise my imagination and my admiration. Almost immediately, they are followed by a kind of chilling fear.

How would I cope in circumstances like that? How would I face such a prospect?

[4 : 00] And here, fascinating thing is, in this story we've just read, the story of the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus Christ faces death, not as Ridley and Letimer did, but with fear, with sorrow.

We're going to look at that. Each gospel tells us the story of this. You notice Luke doesn't actually mention the name of the garden. This is the Garden of Gethsemane. But each gospel gives us a picture of the agony in Gethsemane.

And Luke has some details that the other gospels don't have. In particular, the angel from heaven. What I want us to do in these few moments is to look at three powerful cross currents running through this story.

There are places on the surface of the earth where different seas meet. The type of South America, for example, the very extreme south of South Africa, where powerful currents meet, and sailing is dangerous.

Now, there are three powerful currents flowing in this narrative. And first of all, we have the power of prayer in verses 39 to 46.

[5 : 15] Luke has a great deal to say about prayer in his gospel. Indeed, a few chapters before he's told the story, the so-called unjust judge, and says this is to show you that people ought always to pray and never to give up.

And it's important to notice that Jesus, while in one sense he is in charge, in a very real sense he's in charge, he still prays.

And he prays on the Mount of Olives. And probably Luke wants to link this with the instant, the very end of his gospel, where Jesus is going to ascend back into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

The Son of Man is going to ascend from there where he is praying now. And this whole section of Luke really is governed by a phrase earlier in the gospel, that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

But here is the Son of Man praying in agony and in sorrow. In one sense, it's an ordinary prayer. He came out and went, as was his custom.

[6 : 28] In other words, he regularly prayed at the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane. And now in a great crisis, this prayer is continuing.

I think this is a very important lesson for us. It's more difficult to pray in a great crisis if we're not accustomed to praying at normal times. In a similar thing in the book of Daniel, where Daniel, in great danger of his life, prays and tells us it was as his custom was.

It wasn't something, it wasn't a desperate emergency measure. So, he's there in the Garden of Gethsemane where he has prayed many times before. This time is different.

He is facing the last enemy. He's facing death itself. And there is loneliness there, isn't there? A number of yards away, the disciples are asleep.

At the very time when he needed them most, they're asleep. And yet, there is a detail here which none of the other gospel writers mention. In verse 43, there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.

[7 : 31] So, while there is loneliness on earth, there is support from heaven. And this is once again in keeping with so many of the accounts in scripture of prayer and the presence of angels.

The angels come to him from the unseen world, or an angel comes and strengthens him. Just as Gabriel, at the very beginning of this gospel, had announced his coming to Mary.

So, an angel, we're not told who the angel was. It could have been Gabriel, of course. But, certainly, a powerful angel comes, strengthens him. Strengthens him in the sense, I think, of saying, look, this you've got to go through with this.

This has to happen. Not strengthening in the sense of some facile comfort. It will be all right. And the nature of the prayer.

As I say, it's not at all like Ridley and Latimer. There are many times I don't want to hear about Ridley and Latimer because I know my faith is not in the same league as theirs. How do we reconcile Jesus' commitment to the will of God?

[8 : 35] His absolute commitment to the will of the Father. His absolute determination to die for the sins of the world. And to this, asking, remove this cup.

Verse 43. Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. The first thing to note is the emphasis on the sovereignty of God.

God is in charge. Not your will, but mine be done. And like Adam, he is faced with temptation.

But unlike Adam, he triumphs. He is faced with what it's like to be in a universe from which all trace of God seems to have vanished. Those of you who were here last week, remember we saw that in Psalm 77, where the psalmist looks round on the universe.

All the lights have gone off. God is nowhere to be seen. Now, it is clear, of course, that Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, one with God, knew the will of the Father.

[9 : 46] Before the worlds were made, in eternity, this was planned. The cross and the Gethsemane and Calvary. Yet it seems to me the only way that we can understand this story, and I say this with fear and trembling, is that at Gethsemane and Calvary, he willingly forgoes that knowledge.

You see, he truly entered our vulnerable and threatened world. I see, as Lewis says, and I find this very helpful, on that dreadful night, Jesus chose to face death and judgment, and face it like one of the most frightened of his followers, and not as one of the heroes of his army.

I find great comfort from that. Face it like one of the most frightened of his followers. He truly became one of us.

As the letter of the Hebrews says, he was in every way tempted as we are, but without sin. There is no sinfulness in this fear. There is no sinfulness in this prayer.

But it is a vulnerable human prayer. Power of prayer. The intense prayer. The emotion. The great sweat like great drops of blood falling to the ground.

[11 : 15] And as he wrestles, and as he longs for reassurance. And the angel comes from heaven. That's the first power.

The power of prayer. The second power emerges in verses 47 to 51. The power of the establishment. Which seems to be in control at this moment.

Notice how the prayer is over. In verse 46, he still urges the disciples to pray. Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

That's the point. It's a very different kind of power. The military, the state establishment. Now I want you to see just... And Luke emphasizes the awfulness of this.

The man called Judas. One of the twelve. You can sense the shuddering horror in Luke's words. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him.

[12 : 15] One of the twelve. And the text literally reads, while he was still speaking, there came a crowd. And look who it was.

It was Judas. One of the twelve. And Judas' name, of course, has become proverbial with betrayal. Paul is to write, the Lord Jesus, the night on which he was betrayed.

Now I know some people say the word betrayed is a bad translation. It simply means handed over. I've yet to discover how handing over a friend to those who wish to destroy him is different from betrayal.

This is betrayal. Dark and evil. Betrayal with a kiss. Charles Lamb, the writer, the same time as Wordsworth and Walter Scott, was having a conversation with some of his friends way back at the beginning of the 19th century.

And they were discussing which person in history would most like to meet. The obvious people, of course, Shakespeare, Napoleon. Charles Lamb said, I would most of all like to have met Judas Iscariot.

[13 : 23] And everyone was astonished and asked why. He said, I would like to meet the man who could look into the face of the Son of God and afterwards betray him.

Judas, one of the twelve, betrays him with a kiss. And you'll notice, the disciples don't understand. Verse 50, one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear.

I think other Gospels tell us it was Peter who did this. They're overwhelmed by the establishment. They try to fight the establishment with its own weapons. But it is Jesus' submission which controls the scene rather than their violence.

But the establishment has real power. We have the prayer. The prayer with its agony, with its sorrow, with its dismay.

Then we have the establishment which is the second power. But you see there is a third power. Look at the last verse we read. Verse 53, When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay your hands on me but this is your hour.

[14 : 34] And the power of darkness. You see this relativizes the establishment. The establishment who always think they're in control.

The establishment who always behave as if they were running events and manipulating what's happening as a power behind them. And this is the real enemy.

The power of darkness. The devil himself. This is the climax of the story announced way back in Genesis. The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

The serpent crusher has come. And darkness is opposing him. Now evil has its moment of course. Long back in Luke in chapter 1 verse 79.

The child who is to be born is to shine on those living in darkness. From the point of view of the establishment he himself has ended in darkness.

[15 : 35] Particularly the three hours of darkness. And yet the cross will achieve exactly the opposite of what Satan had intended.

Evil has its moment. And just as evil wanted to destroy Jesus. Evil wants to destroy Jesus' followers. Well you don't have the Bibles in front of you.

But back in verse 31 of the chapter we read from Jesus says, Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you as wheat.

But I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail. You see, coming back to these three powers. The power of prayer.

The power of the establishment. And the power of darkness. The establishment and darkness alike are relativized because prayer puts us in touch with heaven itself.

[16 : 35] And that prayer is mobilizing heaven. And the story is going to end very, very differently from what we might imagine. If we were reading this for the first time, it's a good thing sometimes to try and read scripture as if you had never read it before.

Because so often these stories become like a shiny coin which has lost its definition. Read these stories. One suggestion I often make to the Cornhill guys is if the Bible reading has gone stale on you, read Peterson's message, E.H. Peterson's message which will show you in a new way some of the truths of scripture.

So, this story, three powers. Power of prayer. Power of the establishment. The power of darkness. At Easter, these powers come together.

And at Easter, these powers, these powers are deciding who actually reigns. Who, as Pilate is going to say later, who will I release to you?

The rabbits or Jesus who is called the Christ. This story is forcing us to answer the question which was raised in the earlier part of Luke, whether we are able to stand before the Son of Man and stand before Him forgiven and cleansed.

[18 : 00] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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