

Facing death - why was Jesus so afraid?

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Well, it's very good to be with you again, however unexpectedly it may be, and I thank Willie very much for his welcome. Now let's pray together before we look at this passage.

God our Father, as we approach this great passage in your word, we realise that these are depths which we have no lines to plumb. And so we ask for your gracious Holy Spirit, we ask that he will take my human words, use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Amen. And if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 882, that would be a help.

I want you to come with me to the centre of Oxford. The date is the 16th of October, 1555, and two English bishops, Ridley and Latimer, are standing side by side there, waiting to be burned at the stake for their faithfulness to the gospel. The plaque where they suffered is still there in Oxford, near the Randolph Hotel, so often featured in the Inspector Morse programmes, probably many of you will have seen it. And there, too, Archbishop Cranmer was to suffer for his faith. And on that occasion, just before the flames were lit, Latimer said this, 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. And that indeed has proved to be true. These words have resounded down the centuries, that courage has inspired millions.

And that's just one of the many stories of martyrs who have faced death, faced martyrdom, sometimes in awful circumstances, because of their faith. And here is a problem, isn't there?

[2 : 24] Most of us are not the stuff of which martyrs are made. Most of us feel very timid often. Agnes talked about this to the young people. We feel like running away. We feel afraid.

We don't want to speak out. We don't want to be noticed. And that's why I want us to turn to this passage in particular. Because here we find something very strange, very powerful, which speaks right into our situation. Why is it that Ridley and Latimer, Cranmer and so many others face death bravely and fearlessly? And yet, our Lord Jesus Christ, facing those same circumstances, seems to shrink away, seems to be afraid. What is this saying to us? This is a powerful and very, very penetrating passage. And we need the Lord's help as we look at it.

It's a story with many cross currents. There are many places on the surface of the planet where several seas meet together. And navigation, sailing is very dangerous in these places. This passage reminds me of such a place. Underneath this passage are swirling cross currents. It's a simple story in many ways. And yet, the powerful currents that are flowing give us the key to what it's about. The other thing I want to say by introduction is that each of the Gospel writers have their own way of looking at Gethsemane and Calvary. They all build up together to a wholly consistent account. We learn about how our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.

And yet, each of them tell it in their own way. Rather like, if you like, four different shots of the same event from four different camera angles. It's very interesting when you compare particularly Mark and Luke. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is totally isolated. No one speaks for him. No one stands by him. In Luke, there is more support. For example, as we'll see in a moment, an angel appears in Gethsemane. And above all, there's that astonishing and heartwarming account of the thief beside him, who acknowledged him as Lord and was welcomed into his kingdom. So what is Luke saying to us here?

I think to get the key to what Luke is saying, we have to glance back a chapter to chapter 21. In chapter 21, Luke has shown Jesus standing on the Mount of Olives and prophesying his coming and the end of the age. Prophesying, first of all, the fall of Jerusalem that was to take place 40 years later. But beyond that, the event which is still to happen, his coming and the final judgment.

[5 : 18] The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. The verse 36 of chapter 21, which I think looks forward to this episode we're looking at, he says this, Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.

Basically, Jesus is saying, one day, all of this is going to be reversed. One day, I am going to be the judge. One day, you're going to have to stand before me.

And in order to do that, we have to watch. We have to stay awake. And we have to pray. And you can see how that fits in so well with this story, where the disciples simply fail to stay awake and fail to pray.

So let's look at the story then. And I want to use this picture I had of the three powerful currents that are flowing under the story. First of all, we have the power of prayer.

And that's what I'm going to spend most of the time on. That's verse 39 to 46. Jesus prays and Jesus wrestles and battles in prayer.

[6 : 35] Then we have the power of the establishment, if you like. Verses 47 to 51. Power of prayer, the power of the establishment. And finally, in the last two verses, 52 to 53, we have the power of darkness.

So let's look then at how these come together and what they have to say to us. First of all, the power of prayer. Luke has a great deal to say about prayer. In chapters 1 and 2, we have the great prayers of Mary, of Zechariah, and so on.

The great songs of praise, where Mary speaks of the coming of the Saviour. And it's important to notice two things here. First of all, that Jesus is in charge.

The Son of Man is in charge. The Son of Man is already the judge, if you like. But secondly, and Agnes mentioned this already as well, Jesus still prays.

He's in charge, but he needs to pray. If he needed to pray, how much more do we need to pray? And another interesting point is, verse 39, Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives.

[7 : 48] Matthew and Mark call this place Gethsemane. John simply calls it a garden. But Luke calls it the Mount of Olives.

I think he's doing that for two reasons. First of all, he's linking back to chapter 21, reminding us of that discourse of Jesus. Keep awake, pray at all times, and you'll be able to stand before the Son of Man.

And he's pointing forward to the event that's going to take place some six weeks later, accorded by Luke, both at the end of the Gospel and in Acts chapter 1, where the Son of Man will ascend to heaven, from which one day he will return.

So as Jesus prays, he prays on the Mount of Olives, the place where he had announced his coming triumph, and the place which will see his ascension and his return.

I want you to notice one or two things about this prayer. First of all, this prayer is a blend of ordinary prayer, if you like, and extraordinary prayer. Verse 39 again, as was his custom.

[8 : 58] Jesus didn't say, oh, by the way, there's something terrible about to happen, I need to pray. He prays in any case. And it reminds me of that great incident in Daniel chapter 6, where Daniel prays, not because he's going to be thrown into the den of lions, but because he prays always with his windows open to Jerusalem.

So the ordinary prayer, it now becomes the mainstay in a time of crisis. Back in chapter 18, Jesus had told the parable of the unjust judge.

And this parable is told so that people will always pray and not give up. And give up what, you might ask? I don't think Jesus just means give up praying.

I think when Jesus says pray and not give up, what he means is that if we give up praying, we're virtually giving up Christian living altogether. Because prayer and Christian living are so integrally bound with each other, that we're not praying, we're not living the Christian life.

So it's an ordinary prayer. He goes there to pray beneath the trees as we sang, as he had done so often before, but that ordinary prayer becomes a prayer facing crisis.

[10 : 17] Another thing to notice here is the blend of two other things. Loneliness, first of all, and support. A number of yards away from the disciples, he prays.

And some Matthew gives us more detail about this. But Luke adds a detail, which is not in the other Gospels. He is lonely. He wants his friend's support.

They're not supporting him. They've fallen asleep. But another figure enters the scene. In verse, look at verse 43. There appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.

You see, this angel is reminding us that prayer touches the unseen world. After all, back at the beginning of the Gospel, it was Gabriel himself who had come with a message to Mary that the Saviour was to be born.

And once again, in the book of Daniel, an angel appears so often as part of the answer to prayer. When we pray, we are touching the unseen world.

[11 : 26] We are wrestling not, as Paul says, against flesh and blood. But as we wrestle against the principalities and powers, by prayer, we are touching heaven. So while there is human loneliness, there is heavenly support.

But then let's look at the nature of the prayer. It's a very, very unusual prayer indeed. Father, if you are willing, remove this, verse 42, remove this cup from me.

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours. How do we reconcile Jesus' commitment to the will of God and his request for removal of the cup?

Why is he not showing the courage of Ridley and Latimer? Why is he not facing this fearlessly and defiantly? Why is he praying in agony and in anguish to his father to remove the cup?

We've got to remember, first of all, he is acknowledging the sovereignty of God. He is acknowledging, even at this moment, that everything is under God's control. Everything is in the father's hand.

[12 : 31] Father, he says, and he trusts his father even at this moment. And also the phrase, the Son of Man, is so important. What is Jesus doing here?

He's not simply there on his, in his, for his own sake. He is there for our sake. When you prayed beneath the trees, it was for me, O Lord.

That's what we sang a minute or two ago. He is there as the Son of Man. Not just the Son of Man who will come in the clouds of heaven, but as the last Adam, the representative of the human race.

The one who triumphs where Adam fell. Adam was tempted, Adam fell, Adam succumbed, and we fell with him. But now, the last Adam is going to regain the ground that the first Adam lost.

O wisest love, says Newman, that flesh and blood which did in Adam fail, should strive afresh against the full, should strive and should prevail.

[13 : 35] And he's facing, our Lord Jesus Christ is facing, what it is like to be in a universe from which all trace of God seems to have vanished.

He knew the will of God. He knew he was integral to that will. And yet, at Gethsemane and Calvary, he forgoes that knowledge.

You see what this means? He entered our invulnerable and uncertain world. He became truly like us.

We do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities. Listen to how C.S. Lewis puts it. On that dreadful night, Lewis writes, Our Lord chose to face death and judgment, and to face it like one of the most frightened of his followers and not as the heroes of his army.

I think that is wonderful. Do we fear martyrdom? Do we fear standing up for Christ? Even that experience, the great high priest understands, he knows, because he entered it in Gethsemane without ceasing to be God, without ceasing to be who he was.

[14 : 59] Yet, in marvelous grace, he entered your experience and mine. After all, suppose our Lord Jesus Christ had chosen to become incarnate as the kind of person who never knew fear, who never knew trembling, who never knew timidity.

For most of us, he might as well not have become human at all. He is truly, he truly entered our experiences. And that's the great thrust, as I say, of the letter to the Hebrews.

We have a great high priest who has gone into heaven. And the prayer is intense. He prayed more earnestly, verse 44, he prayed more earnestly and he sweated, became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.

We're not told what the angel from heaven said. I wonder, once again, Lewis comments on this, I wonder if Lewis is right when he says, perhaps the comfort was the true old sense of comfort, giving him strength, saying that this had to be faced and therefore it could be faced.

When you prayed beneath the trees, it was for me, O Lord. The power of prayer touching the unseen world. The power of prayer facing the darkness and the hosts of hell.

[16 : 14] That as we, as that current swirls around and enters into it another count, verses 47 to 51. And we have the power of the establishment.

The prayer is over, but Jesus still urges the disciples to pray, verse 46, why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

But now a very different type of power emerges, verse 47, while he was still speaking, there came a crowd and the man called Judas. Here the military power, the power of the state.

And the first thing we notice here, of course, is the awfulness of betrayal. And Luke underlines this, the man called Judas. He can scarcely keep the horror and shuddering and distaste out of his voice.

There is a word in the text which our English version doesn't have. The word which in the old version is translated, behold. I think it's a great pity that in our modern English we don't have a word that catches the nuance of this word, behold.

[17 : 23] Something like, look who it was. It was Judas. And notice, one of the twelve. And then the kiss, verse 48. Jesus, Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?

A horror, shuddering horror of this. Judas. And that's why, of course, Paul reminds us that when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we celebrate the Lord's death till he come.

This is the night he was betrayed. Now, I know some people want to water down the word betrayed and say it simply means the night he was handed over. I've yet to discover an explanation of how handing over your friend to those who wish to destroy him is different from betrayal.

And of course, that's one of the many attempts to rehabilitate Judas. There has been around for centuries the so-called Gospel of Judas. You can find the latest version down the road at Borders described as an updated version of the Gospel of Judas addressed to contemporary contemporary minds which whitewashes Judas.

And you might be interested to discover that the author of this is one Jeffrey Archer. Well, if you want to believe what Jeffrey Archer says, you may want to do so.

[18 : 41] And we also have notes that tell us that no reputable scholar now believes in the miracles. I don't notice any reference having consulted Don Carson, for example, on these matters.

But this is the problem. Judas is, they try to rehabilitate Judas, but by rehabilitating Judas, they are denigrating the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what is happening so often.

I sometimes think the devil chooses Easter so often to launch these kind of things. I think it was a few Easter's ago when the story's been revived, bones were discovered in a tomb in Jerusalem with the names Jesus and Mary on them, tombs of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and their son and so on.

Now that's the kind of thing that happens. These stories, these stories which are hyped up, not forgetting, of course, that Jesus and Mary are so common in the first century that it's almost certainly graves of ordinary people.

And once again, this evening we shall be looking at the great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul already is engaging these kind of things. So we have betrayal.

[19 : 53] The very heart of this story is betrayal and the very heart of it is a warning to us not to betray, a warning to us to pray that we do not enter into temptation.

Then we have violence and the disciples do not understand what's happening. They're intimidated by the establishment. They try to fight it with its own weapons.

One of them, we learn elsewhere, this was Peter, struck the servant of the high priest, verse 50, and cut off his right ear and Jesus, in the midst of this awful moment, is still showing his healing power.

the establishment has real power. The establishment is terrifying. But, violence, betrayal, contain the seeds of their own destruction.

And this brings us to the third element in the story. The power of prayer, the power of the establishment, but finally, the power of darkness. Verse 53, this is your hour and the power of darkness.

[20 : 57] You see what's happening here? The establishment is relativized. It doesn't really matter. The real enemies now face each other. The power of Christ and the power of darkness.

The battle of Christ and the devil. We're coming to the climax of that great story that begins back in Genesis 3, verse 15, when the Lord God says, the descendant of the woman will crush the serpent.

And so often, throughout that long story, it seemed as if the serpent crusher had arrived. Noah, David, Moses, so many of them. It all seemed, but now he has arrived.

Now, the young prince of glory faces the serpent dragon of Genesis 3, verse 15. And there are two things to notice here.

First of all, that evil has its moment. This is your hour and the power of darkness. The hour had, but behind that, of course, overarching that, is that the hour has come.

[22 : 01] John, John in his gospel particularly emphasized this. The hour had come for Jesus to give his life, but it's also the hour of the power of darkness. Once again, fits in with Luke's themes.

Back in chapter 1, Jesus is announced as coming to shine on those who are living in darkness. And here is darkness and it's going to culminate in the next chapter, in the three hours of darkness.

But darkness, the darkness, of course, overreaches itself and very far from the cross being the triumph of darkness, the cross becomes the triumph of light.

We sang a moment or two ago, didn't we? When it seemed like your defeat, it was for me, O Lord. At the moment, the power of darkness is in control.

As we look around the world, it so often seems that that is true now, doesn't it? We sing and we say by faith that Christ reigns, that the Lord is King, but that is a statement of faith.

[23 : 04] It's not self-evident as we read the newspapers and watch the television and look around or even look into our own hearts. Evil has its moment. This is your hour and the power of darkness.

But the second thing to notice is that evil is out to destroy us. Back in verse 31 of this chapter, Jesus says, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat.

But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. You see, once again, Jesus is saying, darkness is out to get you. The devil will trip you up.

The devil will dominate you. What weapon do we have to face him? Jesus says, I have prayed for you. And that, of course, is even more true now that he has ascended to heaven.

The great high priest who continually intercedes for us, continually protects us against the powers of darkness. However busy the devil may be, the shepherd is faithful.

[24 : 12] Power of prayer, power of the establishment, and the power of darkness. It leaves us with two questions, doesn't it? Coming back to the point we began, are we able to stand before the Son of Man?

Because one day we will, every one of us will one day stand before the Lord Jesus Christ who will judge the living and the dead, who will come again as the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven in power and great glory.

And all judgment, all authority has been given to him. That's the question we need to ask. Will we be able to stand before the Son of Man? And the second question we need to ask ourselves is this.

Are we prepared to stand with him now? Are we prepared to pray the prayer we prayed earlier on? To ask, asking the Lord Jesus to give us courage to stand for him in this increasingly difficult world?

Because if we stand with him now, we will know his protection, we will know his power, and when he returns again, we will be able to stand before him.

[25 : 24] As Jesus himself said earlier, whoever is ashamed of me before men, I will be ashamed of him when I return in the power of my Father. It's a powerful story.

It tells us that we do not need to be even of the calibre of Ridley and Latimer and Cranmer and others. What it does tell us is that we have a great high priest.

If we are faithful to him, he will enable us to stand. So let's pray.