

Proclaimed on Wednesday 3 March 2021 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Forsaking Christ

At the Last Supper, Jesus had foreshadowed that one of the twelve would betray him. Mark tells us that one after another the twelve said “Is it I?” It’s a humble response, and really the only response that any of us could truthfully give. How do any of us really know how we would react under persecution. “Will it be me?”

But as we heard in tonight’s Gospel, following the Last Supper their humility leaves them. When Christ says to the eleven or twelve that they will all become deserters, Peter takes the lead by saying that even if all the others become deserters, he will not. Even if it means giving his life, he will not deny Christ. And Mark tells us that “all of them said the same”.

Yet Jesus is correct. Fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy, Jesus the shepherd will be struck, and his sheep scattered. Christ is betrayed, denied, and abandoned, yet never betrays us, denies us, nor abandons us. Not just at the cross, but here in the garden of Gethsemane.

Olive Press

So after the Supper, Christ walks to the Mount of Olives and finds a particular place within the Mount called Gethsemane. Gethsemane means “wine press of oil”, and was a place within the olive groves on the Mount of Olives that had an olive press.

In the last week of his life, Jesus seems to spend most of his time either at the Temple or in the Mount of Olives. Two mountains next to each other. In the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus had taught in the Temple but then foretold its destruction. After saying this, he retreats to the Mount of Olives, “opposite the Temple”, as if it was something of an alternative sanctuary.

In a vision, Ezekiel had seen God’s glory cloud actually depart from the Holy of Holies in the Temple, move across the Temple court, out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley

toward Babylon. Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God's glory, follows the same path of withdrawal.

Just as the temple furnishings were all anointed with oil to be made holy, even as the doors of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple were made of "oil wood", and also the cherubim that flanked the Ark of the covenant (1 Kings 6:23,31-33), so now Christ, who is the true Temple, takes his place among olive trees and olive oil. Christ, the very word itself means the 'Anointed one', that is, anointed with oil.

And it's in this olive press that Christ does his priestly work. In the previous chapter he came to the Mount of Olives to proclaim God's authority with respect to the end times, telling his disciples: "Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:33). But now as he visits the Mount of Olives again, and Gethsemane in particular, he does other priestly work in this alternative sanctuary, interceding to the Father.

Christ's Prayers

And just like last time, he tells his disciples to stay awake. More specifically, he tells three of his disciples whom he'd separated from the others, Peter, James and John.

These were the same three disciples that Jesus took with him specifically on a high mountain on which he was transfigured, on which the glory and divinity of Christ was on display. But now Jesus takes the same three up a different mountain, on which Christ is distressed and agitated, on which his full humanity is on display. On the Mount of Transfiguration Mark tells us that "Peter did not know what to say, for they were terrified" (Mark 9:6). Now on the Mount of Olives he tells us that the three of them "did not know what to say to him" (Mark 14:40). Nevertheless, instead of apparent glory, there is apparent anguish, even while God's glory was being manifest in Christ's suffering. Instead of the voice of the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration, there is silence. Instead of the uncreated light shining forth from Christ, the night is dark, and it seems as if the powers of darkness are in charge.

Jesus's prayer, as his face is planted on the ground, addressed God as "Abba", the first time anyone in recorded history has addressed God in such an intimate way, a detail not in any of the other Gospels. Christ prays to the Father that the cup be removed from him, yet, Christ adds, "not what I want, but what you want." Isaiah had prophesied of this cup, and the Psalmist had sung of this cup in Psalm 75. Not just a cup of a painful

death, but a cup of divine wrath against sin and sinners. The cup that Jesus was being given was not just the cup of martyrs, but a cup for you. Drinking your sin, he took on your punishment, so that you no longer come under the judgment but are redeemed, and removed from the cup of wrath. The only way to remove the cup is for Jesus to drink it.

Jesus returns to find the three disciples asleep. In Mark 4 it was Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat, while the disciples around him were agitated. Now the roles are reversed. The disciples had just professed that they would die for Christ, and in some sad irony, here they are asleep, a kind of mini-death, a sleep not of bravery but of cowardice. Jesus tells them to keep awake, before return to pray a second time, "saying the same words," Mark tells us, and then a third time about which we hear nothing. Only that at the conclusion Jesus doesn't just wait for Judas, but actively seeks out Judas and his mission of the cross, saying to the sleepy disciples "Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

St Paul once prayed three times for something too, for God to take away his thorn in the flesh. Then Paul was given the response: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The response Paul received was a reflection of the more primary response the Father gives the Son. That God's grace for you, God's power over sin, over death and the devil for you, is made perfect in the weakness of Christ.

Conclusion

Christ went to Gethsemane, so that the oil could be pressed from him, so that it can be poured out for many, anointing us, lighting our lamps with an oil that can never go out. For Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One. But our heads can only be anointed with oil, our cups can only overflow with God's mercy and grace, if the oil is first pressed out of Christ, if he is trampled underfoot, and if blood and water flow from his pierced side. While we too pray to the Father in anguish, Gethsemane can never be repeated. For now everything is different. The oil has been pressed, the Son has suffered for you, has atoned for your sin, and so has become the source of eternal salvation, a celebration enlivened by the oil of gladness.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.