

Mark sermon series: week 6

12/07/15

18:30 Evensong

Mark 14:10-25, Mark 14:32-50

At the end of a choir term, I am reminded of my days in the church choir as a young boy. My avoidance strategy during the Vicar's sermon was a comic. Today it might be a phone or iPad. The greatest insult perhaps to the vicar was the faint sound of snoring!

We come to the 6th week of our sermon series on Mark. The pace has now dropped, and events are explained in detail. We focus on betrayal, and the needs to stay together in the chaos of the times. Jesus now asks his disciples that they stay awake.

One church has a huge round window over the choir with a picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Wearing a robe of incandescent white, he is splayed out upon a rock, with his bare feet touching the ground and his hands clasped tightly in front of him. James Weldon Johnson, in a poem entitled 'The Crucifixion' uses these words to describe this scene of Jesus' praying in Gethsemane: "my sorrowing Jesus, the sweat like great drops of blood upon his brow". I recall walking down to the front of the church one Sunday morning to get a closer look. Indeed, the artist had included sweat and tears falling from the well-lit face of a beatific Jesus. Even a six year old could get the message: here is a man filled with sadness. What has happened to make him sad, and why is he facing upward toward heaven?

Following their last meal together, Jesus and his disciples walk out of the city walls to the Mount of Olives and a garden that is probably simply an olive press. Here, in the evening hours, they will enact a drama of intense sorrow and, for Jesus, agonising loneliness. True to form, the disciples fall asleep and cannot watch and pray even on this last night. It seems that they have a talent for drifting off at the most demanding moments. Mark underscores it three times. Jesus ask them, 'Watch and pray with me,' only to head off into the heart of darkness alone. The inner circle of Jesus cannot sustain him through this distress of his prayer in the garden. Mark's Jesus is not approaching this last night of his life with detachment or resignation. He is shaken to the core, terrified by his inner struggle and the night demons at play: Peter, James, and John cannot keep their eyes open, not even for this last act in the drama of their life with Jesus. Mark underscores the miserable followership of those who would be leaders into the new day. The flesh is scared and weak, even if the spirit could declare a willingness to wake up and move ahead. All, it would seem, is darkness; even those who could see light cannot lift the heaviness of their eyes to see.

How many times have we fallen asleep in the midst of a crisis, either in our own lives or in the community or the world? Its all too easy to sleepwalk through a child growing up, or a partner's illness. Governments have sadly not always reacted to wars or natural disasters as quickly as they should. The agonies of the world, whether personal or political, demand our spirit's watchfulness and a lifetime of physical presence; but too often we cannot bear the freight of the pain of the world. Recently, after a death in the family, a friend wrote to me "Grief is exhausting?"

Too often, we are just not up to it. Peter, James, and John stand in for us as we make our often feeble attempts to minister in the tragic gap of a broken world. When Jesus prays that the cup of suffering be removed from him, he also has the presence of mind and spirit to turn himself over to the will of God. It is a total surrender and who among us wants that kind of suffering? We would rather fall asleep and face the criticism that we are lazy or just plain too exhausted to take on that kind of a life.

As the old song reminds us, though, "what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear". When Jesus prays into the depths of the vast darkness of that awful night, somehow he is renewed and given strength for the journey to the cross. Jesus faces up to his death through the privilege of prayer uttered into the void of holy terror. This is not a Sunday school utterance, but a soul-shaking, earth-moving, direct request for the power of Abba God to be present in life and in death. The difference between Jesus and his followers is not that the flesh is weak or the spirit willing; it is that the demons of night and the day to come are directly met through the summons of the Spirit of the living God. "Sit here while I pray," Jesus invites us. Can we comprehend the power of staying awake through the discipline of fervent and frequent prayer that will enable us to face whatever cup of life is given us? There will be times when we will be asked to leave the city of comfort to enter the garden beyond the walls to pray—times of grief, distress, terror, and demand. Can we stay awake all on our own? Will we remain alert, even vigilant, to all that the world asks of us? Will we submit to the strength and courage of the One who waits for us and asks only that we be present and stay awake? Such is the demand and the promise of the Holy One.

As we enter into our own cities and gardens, whatever they may be, let us have the strength to stay awake, even for one hour. For to come is the worst of horrors, and the strangest of events. Mark knows just how the events of our lives can test us - and for them we had better stay awake.