

## **Good Friday 2023 - Three Hours' Devotion Address 1**

### **READING 1**

Matthew 26:26-46

#### **The Institution of the Lord's Supper**

**26** Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." **27** And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; **28** for this is my blood of the[a] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **29** I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

#### **Peter's Denial Foretold**

**30** And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. **31** Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' **32** But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." **33** Peter declared to him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." **34** Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." **35** Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

#### **Jesus Prays in Gethsemane**

**36** Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsem'ane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go yonder and pray." **37** And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zeb'edee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. **38** Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch[b] with me." **39** And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." **40** And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter,

“So, could you not watch[c] with me one hour? **41** Watch[d] and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” **42** Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done.” **43** And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. **44** So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. **45** Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. **46** Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

## ADDRESS 1

In Holy Week, we read the Passion narrative all the way through, not only during the Three Hours’ Devotion on Good Friday, which makes it feel like the whole sequence of events took only a few hours; but we also enact the narrative over the course of the entire Triduum, from Maundy Thursday to to the Easter Vigil, and this stretches the story out into real time.

Part of the strangeness that results when we do this year after year is that, unlike the disciples, we know what is coming. The ornate ceremony of last night’s service ended abruptly, as it always does, with our abandonment of Jesus after we had placed the blessed sacrament in the Garden of Repose. Just as the disciples did, we left him, and scattered, without ceremony. Time stops at that point; if the liturgy has done its work on us, we go back to our homes feeling stricken, because we have left Christ alone, and we only return on Friday, at noon, to take up the story again.

Time is strange in the cosmic story, too: at the Last Supper, the disciples are shown the future for a moment. Offering his beloved friends the cup, Jesus says, “I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

There is a great sense of Christ’s aloneness in this story. This sort of eschatological talk, hinting at the coming of the kingdom and the

heavenly banquet, shows us one way in which Jesus is alone: his disciples have no idea what he's talking about. He is, in a sense, as mentally alone at that meal as he is in the garden. Because what is the difference between a group of friends who are awake but don't understand, and a group of friends who have left you alone by falling asleep? Not very much difference at all.

In Matthew's gospel account, Jesus will very nearly die alone, too, flanked by two unnamed criminals, just as in Mark and John's gospels. It is only in Luke that he has a conversation with the penitent thief, who asks him to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. And time collapses again. "Truly I tell you," says Jesus, "today you will be with me in paradise." He will drink the fruit of the vine with that man, too, when he drinks it new in his father's kingdom.

All time is as one moment to God. But the particularity of God's coming to us in human form for a limited time, during the earthly life of Christ, means that that particular last meal is a moment that we can remember again and again. An extraordinary thing about the incarnation is the way in which God who has made time itself, to whom all moments are as one, can sit down and take his time over a meal, over a conversation, over a prayer in a garden.

He takes his time over people, too. It is these characters in the gospel story who now come to the fore, whose time-boundness and mortality means they cannot possibly understand what is to come. Jesus may be alone spiritually and mentally, but he is also surrounded by people whose personalities, failings, and loyalties give us a difficult, but crucial, look in the mirror at ourselves.

The tragedy at the centre of the gospel story is not the inevitability of Jesus' death, to which he goes willingly and knowingly, despite the moment in which he begs God to take the cup, that potent Old Testament symbol of suffering, away from him. He may recoil from the pain that awaits him, and experience great sorrow not only in his physical loneliness with the disciples, but in the apparent silence from heaven following his prayer. But he knows that his course is fixed by

God, and he neither resists death nor embraces it. The overriding emotion is acceptance in the face of the inevitable drama.

So the tragedy here is not that of Jesus going to his death. It is the weakness and the culpability of the disciples. It is they, in whom we must see ourselves, who emerge as the subjects of that tragedy. Although Jesus is of course at the centre of the story, we are given so many details about his followers and their failings. They are convinced that they will never betray Jesus. They cannot even imagine it. Peter and the disciples are horrified at the idea that they could turn against their Lord in cowardice. But, of course, mere hours later, this is what will happen.

It is touching that they fall asleep. We ourselves might feel rather sympathetic to them, especially this week, when the liturgy demands much of our bodies and our emotions. The disciples think it couldn't possibly happen, but they all drop off, and so at the moment when Jesus looks over his shoulder and sees his accuser, and those who are coming to arrest him, he speaks to those who are unconscious of what is going on in more ways than one.

Jesus is about to triumph over hatred with gentleness and love. He knows exactly what he is doing. He is not tricked into being arrested. He does not stumble unthinking and unaware towards Jerusalem in the days that lead up to his betrayal. It is only we humans who fail to understand what is happening and, therefore, the substance of our own salvation. The strangeness of how time works on Good Friday is that in our re-tellings of this story, we re-learn its meaning. And yet we experience pain and confusion as though the story were new. A good and innocent person, the most good and innocent person, is about to be arrested and tortured.

Today is the one day of the year when the mass must not be celebrated. This is why, in the Mass of the Pre-Sanctified, we consume that which was consecrated last night, and left in the garden of repose. It is a day when Jesus' words about not drinking of the fruit of the vine until he drinks it new with his disciples in his father's kingdom have new weight.

The Easter Vigil will see a new kingdom established, a new reality taking hold.

We are also, in this particular moment, in a particular agony of waiting, because of the way Matthew's gospel uses dramatic structure so well. The three scenes we have witnessed in our first reading were all scenes of relative calm: to misquote a famous rock song, "A little more conversation, a little less action." There has been, so far, an air of peace, albeit shot through with unease at that final meal, and despair in the Garden.

But now we come to the end of this period of watching and waiting. You can feel Jesus turning his body, looking in a different direction. He has been praying, using the same words again, asking for strength and help. And now, suddenly, almost in the middle of saying, "Are you still asleep?" he looks up and sees new characters entering stage left. "Behold," he says, "the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

Time has moved slowly and majestically up to this point. But if there is a moment when the Passion account shifts from an internal world to an external, the physical reality of the Passion, it is now. Judas has arrived: Judas, whose tragedy has been unfolding for some time now, offstage, who embodies the worst of those things that we so fear lurking within ourselves: cowardice and weakness, meanness and smallness, cruelty and the overwhelming desire for self-preservation. His entrance is the moment when the drama turns, and we begin to accelerate. The hour is at hand.