

SERMON – GOOD FRIDAY 3 APRIL 2015

Reading: Matthew 26: 36-46 and Matthew 27:45-50

BACKGROUND

Our reading tonight is an intense moving tale where we hear the voice of Jesus in a way that we all can relate to.

Jesus went with his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane after the meal, which would have been by 10 or 11 pm (which was well into the night in that culture). Gethsemane is derived from two Aramaic words *gaṭ šemen* meaning an ‘an oil press’. It was a garden east of Jerusalem beyond the Kidron valley and near the Mount of Olives. It was a favourite retreat frequented by Christ and his disciples, which became the scene of the agony, Judas’ betrayal and the arrest.

Luke tells us that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives and that his disciples followed him. There in the garden Jesus wandered off to pray. Luke says that Jesus prayed so intensely that an angel supported him. It was so intense that his sweat was like blood falling to the ground. Mark the oldest Gospel and Matthew tell the story a wee bit different. They do not report anything of the angel or the sweat falling like blood but do tell us about the anguish of Jesus.

According to Mark 14:32-42 Jesus was deeply distressed and troubled and said: “My soul is so overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”. Matthew says the same, although he adds words that make his account even more touching. In Mark, Jesus says to Peter, James and John that they “must stay here and keep watch”. In Matthew, Jesus says “stay here and keep watch *with me*”. This is quite significant because it gives us the

full picture: Jesus was really scared and reached out to his closest disciples for comfort and support.

The disciples were to “stand watch” like the porters, slaves in charge of the door, in the parable in Mark 13:34–36. It was customary to stay awake late on the Passover night and to speak of God’s redemption. They should have been able to stay awake to keep watch; they had probably stayed up late on most other Passovers of their lives.

But it seems as if their support was not efficient. They could not stay awake. It was clear that his way of suffering would be a lonely one – so much so that on the cross He felt “godforsaken”.

All the Gospels tell us that Jesus prayed. Mark says that Jesus knelt down and prayed. Matthew once again surprises us with his words when he says that Jesus “fell with his face to the ground and prayed”. With these words Matthew reiterates the intense agony, suffering and anguish of Jesus. Jesus prayed three times. This in itself is very important. The number three confirmed that something really happened, like Jesus who was three days in the grave, meaning that He was really dead. It also confirmed that something was really meant like, after asking something for the third time, the answer after the third time would be final, like Jesus who asked God about the cup of suffering. Between the second and third time while He was praying, He realized that the cup of ultimate sacrifice will not pass him. He will have to suffer like the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

But although his closest friends deserted him, after the third time, Jesus accepted his coming suffering and instead of walking back, deeper into the garden, He confronts his destiny head on. God the Father gave him the strength to tell his

disciples what is going to happen. Yes, He even has the strength to say: “Rise, let us go. Here comes my betrayer!”

In our second reading, again the anguish of Jesus is clear in his final moments of earth. Again Matthew does not disappoint us with his description of Jesus’ final hours. It was dark from the 6th hour to the 9th hour, meaning from noon to 3 pm in the afternoon. At the ninth hour Jesus shouted out the words of Psalm 22:1 “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*” Crucifixions rarely ended so quickly. Darkness was one of the plagues in Egypt and occurs in the prophets as a judgment for the end of time. The Jews and the pagans considered eclipses and other darkenings of the sky as bad omens.

The bystanders thought He was calling out to Elijah because according to folklore, Elijah was thought never to have died. They also believed that Elijah was like an angel ready to rescue the righteous in their moment of need.

Someone then got a sponge, dipped in wine vinegar and offered it to Jesus to drink. This offer of a wine-soaked sponge may have been an act of mercy, because the wine could act as a painkiller. Perhaps the man thinks Jesus is delirious from pain. But sour wine was usually a remedy for thirst, and it may have been an attempt to revive him to maintain his suffering.

And then Jesus cried out a final time and gave up his spirit.....

There can be no illusions as to what Matthew wanted to achieve. He wanted to make the point clear: Jesus suffered until the end. He was in pain and anguish. It is also clear that Jesus obeyed God until the end. And in his hour of need, He called on God for help and support. The voice of Jesus could be heard by all the bystanders as He called out to God – revealing his vulnerability. But by quoting Psalm 22 verse 1 Jesus was

reminding them all of the triumphant ending of the Psalm when the Psalmist proclaimed: “You who fear the Lord, praise Him! All your descendants of Jacob, honour him! Revere him, all your descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one, he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help”

SERMON

Jesus spoke with pain and anguish. His voice cried out to God and God listened to His prayers just like the Psalmist did in Psalm 22. Jesus quoted this Psalm in his final moments to make the bystanders attentive to go and read the whole Psalm. I think those who did, found a lovely surprise. In it the Psalmist also cries out to God in the beginning saying the exact words that Jesus said: Eloi, Eloi, lama Sabachthani! But in the end of his Psalm, he realised that God did not leave him for one second. God was with Him always and ever. God is a God of mercy and love. Something that Jesus also acknowledged. Jesus also obeyed God and did God’s will.

And the same Jesus cries out again tonight and all the other nights of our living existence, “Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani!” for us to go and read Psalm 22 when we feel alone, full of anguish and pain. Jesus is urging us whenever we face death to cry out to God our Father. We do not have to suffer alone. WE DO NOT HAVE to face death alone. God will be there in all our troubles, hurt, trepidations, angst, bewilderment and pain.

Yes – if we listen to the voice of Jesus, we too can pray “My Father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will! We, too, can be assured that God is listening and that He knows the fuller and bigger picture just like He knew Jesus had to bear the brunt of His judgement over

our sins. If Jesus did not take our sins upon Himself, then all of us would have been destined to hell and the kingdom of death. Not one of us stood any chance of being saved on our own.

That is why we are here to remember and listen...to go out and renew all our efforts to take heed of what Jesus said. We are here to say thank you, because all of Jesus' suffering is because of our sins, our rebellion against God.

So let's man (woman) up at this occasion and just acknowledge who we are, let us see ourselves hanging on that cross.... And let's go out and tell the bystanders who are looking from a distance, the words of Jesus, who said: Come to me all of you who are burdened and heavy laden, and who also said: Love your God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself...

And let us listen and obey Jesus, God's only Son who obeyed God until the end. Let us do the same with dignity when we face our final hour on this earth.

Jesus' death brought an end to the way life was before, because when the sun started to shine again – there were no more barriers between God and us. The temple curtain was torn, God was now in the midst of the people – he came close to us, to stay.

We now have the power, and the responsibility, to not only tell the whole world what happened at Easter, but to tell them what it means. To show them what it means. Jesus opened his arms wide to demonstrate to us how big God's love for us is. Let *us* go demonstrate this to the world, this Easter, and evermore.

Let's open *our* arms to the frail, the lonely, the needy. Even to the enemy. Without asking questions, without setting conditions. Let's – as a matter of speaking – *rip* open the

curtain in front of so many people's eyes – so that they can SEE God's love in what we do and in who we are, because if we don't do that, if we just go on with our lives as if nothing has happened, it will be as if we are hammering those nails in Jesus' outstretched hands all over again...

Let's remember everything Jesus did for us today, how He cried out "Eloi Eloi, lama sabachthani", let's go relive it tonight, and let's celebrate the culmination of this event on Sunday, that day, so many years ago, when the biggest tragedy ever to have happened, turned in a triumph.

Amen