

St. Mary's Sermons

Matthew 26:36-46

Maundy Thursday

13/4/17

As you are aware the past six months have been particularly difficult for both Di and me. It all started in October when Di bent down to pick up a memory stick from the study floor and her back went again. She had had problems with it three years ago following an accident in the toilets of the house of Frazer in the meadow hall shopping centre in Sheffield, but it seemed to have settled down and had not caused her too many problems during the past two years.

Then in November my Aunty died suddenly. This was followed by Di's younger brother having a series of three strokes and most recently her dad having a heart attack. Someone was defiantly looking after Ken that day. Had Di's sister not been persuaded to stop and have the car washed when Ken had the heart attack Bev would have already taken her mum out to the shops and there would have been no one in to phone 999 and he would have died long before they returned home again.

All this raises an important question for me, how do we pray at times of great crisis in our lives? Just because I am the vicar does not mean that I've got some special hot line. I'd be the first to admit that it has been hard for me to know how to pray when Di has not known whether to sit, stand, or lie down, in order to get comfortable: when she has found it very difficult to sleep, when the pain killers have not given her any rest bit at all. How do you pray when doctors make promises and then fail to honour them? Perhaps these issues may

seem fairly trivial to some of you who I know have been wrestling with your own problems that are far greater than mine. How do we reconcile the belief that God is unquestionably good when bad things happen to us? It has been said to me on more than one occasion, what have I done wrong, for this awful thing to happen to me? These are important, profound questions that we all need to address, that unless we have wrestled with them, when the fat hits the fan and the crisis, whatever it is, occurs our faith can be shaken.

Over the course of the next four days, we are going to look at how Jesus coped during the most difficult time of his life. We are going to journey with him, starting tonight in the garden of Gethsemane, then tomorrow follow him to the cross and finally on Easter Sunday to the resurrection itself.

Tonight I want to begin by focusing for a few minutes on the most detailed account that we have in the gospels of Jesus at prayer. As Jesus prays in Gethsemane, we are granted one of the most moving insights into the intimacy of his relationship with his father. All three synoptic gospels record that in his bleakest hour, Jesus addresses his prayers to his father.

However Mark's gospel reveals more particularly that Jesus used exactly the same word that a Jewish child would use, the intimate

Aramaic word, Abba the best translation of which is daddy. Here we see one of the rare occasions in which Mark, almost certainly writing his gospel in Greek, chose to use a word in the original language spoken by Jesus in order to drive home a point. He wants us to catch a glimpse of the extra ordinary intimacy and humanity of Christ's interaction with the almighty. This is the only time in the whole bible in which Jesus address Yahweh as Abba and he is doing it at the time of his greatest vulnerability.

Pete Greg who wrote an excellent book on this whole subject called God on mute, based on his own struggles with prayer following his wife's brain tumour: she was only 29 when she was first diagnosed wrote, "When life hurts it becomes even more important than ever to cry out to God like a child, remembering that he is first and foremost Abba, father."

In the first of the Narnia chronicles, the magicians' nephew, which is the prequel to the Lion the witch and the wardrobe, C S Lewis tells the story of a boy named Digory whose mother is dying. When Digory first encounters the great lion Aslan he gathers his courage and asks, May I please - will you give me some magic fruit from this country to make mother well? It's a heart rending request, a prayer of desperation and yet Aslan appears to ignore it completely. He had been desperately hoping that the lion would say yes; he had been horribly afraid that he might say no, but he was taken aback when he

did neither. When God is silent in response to our most desperate prayers, saying neither yes with a miracle, or no with a clear sign that he had heard us it is natural to conclude that God does not care. But a little later Digory dares to ask Aslan for help again.

He thought of his mother and he thought of the great hopes he had and how they were all dying away and a lump came in his throat and tears in his eyes and he blurted out: but please, please won't you – can't you give me something that will cure mother? Up until then he had been looking at the lion's great feet and the huge claws on them, now in despair he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him, as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down, near his own and wonder of wonders, great shining tears stood in the lion's eyes. They were such big bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the lion must really be sorrier about his mother than he was himself. Digory's prayer remained unanswered by everything had changed. Now he knew that the great lion, in whom all his hopes were resting, truly cared. The revelation of God's love- the tears in his eyes- many not solve our intellectual questions about why he leaves a particular prayer unanswered but it does touch an emotional need deep within us. When we are hurting and the pain seems senseless we may find it hard to think clearly or to pray diligently. But we can still trust, resting quietly in the father's love for us.

The second thing to notice from Jesus prayer in the garden of gethsemane is Jesus affirmation that all things are possibly for God.

When Rabbi Harold Kushner's son tragically died at the age of 14 he wrote a book about the profound question that his son's premature death raised, it went onto become a best seller. When bad things happen to good people concludes that the only way to make sense of unmerited suffering without losing one's faith in God is to reduce or expectations of what God is able to do. Christ's prayer in the Garden unequivocally asserts God's power over everything. Why God answers some prayers for miracles and not others remains a complete mystery but we should never downsize God.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus was utterly honest about his fear. He knew that the main reason why he came to the earth in the first place was to die on the cross but he still asked God to take the cup of suffering away from him. This is not the kind of thing that messiah's are supposed to pray. In fact it is a prayer that runs counter to God's revealed purposes. But in this heart rending request we are assured that it is ok to grieve and to cry, to plead with God and to wonder why. It is clear that God wants us to be honest with him no matter how we feel.

In 1842 an Irish man named Joseph Scriven graduated from Trinity College Dublin and promptly fell head over heels in love with a girl from his hometown. They got engaged and with great excitement planned their wedding. On the eve of their wedding Joseph's fiancée saddled a horse to go to see him, tragically it was one of the last things that she would ever do. A little later Joseph saw his bride riding towards him. As she was crossing the bridge her horse suddenly bucked and threw her like a rag doll into the river below.

In blind panic Joseph ran to the river shouting her name but it was too late she was already dead. Heartbroken he emigrated to Canada. Eventually he fell in love again. In 1854 he planned to marry Eliza Roche but she fell ill and progressively grew worse. The wedding was repeatedly postponed until three years later she died. Joseph Scriven never again gave his heart to another. Back home in Ireland his mother was deeply concerned for her heartbroken son, so he penned her a poem which later became a famous hymn. Any suggestions as to what the hymn might be? What a friend we have in Jesus.

The Bible begins with Adam in the garden tragically choosing not to do God's will with disastrous consequences. Now in another garden, another Adam must make a choice that will reverse the one made at the start of human history. But it was a real struggle. Even the son of

God wrestled for a protracted period of time before he reached the necessary place of acceptance, praying your will be done.