

38. Gethsemane

Many Christian songs are inspired by the idea of Jesus in tears in the garden of Gethsemane. This is a scene that allows us to see a little more clearly the magnitude of the sacrifice that the Lord made for each of us. When we see the great courage with which he calmly faced his accusers, with which he accepted blows and insults, with which he allowed himself to be crucified, we may wonder if all this was not easier for him than it would have been for an “ordinary man” like one of us. Was he not so different from us that he would not truly feel his ordeal as we would have? Seeing him in Gethsemane ought to set us straight on this point.

Each of the four Gospel accounts tells us in detail of the events of that night when Jesus was in Gethsemane. Some things are told by all four, but each contains details the others omit. In our lesson today, in order to follow more easily the events and discussions, we will try to weave together the four accounts which are found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22 and John 18.

THE TEXT

Matthew 26:31-35: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: “I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.’ Peter answered and said to Him, ‘Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ Peter said to Him, ‘Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!’ And so said all the disciples.”

Mark 14:32-40: “Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch.’ He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what

You will.’ Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ Again He went away and prayed, and spoke the same words. And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him.”

Matthew 26:47-49: “And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.’ Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, ‘Greetings, Rabbi!’ and kissed Him.”

John 18:4-10: “Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ They answered Him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am He.’ And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Now when He said to them, ‘I am He,’ they drew back and fell to the ground. Then He asked them again, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way,’ that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, ‘Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none.’”

Luke 22:49: “When those around him saw what was going to happen, they said to him, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’” John 18:10: “Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant’s name was Malchus.” Matthew 26:52-54: “But Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’ [Luke 22:51: “And he touched his ear and healed him.”] ‘Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the scriptures be fulfilled that it must happen thus?’”

Mark 14:50-52: “Then they all forsook him and fled. Now a certain young man followed him,

having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked.”

John 18:12,13,15-18: “Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year... And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now, that disciple was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. But Peter stood at the door outside. Then the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to her who kept the door, and brought Peter in. Then the servant girl who kept the door said to Peter, ‘You are not also one of this Man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ Now the servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. And Peter stood with them and warmed himself.”

Matthew 26:69-75: “And a servant girl came to him, saying, ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee.’ But he denied it before them all, saying, ‘I do not know what you are saying.’ And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, ‘This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ But again he denied with an oath, ‘I do not know the Man!’ And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, ‘Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you.’ Then he began to curse and swear, saying, ‘I do not know the Man!’ Immediately a rooster crowed...”

Luke 22:61,62: “And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.’ So Peter went out and wept bitterly.”

JESUS HAD ANOTHER CHOICE

An undeniable fact is that Jesus chose to die. He said in John 10:17,18, “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.” This becomes very clear in his last hours. When Jesus prayed in the garden, he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup

away from Me...” (Mark 14:36). He knew perfectly well that his Father could have prevented his death and he would have done so if Jesus had asked Him to. This is what Jesus said to Peter when Peter drew a sword to defend his Lord. “Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53). Jesus could have resisted. His Father did not force him to give his life. And men could not take away his life against his will.

He chose to die and he helped his enemies to arrest him. John 18:3 says that the crowd who arrived in Gethsemane to arrest Jesus “came there with lanterns, torches and weapons.” Jesus died at the time of the full moon of the Jewish Passover. The night was already illuminated enough. Why then did the crowd need to come with lanterns and torches? This is because the people expected to look for a man hiding among the shadows of the trees. But Jesus did not make it necessary to search for him. He approached the crowd and asked what they were looking for. And when they said “Jesus of Nazareth,” he answered without hesitation, “That’s me.”

Jesus could have avoided death. But he chose to die.

IT WAS NOT AN EASY OR AUTOMATIC CHOICE

Don’t think, however, that this means it was an easy choice. That is just what we see in the agony of Jesus as the time to die on the cross drew near. The Bible tells us that he experienced fear and anxiety. You and I would be afraid of beatings, afraid of the humiliation, afraid of being abandoned by everyone including God, afraid of being nailed to a cross to die writhing in pain, thirst and suffocation. Jesus knew everything that was coming, and he was afraid. In this, he was no different from us. He had really become a man. In this very strong emotion, he prayed intensely and the sweat flowed to the ground like drops of blood.

One could say that the eternal fate of each of us hung in the balance. Would he go all the way? Would he ultimately agree to suffer so horribly for unworthy people like us?

HIS SACRIFICE BECAME MORE DIFFICULT BECAUSE HE WAS ABANDONED AND DENIED BY HIS FRIENDS

In our last study, we saw how Judas, one of the twelve, betrayed Jesus for a small amount of money.

He went to the enemies of his master and promised to deliver Jesus to them so they could put him to death. It would have been easy to become bitter, to turn against the human race which was capable of such acts of disloyalty. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sees again to what point people were capable of deception. First, he asks his three closest friends—Peter, James and John—to watch with him while he prays. He felt the need for their company at that hour. He knew that they also needed prayer for themselves to stand firm. But they disappoint him. They cannot even stay awake for an hour to keep him company. Then he sees them all fleeing at the time of his arrest. They had all said they would die with him, if necessary. But none stayed by his side.

In addition to all that, he knew in advance how he would be denied by Peter. The one who declared most forcefully his undying loyalty was the one who would say more than once and with an oath, “I don’t know this man.” Jesus, bound and standing before the Jewish council to be judged by it, heard the words from the mouth of his friend Peter. How could he give his life for such men?

Yet, in a way, Peter was among the best of men. It’s true that he denied the Lord, a completely reprehensible act that could only hurt Jesus deeply. But let’s remember that all the other disciples, except for John (if John was the one who was known by the chief priest), had abandoned Jesus. Because of his love, Peter had followed him, though from a distance. He was anxious to see what would happen. He had shown enough courage in the garden to fight alone against a large crowd of hundreds of soldiers to protect his master. And it’s because he had this courage that he was among the enemies of the Lord. But he failed. Fear got the better of him; and three times he declared that he did not even know Jesus. And Jesus, who was already being mistreated, heard this each time. If Peter acted in this despicable way, what would we expect from everyone else?

WITH GREAT COURAGE, HE MADE THE NECESSARY CHOICE

No, it wasn’t easy, but Jesus mastered his emotions of fear and anguish. By struggling with his fate in the garden of Gethsemane, he pronounced the key words which gave us salvation. After asking God to spare him the cup of suffering so that he didn’t have to drink it, Jesus said: “Nevertheless, not as I will but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). Whatever the pain,

whatever the humiliation, Jesus would submit to the will of the heavenly Father. He would face with resolution and flawless courage everything that was coming. He would be obedient until death. He would give his life for his sheep. He would open heaven for us.