

## Maundy Thursday 2023 (6<sup>th</sup> April) – Mark 14:12-31 ‘All fall away’

Faith is always easier in a crowd. The sense of being surrounded by others on the same journey, who share our values, who desire to walk the same path, is energising, faith-building – and rightly so. It’s why we have the church – Jesus longs for us to walk his kingdom way together.

And, if you’re anything like me, we can often find it harder when we have to make our own way. I was the only Christian in my group of friends at school, and the only Christian in my team in the office job I used to do. Suddenly, faithfulness in those situations takes more courage, and I can think of times when I demonstrated that courage and, sadly, one or two times when I didn’t. Times when I had the opportunity to defend or present my faith and didn’t take it.

‘Even if all fall away, I will not...’ it’s easier to say than to do, isn’t it? **How like us is Peter!**

The journey of Jesus through Holy Week is, among many things, a journey from crowds to loneliness. The great throng of Palm Sunday becomes the large crowd in the temple; then the smaller gathering at Bethany, moving on to the Last Supper with his disciples; then just Peter, James and John in Gethsemane, until finally Jesus is arrested and is completely alone. Listeners left, followers gone, friends fled.

The narrative becomes more intense, claustrophobic. Today, Jesus prepares to eat the Passover (v13), then at the celebration itself talks of betrayal (v18) and his own shed blood (v24). He finishes the meal with an evening walk where he finally comes clean: ‘you will all fall away.’ (v31)

It is a stark and sobering admission, and, not surprisingly, his friends, buoyed not just by wine and conversation, but an evening reflecting on God’s sovereign activity in history (which is the story of Passover), don’t agree. A tight-knit huddle, they’ve weathered all storms – literal and spiritual – for three years. They’re just not the ‘falling away’ types – especially not gung-ho, have-a-go Peter. ‘Even if all fall away, I will not.’

We all know what happens next, and I’ll reflect on the post-script briefly in a moment. But let’s stay in this moment in the narrative for a while... I’m always struck by **the disconnect between words and deeds**. Between brave declarations, and craven response. Between intention and action. Or as Jesus puts it shortly: ‘The Spirit is willing’ – it usually is – ‘but the flesh is weak.’

Little did the disciples realise at the time, but this interchange between them and Jesus demonstrates exactly why Jesus had to do what he does next. The fact is that we can’t live up to our own hype. Truthfully, some of the time we don’t *want* to do the right thing, anyway: it’s too demanding, too costly, we fear the reproach of others for being a goody-two shoes or a holy Jo/Joe. But most of the time, we do want to do the right thing – and yet, so often we still mess up anyway. Like the disciples over the next few hours, we fall asleep on the job, run away, or pretend we don’t know Jesus when the going gets remotely rough. Their story is our story.

These are hard things to accept about ourselves – but conversely, **only when we do accept them do we find the path to freedom** – the path of death which leads inevitably to resurrection.

As we gaze back at these iconic scenes with 2,000 years' perspective – two millennia of knowledge and experience – it strikes me that **the only honest response is simply this: *there but for the grace of God go I.*** Go any of us. The disciples are just like us: true of heart *and* easily scattered. How many times has the rooster crowed for each of us?

And yet... and yet.... Jesus is still Jesus. Still full of compassion and mercy, still slow to anger and of great goodness. Still able to welcome us back with our blushing, tear-stained cheeks. And in this famous meal he gives us, this simple but glorious act of remembrance, we are able each time to acknowledge our weakness, and praise his strength; to lament our faithlessness, and rejoice in his faithfulness; to receive mercy and forgiveness again. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's saving death until he comes.

Even as they gather to celebrate the Passover, Jesus knows they will all desert him within hours – and yet he gives them this wonderful sign of his love anyway. That is grace – and, above all, it is grace we remember today.

There is a post-script for Peter, too. The story of grace and mercy we find over the Easter weekend, becomes a personal story for Peter, too. Denied three times, Jesus calls him back three times, a few days later on the shore of Galilee. **Each call washes away a memory of failure. Jesus deliberately asks Peter three times not to hurt him, but to heal him.** He is not condemning him for his past failure but reassuring him about a different future. He is giving Peter a living illustration of the all-sufficient grace which covers everything.

This is his body, given for us. This is his blood, shed for us – and for many – for the forgiveness of sins. Yes, we all fall away, but this is not ultimately a story of defeat, but of victory. Not ours, but his. As I close, I can't put it better than the words of this lovely old hymn: 'When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within: upwards I look and see him there, who made an end of all my sin.' Amen.

*Loving Lord, there but for your grace I would have gone so many times. Thank you for your mercy and love. Make my weak knees strong, heal my memories of failure, and stand by my side always. Amen.*