

NOT WITHOUT PASSION

Genesis 22:9-19
Matthew 26:36-46

Praying with Jesus

Maybe they thought this was some knew short cut across the hillside that would get them home to Bethany just a little bit quicker.

It is possible that the disciples didn't know what they were coming to the Garden to do, or see, or be a part of. After all the reason for their journey to Jerusalem from Galilee was accomplished by this point. They came to celebrate the Passover, they came to remember their salvation, to join with all the other Jewish pilgrims in this night that is unlike all other nights. They have done that. The lamb is sacrificed, the prayers offered, the hymns sung, the cup passed and shared. They have kept the Passover together. Their deliverance from slavery, from captivity to sin and death, has been marked, remembered, and appreciated. Tomorrow morning they will gather their meager belongings and get on the road out of town, headed north through Samaria this time, back home, to Galilee, to Capernaum, the Sea, the fish, the familiar surroundings and adoring crowds.

When Jesus turns aside and goes into the garden it is possible that those walking with him gave it very little thought. They didn't know, maybe, that Jesus had brought them there for a reason, that Jesus had come to this garden on this night to face a struggle, an enemy, unlike any they had seen before. Maybe they didn't know that they were there with Jesus to pray. The gospel is certain though, that the disciples have been brought here by Jesus and that Jesus has come to this place for just this reason.

Even more than when he teaches them the Lord's Prayer, Jesus keeps his disciples close in the garden, within earshot, hoping that they will see, hear and understand the richness of a life lived in prayerful obedience to God.

Maybe then it was a good thing that the disciples were not fully informed when they sang a hymn and left the upper room, bound for the prayer garden and not the boarding house. They had prayed a lot that night already. They had recited the ancient prayers of Israel over the lamb and the bitter herbs and the salt water. It had been a long day, a long week, and as subsequent events reveal, they are exhausted. It is not likely that they would have consented to a prayer tutorial at that moment. If Jesus had said, it's time for you learn about prayer, the list of excuses and regrets would have been long and convincing. We can always find reasons not to reflect on prayer, to seek to understand prayer, to observe prayer as it happens.

The disciples already knew about prayer anyway. Like some of us, they knew it as a religious duty; an essential part of worship; a public witness that identified the one praying as belonging to a people who acknowledge God's presence and power in the world. They knew about prayer - they had seen people praying all their lives - they knew that people who prayed consistently and well were respected, listened to; They were given offices of authority in the synagogue and community. They had seen people

pray fervently for sick children, for dry fields, for freedom from exploitation, for their husband's safe return from battle – with mixed results. They knew about prayer – like us they were accustomed to drawing up a list of requests, a cosmic wish-list of sorts – submitting that list to God in prayer and waiting to see how many of those requests would get through and be granted.

They knew about prayer and didn't need another seminar, another lecture series, another expert lesson, another class in technique, another list of reasons why praying everyday would be good for them. They had heard it all before. We have heard it all before.

So instead, Jesus brings them to the Garden, on the night in which he is betrayed, and as his last act with them, he shows them what prayer really is. Jesus has time for just one more lesson, one more opportunity to mold them into people who can carry his witness forward, and he uses that last second to take them with him into prayer. In the garden, he overthrows all of those misperceptions, he rejects those erroneous assumptions and demonstrates authentic prayer before their eyes and ears.

If God is the one to whom, in whom and with whom we pray, as *Christian Prayer for Today* wants to claim, then this is where we all eventually find ourselves. We are all brought to the garden and commanded to stay awake, to keep watch, to pay attention to what Jesus says and does. Not to support Jesus in his prayers, or to comfort him in his trials, or to defend him from his enemies. Not to help Jesus in any way, or to add our prayers to his. Jesus brings the disciples with him, we are with him still, to watch, to witness and learn, what it means to pray – what prayer is and what prayer does. Stay awake Jesus tells us, watch closely what happens. Not so that we will learn how to pray, but learn the character and purpose of a life of prayerful communion with God.

Discovering What Prayer Is and Does

Jesus comes to the garden to pray. His relationship with God is such that this moment in salvation history – this task that he has been given to do and the pain and anguish that it has caused him – requires that he and the Father spend this time together. That's why he comes to the garden. To pray. He keeps the disciples close, he brings them with him, so that they can witness the enactment of this relationship that can only be glimpsed, that is only practiced, in prayer. Jesus has prayed a lot over the course of his ministry, the gospel recounts several times when, according to his custom, Jesus goes off to a lonely place, by himself, to pray. What's different this time is that he brings witnesses. He lets us come along.

What we witness is a prayer that is short, to the point, urgent, filled with grief and longing. What we witness is Jesus crying out to the Father in full confidence that he will be heard, that his prayer will be received, that his concerns will be taken seriously, that God's decision about Jesus' fate is not forever fixed but might yet accommodate the pleas of his beloved son. What we witness is a prayer that confronts God honestly with the full depth of human pain and desperation from no less than Jesus himself; a prayer that does not pretend to be doing OK; that is not stoic in the face of suffering; that is not resolute in its confidence that God will not ask too much of his servants; that is not afraid to express disappointment and regret. We witness a prayer that has an opinion, a

perspective, a position that it needs God to hear and consider.

And what we also witness is Jesus offering himself, completely and entirely, to the will and purpose of God, giving himself over to God's intention to redeem the world, whatever that may mean for him. What we witness is Jesus falling before God in submission to God's sovereign love, accepting that God's governance of the world is good and sufficient and merciful; that whether God finds in his favor or not, withdraws the cup of suffering or requires him to drink it - God's purpose, God's trajectory for history, God's kingdom prevails.

What we witness is prayer, in all its fullness. This is no letter to Santa Claus; it is not punctuated with flattering praise, it does not manipulate or make promises that can never be kept. It is not a letter to an abusive and remote parent listing all the things that he did to mess up the lives of his children. It is not a futile appeal to a God who doesn't care, who is devoid of compassion, who lacks the will or way to intervene in creation and effect change. This is real prayer, to a real God, who has real passion for the pain and suffering of his children.

It is this real god who invites us to bring our real selves to him in prayer. It is this real God who promises not to leave in the hour of our greatest need. It is this God whose covenant claims us for the continuing work of redemption, of making his name known, of proclaiming his glory to the nations. This is the God we need and who needs us.

In prayer we enter into God's presence at his prior invitation; we, ourselves, not some cleaned up, super pious version of ourselves, but the real us. We haul our brokenness and frailty, our history of squandered potential and bad decisions - into God's presence in full confidence that his power to heal, his grace and mercy, his compassion and redemptive love will find something in us that is savable - something that is still useful, something he can restore to sufficient glory for us to participate in the work that he is doing in our world. We crawl to God, knowing that this world is not as it should be, knowing that we are not as we should be, shaking our fists and complaining about the state of this life, and knowing that the only hope we have for being part of the solution, and not part of the problem, is for God to let us be a part of his solution, share in his work of redemption and salvation.

So we come to prayer because we know who we are, who God is, and some of what God is up to now, and we are desperate to participate in that work of God, to offer ourselves to his continuing mission, to be claimed by him for service. We know in prayer that we have encountered the only one who can heal us and equip us, commission us and use us for work that ushers in the reign of Christ. That is what prayer is. That is what we witness in the garden with Jesus.

We also glimpse something of what prayer can do in these moments, in this scene. The Jesus who falls on the ground in verse 39 is very different from the Jesus that rises in verse 45 to face his betrayer. No voice thunders from the heavens; the story gives us no evidence that Jesus' prayer is answered, directly and immediately by the Father. The cup that Jesus would prefer to have pass from him is instead his to drink. Suffering is now at hand. But, having made his position on the suffering clear, and having absolute confidence that his concerns have been received and heard, knowing

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CPC; 10 January 2010

that, like it or not, whatever happens in the next hours will be the means by which God atones for the sins of humankind and ushers in a new age of life in the power of the spirit.

In the power and peace of that confidence Jesus rises from the ground, assembles his unreliable disciple witnesses, and is handed over, freely going where God has sent him. Prayer sets us free in the same way. It takes away our fear that we are, in fact, useless, that our lives are futile and amount to nothing. In prayer we are assured that God has a purpose in the world and that we can participate in that work. In prayer we encounter a God who lives and cares about the world; who needs us on the side of reconciliation and healing and peace; who claims us for this life and work; who sends us where he needs us to be.

That is what prayer is and what prayer does.

May we go from this place of prayer in power and peace to do what God has sent us to do.

Amen.