

# *The Human Touch - and the 'flawed' humans God uses!*

Based on the account of Jesus Final Hours in the Garden of Gethsemane

Matthew 26:36-46

## **Introduction**

It seems like a long time ago that we first noted that Jesus was turning his face towards Jerusalem.

First, Jerusalem was months away, then weeks... then Jesus reached Jerusalem and we began counting down apprehensively to the horrendous ending to his earthly ministry.

Last Sunday when we heard his final block of teaching about a vine and its branches, we were only days away from the end.

Today, in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is only *a few hours* to go before Jesus is dead!

Not the last word, as Christians know well - but an almost indescribably horrible few hours that we are drawn into today, as the darkness deepens, and life and death collide - which all has to happen before we can even begin to see what God's true last word is going to be....

This is without shadow of a doubt, the darkest, most life-defining chapter of Jesus whole life and ministry. These are the hours when he reveals more of himself than ever seen before, and where he takes us right into the heart of the deepest mystery of God's love....

Fittingly, we enter the Garden of Gethsemane when the darkness of nighttime has already closed in, and slowly now, step by step the story unfolds....

There is something jarringly incongruous that the final betrayal and darkest grief should be set in a garden of all places - a place intended for peacefulness and beauty, not distress and conflict.

## **A Bit more Background**

We don't need to dwell on how hard and terrible this last night together for Jesus and his closest disciples/friends must have been. The unthinkable was all too quickly becoming their reality!

They knew, without anyone saying it, how fearful a death penalty was for anyone who took on the power of Rome. It was so terrifying to be crucified that no Roman citizen, however bad their crimes, could ever be crucified - that was a torture reserved only for conquered, non-Roman peoples. So this, by way of understatement, is a very tough night.

Not surprisingly, this night reveals some very telling insights into both Jesus and the disciples.

Today, I want to make just 3 pertinent points for us - drawn firstly from Jesus; then the disciples.

## **POINT #1 Nothing is ever going to stop Jesus, the Son of God, or his Mission**

By now, for Jesus, there is absolutely no turning back!

This is the resolute Jesus at his absolute best - *and bravest!* This is courage of an indescribable kind: Jesus is about to walk, by hard choice, through his own hell on earth.

And we must first and foremost emphasise that these hours in the Garden re-affirm, if there was ever any doubt, that Jesus is going to see his God-given mission on earth, through to the end - no matter what.

Jesus prayed, agonisingly, Matthew told us, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

This is truly the life and death climax to his ministry - at every possible level!

Even 2000 years later, our reason for being in this church this morning, on the other side of the world - is all tied up somehow, mysteriously, in what Jesus goes through in these next few hours - and afterwards! We already know this - but its good to let it really, truly sink in all over again!

That's the first stand-out point today. God is doing something unstoppable through Jesus today!

## **POINT #2 These last hours also re-define Jesus, and His Human Side!**

In simple terms, we get perhaps the best glimpse we ever get of Jesus, the truly human man, in these last incredible and agonising hours.

It is also impossible to understate how important it is to see this genuinely human side to Jesus, alongside the very 'divine' side we see in his grand redemptive mission to the world.

Each Gospel paints a gradually expanding picture of Jesus - and Christians, since very earliest times, have described Jesus as mysteriously being both truly human, and truly divine.

Most people seem to be attracted, first of all, to those pictures of Jesus that show us his divine, Godly side. People delight in referring to the healing stories, for example, that point to a Jesus, who seems to have miraculous abilities and discernments not available to normal people... or the great Teacher Jesus, who seems to have wisdom and understandings beyond normal people.... But if that was all there was to Jesus, he would be an aloof, distant, almost super-human Jesus, that we would probably have trouble relating to - whom we would fear could not really understand us mere mortals, who cannot do those amazing things he did so easily! In short, we are not godly, or 'perfect' like he gets characterised!

But today, we see Jesus in another light - still strong, and godly - but in a very human way, as well.

Jesus reveals feelings and inner struggles that identify him as a real and true human being. He shows very understandable apprehension about horrible things threatening to happen to him. These are not flaws or weaknesses - but they are indisputably human experiences.

Jesus shows a deep, human need for the support and company of friends - even though they let him down in some very disappointing ways.

He asks for prayer for himself; this man who spent his whole ministry primarily giving of himself to others, over and over, now asks for prayer to God the Father, for himself.

He expresses unpleasantly painful, disturbed feelings that scream out in his heart-wrenching cry - "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay with me.. Stay here and keep watch with me". And, of course, the pain is deeper, because his friends fail him at that hour.

He indicates, as we already noted, in a very human way, that he would much rather not "drink this cup" of impending, agonising suffering and humiliation - but courageously, he still submits to the will of God the Father. Clearly he was going through a form of deep inner struggle over what was threatening to happen to him; almost wrestling with God to try and find another way.

Unless we are cold and heartless, we cannot help but feel deeply for Jesus and his disciples in this 'dark night of the soul' in Gethsemane.

We recognise that this is a profoundly dangerous, scary, stressful and traumatic situation that we know would crush most people.

Seeing this side to Jesus is absolutely crucial to forming a balanced view of Jesus. We need this insight from the Garden of Gethsemane in these last hours. Here we are seeing the truly human Jesus, unmistakably at one with us, despite whatever else he may be.

No one can ever explain the profound mystery of how Jesus can be truly divine and truly human - but we need keep sight of both sides to Jesus, if we are serious about knowing him.

So today, we must weep with, and for, the truly human Jesus we see.

And in a strangely ironic way, these hours in Jesus story, become for us one of the most encouraging, re-assuring insights we ever get about him. This is the Jesus we know we can relate to, with confidence that he can and will understand us - especially when our lives and faith are ever seriously tested! We needed to know that!

But there is one more stand-out point from today's story that we also need before we go.

**POINT #3 These last hours also re-define Discipleship - *the flawed people God uses!***

In another ironic twist to this Gethsemane story, we now look at the other key people in this story - not Jesus, but three of his closest friends (some of his dearest disciples), Peter, James and John - and we also see their raw 'humanness' in this landmark story.

At arguably Jesus' hour of greatest ever need, some of his loneliest most tormented moments on earth, when all he wanted was the company of trusted friends to watch and pray with him - they let him down. They neither watched nor prayed - they fell asleep, consumed by their own needs, and not only once but three separate times!

Those echoing words "Their spirits were willing but their flesh was weak" must have come back to haunt them a million times - and we can feel for them too, in their flawed humanness!

I don't know about you, but when I read this story (as I have done numerous times this week), I feel like screaming out, at the top of my lungs - "Bravo! Thank God for this story! There is still hope for me!"

It's not just Peter, James and John failing Jesus with good intentions and bad follow through - it's ME too! And dare I say it - it's EACH of YOU too - ALL OF US - isn't it ?

It could almost be a selfie of us and Jesus that Matthew has captured in this Gethsemane story - except of course, the background is different for us. Different context, different place, different date - but the human protagonists, then and now, are still remarkably the same.

This is a story about well-intentioned friends letting Jesus down. Unfortunately, I think it happens to Jesus all the time.

But guess what? Jesus stuck with these imperfect, flawed friends and disciples back then - he didn't give up on them.

And evidence is that he still sticks with imperfect, flawed friends and disciples TODAY to get his mission done!

This also happens all the time - and it is mind-bogglingly good and encouraging news!

This - for us - is the light at the end of the tunnel.

This is the miracle of the second chance (or the third, fourth, fifth, sixth chance for that matter!) for disciples who don't always do the right thing.

This is God's grace and love at work, day after day, year after year, through Jesus.

This is a master stroke of encouragement - we each need to hear Jesus saying to us "I DO know that your heart is willing, that your intentions are usually good; and I DO know that your flesh is weak and I DO know that you will let me down and sometimes cause me great grief and pain - BUT YOU ARE STILL MY DISCIPLES!

I STILL HAVE BIG PLANS FOR YOU - you don't get off the hook just because you failed a few times!

I guess you call that Good news and Bad news! I call that an opportunity too good to be missed - with Jesus!

<< The Bishop of Notre Dame (Story 96)

Let me re-enforce this last point in closing, with a true story.....

With Notre Dame being in the news earlier this year and some 800 years of history sadly going up in smoke, there is one part of it's history at least that cannot be burned - a story worth the telling.

Notre Dame Cathedral had a particularly popular and effective Bishop in the early 1800's. He took his role very seriously and related very well to everyday people. Most particularly he is remembered in France as a great evangeliser. He went out of his way to reach out to scoffers, cynics, critics and determined unbelievers.

He liked to tell the story of a young man who would stand outside the cathedral and shout derogatory slogans and abuse at the people entering for worship. He would call them fools and all kinds of unrepeatable names - and audibly mock and laugh at them. The people tried to ignore him, but it became increasingly difficult to do that.

One Sunday morning he was particularly foul and obnoxious, so the Parish Priest went outside to confront the young man, it must be said, much to the distress of the parishioners, who feared this might only make matters worse.

The young man arrogantly ranted and raved against everything the Parish Priest said to him. Finally, the Parish Priest, in desperation threw out a daring challenge to the young scoffer.

"Look, let's get this over and done with once and for all," he said to the young man, in front of quite a crowd that had now gathered. "I'm going to dare you to do something and I am willing to bet you can't do it."

Of course, the young scoffer shot back instantly, "I can do anything you propose you white-robed wimp!"

"Fine," said the priest, "All I ask you to do is come into the sanctuary with me. Then I want you to stare at the life-sized figure of Christ high above the altar, and I dare you to scream at the top of your lungs, so everyone can hear you "Christ died on the Cross for me and I don't give a damn!"

So the young man went into the sanctuary as asked, and screamed as loud as he could, looking at the figure, "Christ died on the Cross for me and I don't give a damn!"

With a smirk on his face he made to leave, but the Priest spoke up "Not yet young man, you haven't finished. Do exactly the same again." So again, the young man, not wanting to appear beaten, turned to the figure of Christ and shouted the same words, "Christ died on the Cross for me and I don't give a damn!"

"You're almost done now", said the Priest, "Just one more time!"

This time the young man raised his fist defiantly, kept looking at the statue, but then a strange thing happened. There was a very long silence... this time the words wouldn't come. Then he looked away. He just could not bring himself to look at the face of Christ and say those damning words one more time...

He turned and ran from the cathedral.

The Bishop, after telling that story, would always pause a moment, then looking straight at the congregation, he would finish - "I was that defiant young man. I thought I didn't need God, but that was the day I discovered I did. Despite what I had done, Christ made room for even me!"

Christ has a lot of room for imperfect, flawed disciples, who are still willing to have a go!  
AMEN.