

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Making Preparation

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Sunday 4th November 2012

Mark 14:12-25

Last week we thought about the woman who poured the ointment, whose act was to be told in remembrance of her. Now this week we come on to what is to be done in remembrance of Jesus himself. Not that Mark has remembrance as his focus in these verses: he is thinking more about looking ahead than looking back. Last week we heard Jesus commend the woman for preparing his body beforehand for burial. This week we see him making his own preparations, for betrayal, for suffering, for death. Sometimes when we read the Gospels, we can imagine that things just happened. But I don't believe that for a minute. Some things of course just happened, because the unexpected comes to each of us every day, and it did to Jesus as well. But other things we can see coming and plan for, and Jesus was no different.

The disciples expected Jesus to have made plans. They asked him where he wanted them to go to prepare. They knew that he would have made plans, and he had. He had arranged for some friend, acquaintance or contact to meet his disciples - someone they didn't know. He had arranged with a man who didn't mind doing something a little strange - to be seen carrying a water pot.

Jesus can ask strange things of people, and he can accept strange services when offered. We don't know whose idea the water pot was, but I'd like to think the man himself came up with it. That Jesus said "How will my friends know it's you?" and expected him to give the first century equivalent of saying "I'll wear a red rose in my buttonhole". But his man was a bit of an eccentric and so, instead, he gave the first century equivalent of saying "I'll parade through the street dressed in a blonde wig and wearing a large apron." It's good that to be of service to Jesus we don't need to quench our individuality, or our sense of fun.

So Jesus has made plans with this unnamed man, and the disciples prepare the meal. And then we come on to the familiar narrative of the Last Supper. Mark begins it with a warning - that one of the disciples, one of those closest to Jesus will turn him in. Do you notice the reaction? They all say "Surely not I?" Well, of course Judas already knows that it will be him, he has already begun to do the deed. But the rest? They don't say "Well, whoever it is it won't be me" - although Peter will make that kind of declaration later. Instead they seem to look into their hearts and realise that it is possible, it might be them, that they might betray.

Maybe they think that they might betray him inadvertently, and are reminding themselves that they live in a dangerous world in a dangerous time and in company with what is perceived to be a dangerous man. Maybe they are reminding themselves to be careful about where they go and who they speak to. Or maybe they are seeing, catching a glimpse of things that they have avoided thinking about. Perhaps the door into the part of their mind where doubts are kept is opened a crack, and they realise that although they trust and follow Jesus there are questions which are unanswered, and there are hopes which are as yet unrealised. And so it is possible that their faith and trust could change and fail.

It is never a bad thing to acknowledge your doubts, because we all have them. It may be questions regarding some point of Christian doctrine which you find hard to take on board. It may be questions about why some event should have happened in the life of the world or the life or your

family. It may be the small fear "What if it's not all true?" It is better to know what your doubts and questions are, and then choose to have faith and follow anyway, than to force the questions down and out of sight only to have them grow in the darkness and spring up unexpectedly strong and fierce when we are unprepared to deal with them.

When the disciples said "Surely not I?" they were acknowledging that "I" was a possible answer to the question of "Who?"

And so Jesus comes to the ritual of the bread and wine. I am sure that he had long thought about this. I am sure he didn't just look at the bread and wine lying on the table and think "I could do something with these!" The ritual with the bread and wine was part of what he had been planning and the warning about betrayal was the other part. The two go together. It would be too easy for what was to be a sacramental moment to be cosy, even sentimental. Warnings of betrayal, and later, of denial, are deliberate and make the meal, not so much a cosy family gathering as a time of urgency and self-examination. When we gather round the table (as we will have the chance to do at the end of the service today), when we take the bread and cup, we see Jesus' love for us in the shedding of his blood, the breaking of his body. But we should also hear his warning that we might betray him, might give people a reason not to believe in him, not to trust and follow him. And when we hear that our response, the response of humility, should be in the shocked question of the disciples "Surely not I?"

Mark 14:26-52

Jesus has made all his preparation, so that he will know that everything he has to do is taken care of. He has taught his friends and eaten with them. He has warned them, and he warns them again. He has even made arrangements where to meet them again - though they cannot have understood what was to happen before he would go before them into Galilee. He has even taken particular trouble with that particularly troubling, high maintenance, worthwhile disciple, Peter. In preparing his disciples Jesus has also been preparing himself. He has been clearing his mind of distractions so that he can concentrate on the job in hand, which now is to pray without being distracted.

His prayer is agony - an agony of concentration. And it doesn't go as he had planned. Jesus had planned to have company with him at this time. But his friends do not understand and let him down - the first of the justifications of their "Surely not I?" They sleep, they desert him, they run away - even leaving clothing behind in their unprepared panic. Maybe they couldn't have really helped. Maybe they would have made inane comments had they been with Jesus in his agony of prayer, but still it is the first of his plans to go astray.

When someone is in agony of mind, company can be very helpful. Too often we shy away from those who are facing hard times, those who are dying, or bereaved, those who are badly let down or suffering, because, we say "I wouldn't know what to say or do." And people send in the minister, because she is supposed to have the answers in such situations. All people need is company, the knowledge that they are not alone, that someone else cares enough to be there. To sit quietly, to hold a hand, to make a cup of tea, these are not great skills imparted to ministers in four or five years of study. People in agony do not often ask why - which is what most of us are afraid of, and know we could not answer. Instead they ask how? How am I going to get through this? And knowing that you will not be left alone is a large part of the answer.

Jesus was asking that same how - "How am I going to get through this?" He prayed that the hour might pass from him. He prayed that the cup might be taken from him. He did not see how he was going to get through it, and he did not have the human comfort of human companionship to ease his pain, although he had planned that he might.

Jesus in the end prays that God's will should be done - as indeed it would be, and will be. He has planned for human support, but in the end finds, as so many since him have found, that the prayer of agony, which we would rather avoid, can in the end bring courage and peace. When we bring our worst fears to God with all the emotion that surrounds them, emotion we would rather avoid, rather not feel - the hour which Jesus asked to pass - then our faith is refined to its essentials. When we pass through that sort of fire we come can out, as Jesus did, knowing that still we trust God and that this is all that matters.

And so when the accusers come with the betrayer and his treacherous kiss, Jesus is calm and ready to meet them. But those who did not watch with him are not. Jesus knew this would come, if not now then soon, and so he had made his plans, and despite his friends' frailty, he was ready. But the disciples were caught totally off-guard. One strikes out with violence. All of them desert him and run away. They were not those who would betray him, turn him in to his enemies. "Surely not I?" they had exclaimed and no, it was not them. But yet they were those who would become deserters, even as Jesus had said, and even as they all, led by Peter, but all of them, had denied.

We need not pretend to ourselves that we would have done any better. We need not pretend that we do do any better. Jesus planned, but the disciples did not. In our walk with God how can we plan to be strong, be ready for the unexpected? How can we be sure that the way we live our daily lives is keeping us close to God, ready to face difficulty - our own or others - ready to face suffering - our own or others? Only by being intentional, as Jesus was. Only by bringing our daily plans to God and discussing them in prayer. Only by reading the signs of the times, as we thought about two weeks ago, using our eyes and our ears and our understanding to pray through the lives that are laid out before us in the world in which we are called to live.

When we gather around the table in the sacrament of communion we always remember the body and blood of Jesus. Perhaps also we should remember his warnings to us, so that we can bring our doubts and questions to him, so that they may be bathed in his love and light and not fester in the dark to rise up and overwhelm us when we least expect it.

Jesus made preparation - for his death and for his life. If we are to be his followers, then we too are called to live intentionally, not so that we can be in control of our lives and the happenings which define them: we can't be. But so that no matter what happens, no matter how painful or difficult - or unexpectedly joyful, because good news can also throw us off balance - we are able to face it with confidence in the God in whom we trust.

Amen