

The prayer at the olive press

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Good evening and welcome to our evening service of Calvary Evangelical Church Brighton for Sunday the 23rd of August.

! Although we're not able to meet as we would like to do face to face we are going to gather together and do the things we would normally do on a Sunday evening. We're going to pray, we're going to sing together, although we have to do that in our own homes, and we're going to gather around the Bible and study the Bible together. And we are united in the Spirit even if we are separated bodily.

My name is Steve Ellacott, I'm one of the deacons of the Church and I welcome you to this evening meeting. So let's start our time together by praying. Our Father in Heaven, we come to thank you that you are the Holy One, although men and women do not acknowledge that.

We pray that your will may be done on earth, although people seem determined to reject your rule and your King, saying we will not have Jesus to reign over us.

We pray for our world with those words of Jesus. Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. At this time of pandemic, we pray that the world may take warning of judgment.

[1:26] And yet we pray for governments that seem set on the folly of sin, that they may nevertheless receive mercy and wisdom to lead our nations back to health. We pray also that they may realise the need to seek a cure for that disease that is more deadly than Covid, the disease of wickedness that affects all of mankind.

And now as we come to consider the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane, where for compassion for this world he set his face towards the cross, we pray for the Church worldwide and the Church here in Brighton.

We pray that your people may be granted the courage and wisdom to speak with both compassion and righteousness into a world in pain. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Now, before we turn to our study of God's word, we will sing two hymns.

First of all, we will sing hymn number 260 in the praise book, Our God, Our Help in Ages Past. This follows from what we've just been praying, acknowledging that at times of trouble, a nation should turn to seek the help of their God.

[2:45] And then when we've sung that, we'll turn to another song, which is not in the praise hymn book, My Jesus, My Saviour, which will begin to focus our minds on Jesus as he wrestled in prayer with the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And when we've sung those two songs, we will read our passage of scripture and I will address you on the subject of this passage of scripture.

So let's sing together first of all. Let's sing together first of all.

Let's sing together first of all. Thank you.

Thank you.

[4:32] Thank you. Thank you.

Sufficient is your arm alone, and our defense is sure.

And our defense is sure. Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame.

From everlasting you are gone, to endless years the same.

A thousand pages in your sight are like an evening gone.

[6:04] Short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun.

Before the rising sun. Time like an ever-rolling stream.

Will bear us all away. We fight forgotten as a dream.

Dies with the dawning day. Our God, our hope in ages past.
Our hope for years to come. Be our defense while life shall last.
[7:11] And our eternal home. And our eternal home.

Our eternal home. Our eternal home.
Our eternal home. Our eternal home. My Jesus, my Savior, but there is none like you. All of my
aims, I long to praise the wonders of your mighty love.
My comfort, my shouting, tower of refuge and strength, let every breath, all that I am, never cease
to worship you.
Shout to the Lord, all the earth that I see, power and majesty praise you the King.
[8:43] Mountains bow down and the seas will roll at the sound of the
name.

I sing the joy at the work of your hands. Forever I love you, but never I'll stand.
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you. My Jesus, my Savior, but there is none like you.
All of my days, I want to praise the wonders of your mighty love.
I come to my shelter, tower of refuge and strength, let every breath, all that I am, never cease to
worship you.
[10:07] Shout to the Lord, all the earth that I see. Power and majesty
praise you the King.

Mountains bow down and the seas will roll at the sound of your name.
I sing the joy at the sound of your name. I sing the joy at the work of your hands. Forever I love you,
forever I'll stand.
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you. I sing the joy at the sound of your hands.
So, our passage of scripture this evening is Matthew chapter 26, reading from verses 36 to 46. Let
me read it to you.

[11:19] Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane.
And he said to them, sit here while I go over there and pray. He took
Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be
sorrowful and troubled.

Then he said to them, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and
keep watch with me. Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed.
My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. Then he
returned to his disciples and found them sleeping.
Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? He asked Peter. Watch and pray so that you
will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.
He went away a second time and prayed. My father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken
away unless I drink it, may your will be done.

[12:23] When he came back, he again found them sleeping because their
eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the
third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the
hour has come and the son of man is delivered into the hands of sinners.
Rise up. Let us go. Here comes my betrayer. So then let us turn to study this passage of scripture.
In Christian tradition, Gethsemane is called a garden.
But only John describes the location of Jesus' rest as a garden and the translation is debatable. The
other gospels call it Gethsemane, which means an oil press.
And as it was located at the foot of the Mount of Olives, presumably this is what it was. A place for
crushing olives to squeeze out the oil. There are echoes, perhaps, of Gideon at the time of conflict,
wintering grain in a wine press.

[13:28] And the violence of crushing olives prefigures the crushing which
is to come. So what are we to make of this quite unique and distressing
event?

Nowadays, one must start with a trigger warning. This program contains scenes which some
viewers might find distressing. I don't know about you, but I never know quite what to make of that.
Does anyone decide not to watch the program on the basis of this morning? Do I decide that? I am
somewhat squeamish, so I generally have to look away when they cut up the bodies.

But other than that, I rarely find the violence too distressing. But what does that say about me? Am I inured to violence and callous about it? I must admit I do draw the line at Tarantino, who is a genius for turning violence into comedy.

But otherwise, on these cock flicks, we don't find it that distressing really, because we don't really engage with the emotion.

[14:36] On the other hand, how does the TV channel itself justify broadcasting material that is identified as offensive? In fact, the whole idea of a trigger warning invites you into a moral maze.

Jesus had given the trigger warnings to his disciples. One of you will betray me. Verse 21. This very night you will all fall away on account of me.

For it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. The problem for the disciples was not that they had not heard them, but that they had not understood the moral force of these warnings.

And they really didn't understand the nature of the approaching crisis. Look at verses 33 and verses 40 and 41. Once Judas turned up with the soldiers in verse 47, the apostles would have no problem keeping awake.

But as Jesus commenced the conflict, commenced the battle, they failed to notice that it had already begun. We've had the warnings, we've had the Last Supper, and now it's time to roll the action, for those warnings to work themselves out.

[15:47] This isn't a work of art like Mel Gibson's film of these events, *The Passion of the Christ*, where the violence is carefully orchestrated to produce an effect on the viewer.

Of course, the Gospel writer Matthew does have his own agenda in mind. He wants to show us the kingdom and its king. But for Peter and the others, this is real life in all its messy, unpleasant detail. It's not dramatised. They react as they feel at the moment. What will they make of it? What do they really understand? We start to find out at Gethsemane.

So let's try to make sense of this by asking two questions. Firstly, how were these events perceived by Jesus himself?

And secondly, how were they perceived by the observers, by those present, by Matthew as the historian, and so by extension, by us as his readers?

[16:51] How were these events perceived by Jesus himself? We don't know for sure what hymn was sung at the conclusion of the supper, but it was a common Jewish practice to sing Psalm 118.

And if we read a few verses from this psalm, we'll see how appropriate it is. Psalm 118, starting at verse 5. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off.

They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns. In the name of the Lord I cut them off. I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me.

The Lord is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation. This is a song of a warrior, a hero, one apparently alone, deserted by his allies.

[18:23] Look at verse 9. Before the battle he's in anguish of soul. This is a very appropriate psalm for the struggle that Jesus is about to commence. Anguish of soul was indeed Jesus' state of mind in Gethsemane.

As Matthew tells us in verses 37 and 38. Jesus' reaction seems to involve real fear. But as in Psalm 118 he can say, In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free.

The Lord is with me, I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? As with the psalm, the first and indeed the crucial battle victory is won before any sword is drawn.

The enemy is defeated first of all by prayer. By Jesus' prayer that echoes the prayer he taught his disciples. A prayer that the Father's will may be done. Verse 42 we read, He went away a second time and prayed, My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away from me unless I drink it, may your will be done.

From that point the issue is no longer in doubt, but it is worth expanding this a little to examine the nature of Jesus' anguish. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was always in control of the situation.

[19:47] Whatever his opponents threw at him, he was able to keep his cool, to defeat them in debate and escape their plans. Under the most extraordinary pressures, he had always known how to react.

But now he is about to relinquish this control and let himself be arrested. It would take an hour or two for Judas to rouse the priests and assemble the temple soldiers.

And Jesus knew exactly what was going on. He and his disciples could easily have slipped away in the darkness to the relative safety of Galilee. But that would have been to avoid the battle.

The enemy must be engaged. The serpent must be allowed its strike so that its head can be crushed. It was not fear of arrest that troubled Jesus.

If it were, he could have escaped. Was it then the fear of suffering and death? Perhaps this is part of it. Any sane man wants to avoid suffering.

[20:48] Yet lesser heroes than Jesus have faced suffering and death with resignation and equanimity. Surely Jesus' trust in the Father would see him through this. No, suffering alone cannot account for Jesus' own testimony.

My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. What was causing this sorrow? What is really troubling Jesus here is the serpent's venom, the poison chalice that he must take up and drink.

As Paul would later write, The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. At this time of pandemic, we all fear the virus, don't we?

Yet we are used to diseases. But let us suppose we'd lived our whole life in perfect health. Would we voluntarily allow ourselves to be inflicted, not just with COVID-19, but with every nasty disease in the medical textbooks?

Not for our own benefit, but to help others, and no vaccine allowed. Yet this is exactly what Jesus is about to do. But the disease he is facing is a more deadly one than COVID or cancer.

[22:04] The serpent's venom kills not just the body, but the soul and the spirit also. Jesus is facing a death sentence. But it's not just the judgment of a Jewish priest or a Roman governor, but the judgment of the Father himself, one who has lived his whole life in obedience and fellowship with the Father, would cry out with those fearsome opening words of Psalm 22, My God, why have you forsaken me?

It is not what man can do that causes Jesus anguish, but the very wrath and judgment of God, as all the evils of the world are to be laid on him.

And in his time of anguish, Jesus seeks the support of his friends. Verse 40. One of the tragedies of COVID, isn't it, is that men and women have had to die alone, denied the comfort of friends and family by the necessity to control infection.

Even the nurses and carers are hidden behind their PPE. Yet that was not why Jesus would face the trial alone. He would face the trial alone because his friends were asleep and would later desert him.

What kept them away was not the needs of hygiene. They were already infected with the deadly serpent's venom. The problem for them was something else entirely.

[23:31] And that brings us to our second question. How were the events perceived by the observers?

First of all, by those present. COVID has been called an invisible killer, but actually that's not saying much. Most pathogens are invisible to the naked eye.

That's what makes them so dangerous. Relatively few people are killed by tigers. The danger there is clear and hence we avoid it. More people are killed by hippos or even by cows, creatures that appear placid and harmless.

It's when the danger is not perceived that it is far more deadly. The disciples had no problem staying awake when Judas turned up with the soldiers. The threat there was clear.

But until that time, they just did not appreciate the peril. One cannot but sympathise. They were exhausted by an eventful week.

[24:40] They were trying to get their heads around a lot of very confusing information that Jesus had been giving them. They had just celebrated the Passover, which was a festival that was supposed to be

about escape from persecution.

They were gathered for a late night prayer meeting in a place of apparent safety and tranquility. They simply had no perception of the storm that was about to engulf them.

And so they nodded off. Would we not have done the same? They were doing their best, as Jesus acknowledges. Their spirits were willing, verse 41, but their bodies and their minds needed a rest. And so they went to sleep, while the enemy was already on the march. Indeed, perhaps it's just as well they did. If they had realised the imminent danger, they might have dragged Jesus to safely against his will, as the supporters of Martin Luther once did.

Peter had already said to Jesus that he should not go to the cross. But Jesus has set his face to do the Father's will. So why does Matthew tell us this?

[25:56] What does he want us as his readers to learn and what does he want us to do about it? Here are some lessons for us. First of all, the wrath of God cannot be avoided.

Yes, God is omnipotent. That does not mean he can do anything. He can't deny his own nature. The evil in the hearts of men and women is so offensive to God that he cannot but pass judgment on it.

That judgment had to fall on someone. And if it was not to fall on us, it had to fall on Jesus as our representative.

And yet God is also merciful and loving. How could he have mercy on his helpless creatures? How could he find a way?

And secondly, and following on from the first, we see that the death of the king on the cross was the only hope for mankind.

[27:01] If the father himself cannot propose another option, if Jesus must drink the cup of wrath, then there is no alternative to be found. And yet that would not make the cup any more palatable.

Only Jesus can appreciate the full horror of the serpent's venom. Only Jesus could face it down and crush the head of the serpent. The wrath of God can fall nowhere else, must fall nowhere else, but on the Son of Man, or it would fall on us in utter destruction.

So what about us as the onlookers? The third lesson is that we have ourselves no real conception of our peril.

Even Peter and James and John, Jesus' closest friends, could not grasp it. Their eternal destiny was being fought out in front of them, but they slept through it.

In a sense, perhaps that's just as well. People are frozen with fear over a virus that kills over a few percent of its victims. If we were somehow able to perceive the full horror of the disease of sin, a disease that afflicts us all with 100% morbidity, maybe we would not be able to function at all.

[28:30] And yet we do need to understand it. We do need to come to grips with it. So Matthew is showing us that horror in a way we can both understand and take in. If even Jesus was troubled to the point of death, what a fearful prospect this must be.

This must, the judgment of God, must be a true horrific event. And we need to take heed of this warning. Matthew had earlier repeated the words, reported the words of John the Baptist.

But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them, your brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Even the Pharisees had heard the warning, yet most would not receive it. Jesus drank the cup so that we can avoid it, the cup of God's wrath.

Will we listen to John the Baptist and to Matthew? Will we flee the wrath to come? Will we put our trust in the death of Jesus and in the life of Jesus and in the resurrection of Jesus?

[29:46] And my fourth and final lesson was this. In a way, the victory was won here in Gethsemane, even before the traitor's kiss, before the swords of the guard were drawn, before the Romans drove their nails into the cross.

From Gethsemane on, Jesus held resolutely to his course. Satan had told Eve that she would not die. Traditionally, she believed him and died.

Satan told Jesus that he need not die. Jesus did not believe him, so death was defeated. Hallelujah! The hero has triumphed. The psalmist wrote, I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord

helped me.

The Lord is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation. Psalm 118 is the song of the victorious hero, but it is our song too, if we are his followers.

Let us close our time together by singing the version of this psalm in our praise hymn book. So we sing Psalm 118 together. Give thanks to God, for he is good, the everlasting hero.

[31:21] Let all his people praise the Lord, whose love endures forever.
For his right hand has made me strong, I am his new creation.

He is my God, he is my song, my strength and my salvation. We are those who've got every sight, and they bless you, surrounded.

To God, my Lord, I quickly cried, and soon his help abounded. For God has earned my death, and seen my pain and sadness.

He came to me and set me free in hearts of peace and gladness. We are still not in it alone, the storm that was indicated, has now become the cornerstone that God has resurrected.

One day is his, the first of days, to celebrate with singing. Rejoice in God, and in embrace, the best gods that have sprunged.

[33:08] The Lord has made his light to shine, on all our dark depression.
All east to west, believers join, his victory procession.

O save us, Lord, give us success, your gifts flow like a river. O bless us, Lord, whose name we bless, your love angels forever.

O ■ner of the night. you