

LENT COURSE WEEK THREE

The Agony in the Garden – Mark 14: 32-42

Artist; Giovanni Bellini



Bellini was an Italian Renaissance painter, probably the best known of the Bellini family of painters; his father was Jacopo Bellini, his brother Gentile Bellini and his brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna. Andrea painted a very similar painting of the same title. As with the Gospels themselves, we can be sure that one maker is using the other's work, but we cannot be entirely sure who is following whom. There is a very clear and undoubted connection between the two. It should be said that neither painting can be considered a true depiction of the scene yet each is rich in the truths of the Gospel.

Both paintings, often referred to as “twins” hang in the National Gallery. Among Bellini's other notable works are the San Giobbe Altarpiece and “The Dead Christ Supported by Two Angels.” In the painting we have before us we can see Bellini's masterful combination of landscape, the human form and emotion.

Read Mark 14: 32-42

Here is Jesus praying earnestly; He concentrates totally on communing with His Father to the exclusion of all else. In the distant sky He sees, held up by an angel, the cup of salvation, He prays; “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” We are now at Christ's Rubicon, the crossing that He must still choose to make, although He assented to it by implication at his baptism.

With the same intensity which we, ourselves, should bring to a picture of such a crisis, Christ gazes at his own destiny. Rapt in prayer, the rock against which he kneels acts as a kind of altar or prayer desk.

Jesus had shared the Passover meal with his disciples and had said to them "You will all fall away, for it stands written I will strike the shepherd down and the sheep will be scattered." Peter, true to form, declares boldly "Even if all fall away, I will not!" Jesus says to him "I tell you the truth, today, yes tonight, before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." Peter insists emphatically "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And the others said the same (Mark 14: 27-31)

And here, but a few hours later we see Peter, James and John asleep whilst Jesus prays, agonises over all that is to come. Peter is lying on his back and seems almost comatose, so deeply asleep he is. In fact, if you look carefully he could even be snoring as his mouth is wide open. Contrast this with the serene pose of Jesus which is full of earnest concentration.

The three disciples are totally unaware of the significance of the occasion and certainly oblivious to the approaching soldiers in the background of Bellini's painting. The artist well encapsulates their inability to support Jesus as they loll this way and that.

Bellini depicts Jesus as being so engrossed in prayer that he totally disregards the approaching posse, Judas at the front leading them to the place. The soldiers, heavily armed and certainly more in number than was necessary for the arrest of one unarmed man, provide a foretaste of the brutality and desperation of what lies ahead, the brooding clouds hovering in the sky above them add a further sinister feel.

The menacing approach of the soldiers behind the backs of the sleeping disciples only seems to heighten the tension of the scene. Jesus, of course, was to say at the moment of His arrest "Am I leading a rebellion, that you come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you in the Temple Courts, teaching, and you did not arrest me."

Here is Jesus at his most vulnerable; He is totally alone as the forces of evil approach and yet paradoxically he is also showing his greatest strength; his reliance, total reliance upon his Father.

How often, when we are up against it, do we fret and fluster? We seek ever more frenetic schemes to solve our problems instead of doing the one thing that we know can really help us, the only thing that can guarantee our long-term wellbeing. Praying earnestly.

Jesus prays earnestly "Father, not my will but yours." If we had only one prayer out of the whole anthology of prayers, then surely this one will suffice. "Father, not my will, but yours." This is the message we must take away from Gethsemane; reliance upon God for the whole of our lives.

We can see this demonstrated so well at Gethsemane; it would have been tempting for Jesus to slip away at this point, to evade his approaching arrest, to regroup and think of

another possible way forward. But he knows this is his Father's will. In the words, again, of John Henry Newman:

*And in the garden secretly, and on the cross on high,
Should teach his brethren and inspire, to suffer and to die.*

Had Jesus slipped away at this point what would have been achieved? Where would we be now in our relationship with God? – the work of our salvation incomplete, our sins unforgiven.

Jesus agony and the completion of his atoning work on the cross paved the way for us and for our loving relationship with God. No wonder St Paul was able to write years later "We know that in all things God works for good.....and, I consider the sufferings of the present time to be nothing when compared with the glory that is to be revealed."

As Jesus kneels in prayer He sees a vision of an angel holding the Cup of Salvation. The angel has a supernatural form; quite clearly a message from God, sent to strengthen Him for the trials that lie ahead.

Cast your eye just below the angel and you will see a church tower as part of a 15th century town, current with the artist's period. To the left on top of another hill is a town of the Biblical period. The message is clear – the gospel is not just of the past but for all time and every age.

Towards the bottom of the picture on the right you will see a picket fence, notice the open gap where one length of the fence has been opened. To quote St Paul – "Christ has opened for us a new and living way.

Looking to the left, the rock on which one of the disciples is leaning appears to be splitting. Matthew records that at the moment of Jesus's death "The earth shook and the rocks split" here then is a prefigurement of the momentous events that would follow Christ's death.

A final reflection; Bellini depicts the cup of salvation firmly in Jesus' sight and yet beyond his present turmoil.

We, too, are called to look beyond the present and all that may weigh us down, to look beyond all of that to the assurance of God's perfect Kingdom.