

## Evening Zoom Service

### Third Sunday of Lent

Sunday 3rd March

#### Talk (Jon Morgan)

The overarching theme we have as a Church this Lent, 'Watch and Pray', focusses our attention on the moment in the gospels, between the last supper and his arrest, that Jesus spends some time alone praying, and while he is doing so, his disciples fall asleep. In John, Jesus prays in a garden—John has a fondness for gardens. Luke only tells us that Jesus was on the Mount of Olives. Matthew and Mark put him in a place called 'Gethsemane' though they don't say it is a garden. Traditionally, we blend all three and think of a garden called Gethsemane on or near the Mount of Olives.

The name Gethsemane is derived from a term meaning 'oil press'—where the olives are squeezed; a place of pressure, and metaphorically a place of testing. When Jesus returns to his disciples after his prayers he repeats to them a key instruction, something that he'd told them previously in the famous sermon that he earlier preached on the Mount of Olives or at its foot. "Pray that you may not enter the time of trial" he tells them.

When we repeat what we call the Lord's Prayer in English, we most often use a different translation of that phrase. We tend to pray "lead us not into temptation". Personally, I think that is a poor translation for a few reasons, one of which is that it tends to encourage us to spiritualise something which I think the repetition at Gethsemane prompts us to think about in much more material terms instead.

In Christian tradition, avoiding temptation is often presented as being firm in the face of a naughty thought; an opportunity to do something we'd like to but know we shouldn't. A moment where a devil is on one shoulder and an angel the other. Indeed, the kind of moment that perhaps we associate with Lent—a temptation to have *just one* square of chocolate or *just a half glass* of wine despite having said we'd abstain till Easter. But I think that way of framing Jesus' instruction drags us a long way from Gethsemane.

While his disciples slept, Jesus begged God that he might be able to avoid what was, by that point, pretty much an inevitable fate—trial, conviction, and execution at the hands of the Roman Empire. He prayed to be spared the trial that was coming his way, but deep down he knew he had to face it and was getting himself ready. Praying in the place of the olive press, he was olives—about to be squeezed, about to produce oil.

His message to his sleeping disciples was that they too would face trials: not just moments of spiritual weakness, but actual prosecutions. "You will be dragged before leaders and kings because of me" Matthew's Jesus had previously warned—and of course in the early decades of the Jesus movement many followers experienced exactly that, as have millions more since. Thankfully, for most Christians in C20th and C21st Britain, clashes with the political authorities have generally not been a big part of our experience, and certainly we should not desire and go looking for things to label as religious persecution.

However, just now there are several very worrying trajectories in our national politics: a sense that things could well turn very dark, very quickly. In the last couple of years, we have seen, in the face of accelerating revelations about the inability of our economic system to improve society, the true scope of the unfolding global ecological crisis, and the extent to which our leaders will justify or ignore shocking atrocities being committed by their strategic allies, that our government has consistently tried to remove civil liberties and restrict the right of the population to express dissent and protest.

Being called to oppose injustice, to stand with and act on behalf of those who are oppressed and marginalised—to speak truth to power—has consequences. Every time we pray "lead us not into temptation", or better really "lead us not to a trial", we should hope to avoid having to put ourselves in the way of prosecution and carceral violence for the sake of the gospel we confess, but we should also be aware that at some point we might have to do so anyway. Perhaps this Lent when we pray the Lord's Prayer or think about Gethsemane we should reflect on our readiness to stand firm for the cause of justice and to oppose evil even if doing so would mean standing trial.