

Talk Five – April 10th 2019

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! (Mark 14:32-41)

This is a passage at least partly about waiting. Jesus tells his disciples to wait for him while he prays. Waiting is an experience with which we’re all familiar. I’m very bad at it. Waiting feels like an unwanted gap between desire and fulfilment, or a period of anxiety and dread. We desperately want to close the gap – to reach fulfilment, or to fill the stretching gap with distractions.

If Jesus were to tell his disciples to wait for him today, they might not fall asleep. More likely, they’d fish mobile phones from their pockets and fill the waiting time, the dead time, the gap, by scrolling through Twitter or Instagram, checking headlines, the weather, cricket scores, stock prices. Whether we fill our waiting with sleep or distractions, we’re wasting the waiting. The waiting is important.

And the Gethsemane passage from Mark’s gospel shows us *how* it can be important. Because it’s not just the disciples waiting in this passage, or failing to wait. Jesus is waiting

too; but for him, waiting is dynamic attentiveness. He's waiting on God. Waiting on the will of God.

The attentiveness is apparent, I think, in Jesus' stressing the difference between wakefulness and sleep over and over again in this passage. It's surely not for some vital plot or narrative reason that the disciples' tiredness needs to be so emphatically emphasised at this moment in the story. No, the contrast between sleeping and waking is clearly making a deeper, even a fundamental point. Three times Jesus returns to the disciples and finds them sleeping. Three times he scolds them for failing to stay awake.

One of my heroes, as I've already said in an earlier talk, is Andrei Tarkovksy, the Russian filmmaker who died in 1986. His masterpiece, in my view, is the 1979 film *Stalker*. (A good friend of mine, Babak, was at Marlborough College in the 1980s. When Tarkovsky was engaged to talk to the students in the early years of that decade, Babak was given the task of entertaining the director, showing him the sights. So, Babak still fondly recalls taking Tarkovsky and his KGB minder to tea at the Polly Tea Rooms on the High Street. I'd so love to know how that conversation went! And I wonder what Tarkovsky chose to eat – the Lemon Drizzle or the Coffee and Walnut?)

Halfway through *Stalker* there's an extraordinary moment. The three men who are the film's protagonists have been asleep, lying the on wet ground. But the Stalker, the guide on this hazardous and illegal journey that they're making, wakes first and begins to tell a story. He tells how two men on a journey were conversing when a third man joined them on the road. But they were prevented from recognising him. "What are you discussing?" the stranger asks, "And why are you sad?" It is, of course, a verbatim quote from the Road to Emmaus story in Luke's gospel in which the risen Christ appears to two of his disciples who do not recognise him.

The Emmaus story – now I come to think of it – is about gaps. The dreadful gap of grief and loss that we talked about last week – the disciples have lost their teacher and their friend. And the gap that opens up between our expectations and reality: they'd thought Jesus was a dead cert; he turned out to be a dead loss. Or so they assume. The gap between ourselves and others – the gap of unrecognition. And the gap of space, of wilderness; the story takes place on the road, on a journey. The Emmaus story stands then as a microcosm of everything we've thought about in these talks.

In Luke's gospel, Christ discloses his identity to the disciples later when he breaks bread with them. Significantly, in Tarkovsky's film, the Stalker cuts off his Emmaus story before that revelation; he leaves the story on the road, leaves the story hanging with a question. He asks his two travelling companions: "Are you awake?" Just as Jesus asks his disciples in the Gethsemane passage. But, while it makes sense in the garden, it's a strange question to ask in the context of the film because it comes immediately after a slow, back and forth tracking shot in which the two men are seen opening their eyes and looking almost directly into the camera. They are obviously awake; or are they?

As in the Gethsemane passage, I'm not sure we should be thinking literally in terms of being asleep and being awake. But in terms of revelation. Are we awake to the continuous and mysterious unfolding of God's will in the world all around us all the time? Honestly, how awake are we to that? And this returns us to the question: what is this gap between wakefulness and sleep, between being closed, unaware, oblivious, and being open, alert, listening?

The answer is simple: prayer.

And in fact, I think the Gethsemane passage is really a lesson in prayer. Jesus' unheeded call to *remain and keep awake* stands as a definition of prayer – the means of placing us in the waiting gap between ourselves and God, listening and alert. But, of course,

the disciples fail to follow the instruction. Just as we fail to follow the instruction when we fill the gaps in our days with distractions, rather than with prayer. Keeping busy is the opposite of waiting, the opposite of prayer. “Remain” is a call to stillness. And “Keep awake” to attentiveness. While Jesus himself offers prayers to the Father, he offers *us* a lesson in prayer.

Let’s start with stillness, with remaining, with abiding. Saint Augustine reminds us that the faithful are “recalled from the din of the outside world to the joy of silence. God is love. So why do we go running about in the heights of the heavens and the depths of the earth seeking Him who is with us?”¹ The stillness we are searching for is God, and we find the stillness (and God) within; God is already and always with us. Back to that monk on Mount Athos who finds God... here, in his heart.

The journey the disciples make on the road to Emmaus, the journey the men make in Tarkovsky’s film, are both journeys inwards. God – it turns out – is already on the road with us. God *is* the road – the Way. We just need to turn and recognise the Truth.

Paradoxically (even absurdly perhaps), this is a journey made in stillness, without a beginning and without an end. That’s the truth of Jesus’ forty days in the desert: there is no outcome, no goal, no targets to be met. That’s Satan’s mistake. Satisfaction, proof, power are all ends of journeys. And Jesus knows it’s the waiting, the stillness, the acceptance that counts.

So, what about Jesus’ call to keep awake? As we’ve already said, this is a call to alertness, to listen. Christ in the garden is alert, as a listener. Let’s leave the disciples and follow Christ into the garden. He throws himself onto the ground. Remember Job last week. When he hears the dreadful news of his loss, his first reaction is to fall on the ground and

¹ Augustine, *de Trinitate* VIII, 7, 11: “revocati a strepitu qui foris est et ad gaudia silentia. Ecce Deus dilectio est: utquid imus et currimus in sublimia coelorum et ima terrarum, quaerentes eum qui est apud nos.”

worship. (Job 1:20) When Elijah triumphs over the priests of Baal and all the people witness the power of God, they “fell on their faces and said ‘The Lord indeed is God.’” (1 Kings 18:39)

To throw yourself down on the ground – in prostration – is recognition. It is a dutiful stance, an obedient stance. Jesus did not go into the garden convinced of his own plans, his own convictions. I am reminded of a poem by the Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai.

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.

And the whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.²

Gethsemane is not a yard, compacted and concrete with our own convictions, our own decision-making, our own voices. It is ploughed by Jesus’ doubts and loves. It’s in this place that he (and we) can hear the whisper. The still, small voice.

² *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, translated by Chana Boch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996), 34

So, if the disciples offer us an example of how not to wait, how not to pray – what sort of example does Jesus give us? He offers us an example of prayer that is built of gaps. First of all, he *recognises*, by falling to the ground, the gap between God and creation, God and humanity. With God all things are possible. It's into this gap he offers his prayer. Simone Weil brilliantly characterises this gap when she talks about

Two prisoners whose cells adjoin. They communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing that separates them but is also the means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.³

Secondly, Jesus *uses* the gap, pouring into it all his troubles and his anxieties and fears. He offers them honestly to God, across the gap, concealing nothing.

And finally, he *accepts* the gap. Not my will, but yours.

This tripartite structure informs all prayer. We acknowledge God's majesty and power. We acknowledge our own troubles and fears. We acknowledge our readiness to hear and obey.

As Amichai's poem suggests, we can't rely on our convictions, our own expectations, our own rightness. In terms of our journeys, we can't expect to reach Emmaus. The disciples never reach their destination in that story. And, as in Tarkovsky's film, the destination is not what we expected or hoped for anyway.

The concrete yard represented by our own goals and convictions, our own self-chosen destinations is a hubristic failure on our part to recognise the gap. No, we must learn to remain *at home* to God. Our restless hearts finding their rest in God. And then we must listen, accepting not expecting.

³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 145

At the very beginning of *Anne of Green Gables*, Matthew Cuthbert is expecting to pick up an orphan boy from the railway station, someone who'll be useful to him on the farm. He's surprised when the Station Master says to him:

The five-thirty train has been in and gone half an hour ago. There was a passenger dropped off for you – a little girl. She's sitting out there on the shingles. I asked her to go into the ladies' waiting room, but she informed me gravely that she preferred to stay outside.

And when Matthew nervously approaches the girl, she stands up and greets him in the following way:

I suppose you are Matthew Cuthbert of Green Gables? I'm very glad to see you. I was beginning to be afraid you weren't coming for me and I was imagining all the things that might have happened to prevent you. I had made up my mind that if you didn't come for me tonight, I'd go down the track to that big wild cherry tree at the bend, and climb up into it to stay all night. I wouldn't be a bit afraid, and it would be lovely to sleep in a wild cherry tree, don't you think? You could imagine you were dwelling in marble halls, couldn't you? And I was quite sure you would come for me in the morning, if you didn't tonight.⁴

Matthew expects a boy, something he can understand, something he can employ, something that fulfils his own plans. But he accepts Anne, something he doesn't understand at all, something for which nothing has prepared him. But who will bring love into his home and his heart.

Anne's words bear comparison with Mark's account of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Note how Anne has chosen explicitly to remove herself from a social setting, to

⁴ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2000), 10-12

be alone. Like Jesus, she's plagued by doubts and anxieties. Perhaps her saviour will not come. Perhaps she has been forsaken, and her time of trial is not over. But she does not lose faith. For her, the cherry tree in blossom can stand for the marble halls of heaven.

A gap opens up between our expectations and reality. Matthew was hoping for a boy at the station. Jesus was hoping to be spared. But look more closely at the gap between what we hope for and what occurs...

Carlo Rovelli, the Italian theoretical physicist, talks movingly about losing a colleague and a friend, and yet still wanting to talk to him, to share with him. That painful, precious gap we discussed last week. Rovelli says this:

I can no longer tell my friend I believe that he was the first to come close to the heart of the mystery of quantum gravity. Because he is no longer here – here and now. The pain of absence.

But it isn't absence that causes sorrow. It is affection and love. Without affection, without love, such absences would cause us no pain. For this reason even the absence is, in the end, something good and even beautiful.⁵

In other words, it's not in the answers we're expecting; it's in the gaps opened up by the moles of doubt and love. The absence, the gap, is home to the good and beautiful. To God. Not in expecting, but accepting. Not my will, but yours.

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And so, to come to a conclusion for all these Lent talks, we can turn, as we've turned throughout, to Mark as our guide into the gaps. And Mark's gospel offers us the most fascinating and compelling gap of all.

⁵ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre. (UK: Random House, 2018), 105

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:5-8)

The end.

What? Mark’s gospel appears just to stop, almost mid-sentence. In *fact* mid-sentence. In the Greek, it ends with the word *gar*, ‘for’, a particle, a very unusual word with which to end a sentence, let alone an entire gospel. I’m sure, like me, many of you were taught at school never to end a sentence with a preposition. Well, Saint Mark does. Or does he? Perhaps this is a sentence that never ends.

Mark’s gospel itself makes us wait, attentive, in prayer; it thrusts us out into the stillness, into Gethsemane, silence, bewilderment, with our doubts and loves. Mark leads us into the gap, into Lent, and longing for Easter. Slightly, and rightly afraid of Easter. And so he puts us in the shoes of the disciples. It’s the longing, the yearning, the journey that counts.

As Rowan Williams puts it:

The mysterious – do we say miraculous? – ending of Mark throws the ball firmly into our court.

A surprising ending is perhaps in tune with a text that has all the way through been preparing us to be surprised.⁶

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), 66, 68

In order to work, surprise requires: the gap, the gap between what we expect and reality. Mark leaves us with a question: “Are you awake?” Mark leaves us waiting. And waiting lies at the heart of all spiritual experience:

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:24; see also Ps 130:5-7)

Waiting and hoping, as Paul suggests, presuppose absence, the gap. By definition we wait and hope for that which is not (yet) present.

Since God is infinitely hidden, free and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way.⁷

Longing, waiting is the key in which all spiritual witness is composed. We can play our notes, our tunes, but it's the spaces, the silences between the notes that count. It's not what you play; it's what you don't play; it's not what we gain, but what we lose.

For this Lent, the waiting is nearly over. But, as Mark reminds us by leaving the gospel where he does, the real story is never over. The gospel – the waiting, the longing – never ends. Thank God.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: Pelican, 1962), 152

Prayer

God of the gaps,
teach us to stay awake,
alert to your presence in the world all around us all the time.
Teach us to listen,
to break up the concrete yards of our certainties and convictions
with doubts and loves.
Teach us not so much to wait *for* you,
as to wait *on* you,
as a servant waits on their master.
And through all the gaps in our lives
shine your Easter light on us, we pray,
that we may grow endlessly towards you,
our beginning and our end,
and our everything in between.
Amen.

Colin Heber-Percy

Lent 2019