

A Life of Jesus: The Passion
sixth in a seven-part series
"the suffering servant"



This is the sixth sermon in a series of seven that I have been preaching all this Lent in an attempt to sketch the life of Jesus. Last week we looked at the question of messianic consciousness; that is, who did the people think that Jesus was, and what did Jesus think about himself. Today we look at the last days of Jesus' public ministry.

Each of the four Gospels meticulously details the last few days of Jesus' life, in what we generally refer to in the Church as "The Passion Narratives." We have just heard the short form of Matthew's Passion. The full Passion Narratives themselves form the largest part of each of the four Gospels, emphasizing the Passion as the single most important event in Jesus' life.

And yet, despite this extensive chronicling, the reason for the Passion is generally misunderstood. For instance, it is often

thought that what precipitated Jesus' arrest was a sudden change of attitude by the crowds, or by the authorities, and that is how Hollywood usually portrays the situation, as if the crowd or the authorities suddenly turned against Jesus; that the crowd that welcomed him on Palm Sunday with shouts of "Hosanna" soon cried out to "crucify him". Yet if you will recall that when we reviewed the stories last week, it was clear that there had been trouble every time Jesus went to Jerusalem. It was nothing new that the crowds turned against him, for at least twice before in Jerusalem the crowds had attempted to stone Jesus there (Jn. 8.59, 10.31). It was also nothing new that the authorities had tried to arrest him, for they had so attempted to arrest Jesus there several times before (Jn. 8.20, 10.39). And it was nothing new that the authorities were intent to put Jesus to death, for various times before they had so contrived (Jn. 5.18, 11.53).

Another mistake often made in interpreting the Passion is focusing upon the suffering and pain that Jesus endured. This was one of the major criticisms a few years ago of Mel Gibson's popular movie "The Passion of Christ". When we speak of the Passion of Jesus we are not referring primarily to his suffering, not just to the pains that he endured or the harsh manner in which he was treated at the hands of the authorities. The story of the Passion is not meant to be a commentary on the cruelty of man.

We also miss the point of the Passion, I think, if we focus our attention on Judas Iscariot, as we so often do. Judas is often blamed for the events that occurred during Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem. We are all too familiar with the scriptural passages where Judas "betrayed" Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, or where Judas was described as the "traitor." The fascinating thing to note here, however, is that the words "betrayed" or "traitor" are almost certainly mistranslations of the original Greek in the Gospels.

The English verb "to betray" implies or suggests ill will, disloyalty, unfaithfulness and secrecy on the part of the person who betrays, and loss, tragedy or hardship for the person who is betrayed. The Greek word for "betrayal" is "*prodidomi*." Interestingly there are thirty-three occasions in the New Testament when the deed of Judas Iscariot is mentioned, and only on one of those thirty-three occasions is the Greek word "*prodidomi*" used; specifically, when Luke lists the Twelve Disciples by name, and mentions Judas Iscariot as the "traitor." On thirty-one of the remaining thirty-two occasions when the deed of Judas is referred to, it is not with the form of the Greek word, "*prodidomi*," but rather with the Greek word "*paradidomi*," which translates more accurately simply "to hand over." Translating it as "to betray" is much too strong and misleading.

For this Greek word, "*paradidomi*," is used on other occasions in the New Testament. For example, when the Fourth

Gospel records that "Jesus bowed his head (on the cross) and 'handed over' His spirit," the Greek word used was "*paradidomi*." Or when Luke described the departure of Paul on a missionary journey, he wrote that Paul "was 'handed over' to the grace of God by the brethren." And when Paul refers to his preaching to the Corinthians, he says that "he 'handed over' to them" that which he had received. It is apparent in these passages that the Greek word "*paradidomi*" could not possibly be translated as "betray." There is no suggestion that the person who hands over in these cases does so in ill will, unfaithfulness, or secrecy; nor that the person who, or the thing which, is handed over is destined for loss or tragedy or hardship. Rather, just the opposite is implied in these passages, "to be handed over" in these instances was to be passed into good hands, with the likelihood of being cared for and preserved.

Thus it is rather amazing that all four of the Evangelists used such a neutral word to describe Judas' action toward Jesus. For the Evangelists have no love for Judas, nor any tendency to play down the evil of his character or the gravity of his offense. They say in various other passages that Judas was a thief, that the concern which he professed for the poor was a pretense, that he was inspired by Satan, and that he was himself a devil. Thus it is astonishing that the word "*paradidomi*" should ever have been used in the Gospels for the deed of Judas; and it is especially remarkable that it should be used so consistently.

The Gospel writers are not nearly so uniform and consistent in their descriptions of any of the other central facts and events of Jesus' life. The result of their consistent use in the Passion is that the focus of attention is on what happens with Jesus, and not on what Judas Iscariot did, how he betrayed our Lord. And so because of our poor translations of 'betrayal,' we have focused too often on the action of Judas, we have made too much of his role, and we have missed the point. For the Passion is not a story of betrayal. Indeed the English word, "passion", does not really mean to "suffer" as we usually think of that word, but rather the English word "passion" means "to be affected", "to have something happen to oneself", "to be done to," "to be passive," "to be handed over emotionally in some way"?

The focus of the Passion is on Jesus, on how he allowed himself to be "handed over." And the reason why he allowed himself to be handed over was, I think, the result of a change of heart or attitude or action on Jesus' part. Remember that on previous occasions after trouble in Jerusalem, Jesus fled across the Jordan or back to the safety of Galilee. And there was an increasing reluctance on the part of Jesus and his disciples to go about openly among the Jews or even to return to Jerusalem for the high feasts. Remember when Jesus set out for Bethany to raise Lazarus, his disciples tried to dissuade him saying, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" (Jn. 11.8). And Jesus characteristically fled back into

the wilderness after the news of Lazarus' raising had reached the Pharisees (Jn. 11.53-4).

Shortly thereafter Jesus and his disciples returned to Bethany, six days before the Passover, and great crowds, we are told, turned out to see him and to see Lazarus, waving palms and crying out "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And thus begins the final week of Jesus' ministry, in that triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

The key to the Passion story, the change in attitude or action by Jesus is found, I believe, in the Garden of Gethsemane, which is the pivotal story for this sermon. And the key to the Garden of Gethsemane story is there at the end of Jesus' prayer: "not my will, but thine (Father), be done." After that prayer, things changed for Jesus. First he seemed less troubled in spirit thereafter, and he responded to the authorities differently. The root of the Passion is found there, in Jesus' changed perspective.

For when the angry mob came soon thereafter to arrest Jesus, he did not flee as he had earlier from the crowd in Galilee that would have crowned him king, nor did he escape through the throng as he had at Nazareth when the congregation there sought to throw him off the cliff, or the several times in Jerusalem when the crowds sought to stone him, or the authorities there to arrest him. This time was different. Jesus seemed willing to be handed over. "Whom do you seek?" he asked the arriving mob in the Fourth

Gospel. "I am he," he replied. "Whom do you seek?" he repeated. "I am he . . . not my will, but thine, be done." Jesus even rebuked Peter who had drawn his sword in his defense, "shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me (to drink)?" he added. And so it was that Jesus of Nazareth was finally apprehended.

This more passive approach contrasts sharply with the descriptions of Jesus' activity in the Gospels before this time. For earlier in the Gospels there is a great deal of activity and Jesus is always the initiator of that action. Jesus moved decisively: cleansing the temple, healing the sick, exorcising demons, feeding the multitudes. He was a worker of wonders, as we noted in the third sermon of this series. In the same way, he spoke effectively, changing situations simply by his words, stilling the storm, confounding his critics, raising the dead. He was a teacher with authority, as we noted in the fourth sermon in this series. But after he has been handed over, there is little emphasis anymore on what Jesus has to say. In fact, Jesus rarely speaks, he is oftentimes surprisingly silent after his arrest, and when he does speak; his words are inevitably disregarded or ineffective or misunderstood. In the same way after he has been "handed over," Jesus does not seem capable of acting decisively. It is the actions of others that are now decisive. He saved others, but he cannot save himself.

From the moment Jesus is handed over in the Garden of Gethsemane in all the Gospels, the perspective radically changes. Jesus is still there at the center of attention, but he is no longer the initiator of the activity; he is now the recipient. He is arrested, he is bound, he is dragged from place to place, he is beaten, he is spit upon, he is scourged, he is nailed to the cross. It is all done to him, not by him. He is the passive recipient of the action of others. This is the essential feature of the Passion, Jesus being lead about and handed over, like a lamb to the slaughter.

For after that fateful encounter in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus begins to react differently to the world about him; he begins to let go and accept whatever happens. He places himself entirely into God's hands; "not my will, but thine, be done." He doesn't flee or try to escape or argue or speak as he had before. For it is only God that matters now and Jesus trusts in God in a radical way. Still there are moments of doubt, as in the Garden, and times of despair, as on the cross. But Jesus doesn't try to change or alter the situation in the least. He accepts it. He lets it be, he has faith in God, and that is enough, no matter what happens. And that was the attitude of Jesus to the very end of his life; even his last words from the cross bespeak his trust in God, when he cried with his last breath, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

I, for one, do not believe that Jesus knew exactly what would happen to him in being handed over to the authorities. I do not think that he understood what would become of himself or his death. He died a human death, like us, not knowing. But it didn't really matter to him by then. The only thing that mattered was his Father in heaven, and Jesus trusted deeply in God.

What did become of it all though, is where the story resumes next week. AMEN.