

SERMON NOTES

Great Thursday
Vigil

Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 26:31-75

LOYAL LOVE

INTRODUCTION

Our third reading for Great Thursday is Matthew's account of the arrest of our Lord and His trial before the Jewish religious authorities that led to His Crucifixion. Interwoven in this account are the actions of two disciples, Peter and Judas, on that fateful night. Both were confident of success—Judas that he would succeed in his rebellion, and Peter that he would be loyal to His Lord to the death. But events did not turn out as they expected, and before the night was over, both disciples came to deeply regret their actions.

The reading can be divided into five sections: The Warning of Failure, The Necessity of Prayer, the Arrest, The Jewish Trial, and The Failure of Peter. Peter is involved in all five sections; Judas in only one, but his story will be continued in the next reading. In contrast to their failure as disciples, our Lord Who knew exactly what lay before Him, was loyal to the end, both to His Father and to His beloved disciples.

Our reading begins with a conversation between Jesus and His disciples after supper during their walk toward the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. As we read on, it will become apparent that Judas is no longer with the group at this point.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 26:31-75

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.'

But after I have been raised, I will go before you into Galilee."

But Peter answered and said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."

Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times."

Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too.

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me, yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt."

And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done."

And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!"

And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people.

Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him." And immediately he went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him.

And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?"

At that time Jesus said to the multitudes, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Him and fled.

And those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome.

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward.

But later on two came forward, and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'"

And the high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the

living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the son of God."

Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN."

Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?" They answered and said. He is deserving of death!"

Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You? "

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a certain servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about."

And when he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man."

And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away." Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a cock crowed.

And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

NOTES

1. The Warning of Failure

“Then Jesus said to them, you will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.’

The quotation is from Zechariah 13:7. There, it is a prophecy of the Good Shepherd’s death at the hand of the authorities. However, it was the plan of God that this should happen. Jesus applied this prophecy to Himself and saw His disciples as the flock that would be scattered.

Only Matthew and Mark include these remarks about the falling away in their Gospels.

But after I have been raised, I will go before you into Galilee.”

Though the prophecy would be fulfilled that night, Jesus wanted them to understand that He would be raised and would see them again in Galilee. At the tomb on Easter morning, the angel will remind the women that Jesus had said this.

Any mention of Jesus’ resurrection did not lodge in the brains of the disciples; only after that event did they remember. Not so with the enemies of Jesus. They listened carefully to His statements that He would rise again, and would later insist that a guard be posted at the tomb.

But Peter answered and said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”

Peter, as usual, argued with the statements of Jesus that he did not like. Just as Peter would not accept Jesus’ declarations of His coming death, Peter would not accept his own disloyalty in our Lord’s time of crisis. Peter displayed a dangerous over confidence in his own strength to remain loyal.

Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this very night, before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times.”

All the Gospels include this warning to Peter of his coming failure to remain loyal to Jesus. The cock of course crows in the early morning. It would be only a matter of hours.

Peter said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” All the disciples said the same thing too.

Still arguing, Peter did not know his own weakness. One must remember too, that it was out of the question for Peter that his King could possibly die. So, in Peter’s mind, he would never face such a *hypothetical* situation.

2. The Necessity of Prayer

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

Just a short walk across the Kidron ravine from Jerusalem, on the Mt. of Olives, is an olive grove known as Gethsemane. It was to this peaceful garden that Jesus led His disciples for that night of all important prayer, communing with His Father about the ordeal to come.

The disciples, too, had been warned. Nothing was hidden from Christ about what He must face; nothing was hidden from the disciples about what they would face. They needed to pray fervently as well. They needed to join their prayers with His.

The sons of Zebedee were James and John.

Jesus was fully aware of the hour He was facing and He was filled with grief and distress at the prospect.

And He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.” And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me, yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”

Explaining to His three closest disciples the depths of the emotions (to the point of death) that He was experiencing, Jesus commanded Peter, James, and John to stay awake and pray with Him.

“If it is possible” introduces a first class, or simple conditional sentence. This construction indicates that the speaker portrays the condition as actual or possible. Mark’s account makes this very clear; Jesus is quoted saying, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for Thee; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt.”¹

The cup was a metaphor for what He would suffer on the Cross, the bearing of the sins of the world and the consequent separation from His Father. How this could happen is the greatest of all mysteries. Yet, God tore Himself asunder for our sakes.

If this cup passed from Jesus, mankind would have to drink the cup of eternal judgment for their sins.

In the end, it was the decision of the Incarnation to reject the possible, and go forward with the plan, and will, of God. This had been the promise of God since the Garden of Eden’s scene of judgment on sinful man. God would remain loyal to His promises and, hence, to mankind. Jesus would drink the cup to the bitter dregs.

And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

The disciples did not have the sense of sorrow and dread that Jesus had about the coming hours, because they did not accept, though they had been fully warned, that they were in danger that night. Prayer was their resource to gain strength from God to face temptation, but they were too sleepy.

He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done.”

Again, we have a first class conditional sentence. Jesus portrays as true that the cup of judgment—against mankind—will remain unless He drinks it Himself. Jesus knows that it is the will of God that He drink it for mankind, and again He agrees to do it.

¹ Mark 14:26

And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”

The disciples were too weak and they did not pray. This weakness will be reflected in their actions later.

But Jesus was not weak and for the third time, knowing the full extent of what He must suffer, He affirmed His willingness to do the will of God.

The important hour of prayer passed, the disciples had no choice but to jump up from their sleep. The divine king, the Son of Man, foretold by the prophet Daniel, turned to face His arrest.

3. The Arrest

And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people.

Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, “Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him.” And immediately he went to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and kissed Him. And Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you have come for” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him.

Judas, the betrayer, had given the soldiers a strange sign by which they would know, in the darkness, which of the men was Jesus. The kiss, φιλησω, literally, *I have affection for*, was a contradiction of fact. Judas betrayed Jesus with a sign of his affection!

Jesus answered not with a form of the same word, φιλε, but with a form of address one might use to someone unknown to the speaker. It has been translated here as *Friend*. Judas is not allowed to portray himself as having affection for Jesus. They came to arrest Jesus, let them get on with it!

And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.

We know from the Gospel of John that the disciple who wielded the sword was Peter. He may have been emboldened to do this; for as reported by John, the mob of soldiers fell on their faces when Jesus identified Himself as I AM (the NAME of God).

Luke reports that Jesus healed the ear ²of the servant whom John identified as Malchus.³

² Luke 22:51

³ John 18:10

Peter was ordered to stop by Jesus, Who did not need that kind of help. That Jesus added the proverb, “All those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword,” is reported only by Matthew.

Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?”

This statement is only reported by Matthew. A legion was between four to six-thousand foot soldiers. Thus, Jesus is referring to more than seventy two thousand angels. He was faced with a Roman cohort (according to John)⁴ of not more than 600 mere men. Matthew is emphasizing the kingly superiority of Jesus Christ. Jesus was not overpowered; He went because He chose to go.

Jesus chose to go, rather than call upon His superior forces, so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled according to plan.

At that time Jesus said to the multitudes, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left Him and fled.

But those who came for Him during the night were cowards, afraid of the people who would have been outraged had they tried to arrest Him while He was openly teaching in the temple. But it was prophesied that He would be treated as a malefactor.⁵

It finally dawned on the disciples that Jesus was going to allow Himself to be arrested. Afraid for themselves, they fled away. Matthew says *all*, but this is a generalization for we know that John and Peter followed along behind the arresting party and that John stayed with Him during the trial and was at the foot of the Cross supporting Mary, His mother.⁶

4. The Jewish Trial

And those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome.

John, who was an eye-witness, reports that they first took Jesus to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, a former High Priest. It was here that Peter first denied the Lord. The other two times were in the courtyard of Caiaphas, where, after the initial interrogation by Annas, Jesus was taken.⁷

⁴ John 18:3

⁵ Isaiah 53:9

⁶ John 18:15-16; 19:26

⁷ John 18:13-27

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward.

The goal of the chief priests and their council was not to conduct a fair trial, but to find a legal excuse to put Jesus to death. They could not drum up any reliable witnesses.

But later on two came forward, and said, “This man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’”

For a testimony to be incriminating, two witnesses had to agree.

Even these witnesses did not have the facts right. Jesus had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John, in an editorial comment, informs us Jesus was speaking of the temple of His body.⁸

And the high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the son of God.”

During all this, Jesus had remained silent—to the frustration of the High Priest.

Invoking the Person of Almighty God, the High Priest commanded Jesus to answer if He were the Christ, the Son of God. If Jesus answered in the affirmative, the council would have the proof that they needed to accuse Him of setting up a rival kingdom to that of the Romans. The Romans would execute someone claiming to be another king. If Jesus answered in the negative, He would no longer be a threat to them for He would lose the following of the people. They probably would have simply had Him beaten and released.

Would He incriminate Himself?

Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see **THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.**”

You have said it yourself is a way of saying, “Yes, you are correct.” But Jesus went on and gave them more, He defined the Son of God as the divine Person—the Son of Man— Daniel had seen in His vision. Moreover He told them He would occupy the throne of God surrounded with all the attributes of Deity. To “come on the clouds of heaven” was only used of God.

Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?” They answered and said. He is deserving of death!”

Jesus had not only claimed to be the rightful King of the Jews, He had announced that He is God Himself. This, they considered blasphemy, and sentenced Him to death.

⁸ John 2:19-21

Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You? “

The acts of humiliation began and our Lord in silence did not resist.

5. The Failure of Peter

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a certain servant-girl came to him and said, “You too were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.”

Matthew returns to the story of Peter. He conflates both trials, that of Annas and that of Caiaphas. And he accelerates the intensity of the three denials. The first was a simple denial.

And when he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.”

The second was confirmed by an oath, using the Name of God to swear to the truth of the statement.

And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away.” Then he began to curse and swear, “I do not know the man!” And immediately a cock crowed.

With the third, Peter was wildly desperate, because his accent had given him away. He denied completely knowing Jesus, swearing and cursing. The once confident Peter could sink no lower. The cock signaled the last denial.

And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, “Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter remembered too late. How could he have denied the Lord he truly loved? It was a time of bitter grief at this despicable failure.

APPLICATION

One of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew language is *hesed* which means loyal love. It is enduring loving-kindness, faithfully doing good to another. *Hesed* establishes a bond of reciprocal loyalty because of some unexpected act of kindness. In secular usage, it is a norm of behavior that is implicit in the closest of human bonds and “it is among the ethical norms of human intercourse to return *hesed* that has been received.”⁹ *Hesed* was not just an emotion, it was love in action.

The disciples of Jesus knew that their relationship with Jesus was one in which the rules of *hesed* would apply. He was their teacher and they had accepted Him as their King. They traveled with Him and ate with Him. Moreover, they knew that their hope of eternal life was bound up in their relationship with Him. The code by which they lived, which

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996) p. 48

was steeped in their very bones, demanded that they return this kindness that had been shown to them. This is why they were so deeply grieved when Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him. That would be a reprehensible act that repudiated their most revered core values. They could not believe it of one of their number.

Nor could they accept that any of their number would desert Him. Peter objected that he, for one, would never flee even if it cost him his life; He would die with his Lord. All the rest of the disciples said the same. But Jesus knew better and warned the overconfident Peter, that before the cock crowed that night, he would deny his Lord three times—not once, but *three* times.

It was their custom to go to the Garden of Gethsemane in the evening after supper. Jesus knew that on this night especially, He would need, more than ever, the strength that He received from communing with His Father in prayer. He knew too that if the disciples were to resist the temptation that would face them this night, they too must seek His Father's face. But as He prayed fervently in the Garden, they slept. They slept the sleep of the confident, of those who trust in their own strength.

Jesus referred metaphorically to the coming ordeal that He must accept as the *cup* that He must *drink*. This included the arrest, the trial, the beatings, the crucifixion, but most of all the separation—never before experienced in all eternity—from His Father. How could He endure the unspeakable pain of that separation? But there was no other way to save His beloved mankind, and so, as a man, our Lord accepted the will of His Father. As a man, our Lord's loyal love remained firm and unshaken in the service of the One Who had sent Him for this very purpose.

Then they came, the mob with the traitor, Judas, and the soldiers, with their lanterns piercing the cold darkness, with their swords and clubs—too cowardly to arrest Him in broad daylight as He taught in the Temple. Awake suddenly from his sleep, Peter drew his sword to join His King in what he might have thought was the first battle of the kingdom. Better at fishing than swordsmanship, he managed to whack off the ear of one of the High Priest's servants before his attack was restrained by Jesus Himself. Then Peter realized that His all powerful Lord actually *planned* not to fight, but to peacefully give Himself up. All courage left Peter and he turned and fled with the rest of the disciples.

During the first trial of that long night, before the High Priest Caiaphas, they tried in vain to produce men that could consistently witness against Jesus, Who stood silently, waiting. Finally the High Priest demanded, "I demand of You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the son of God." There it was, the question whose answer would either bring His release or send Him to His death. A lie would mean freedom and escape from the brutality to come; the truth would nail Him to the Cross. Would He be faithful or deny His Father?

Peter, who had followed secretly behind the mob and into the High Priest's courtyard, was facing a similar decision. To admit that he was a disciple of Jesus could mean he

would share the fate of his Lord, he would die with Him. Peter was not ready to die, he chose to save his skin; he stoutly denied knowing Jesus three times, the last with curses.

Meanwhile, Jesus, completely prepared to face the death He was born to die, was true to His Father and to His Father's will. He spoke the words, identifying Himself as the divine King, the Son of God. In doing so, He deliberately laid down His physical life for the sake of Peter in the courtyard, for the disciples who had abandoned Him, for the murderous High Priest and his Council, for the howling mob, for the Roman soldiers, for the Jewish people, and for every member of the human race that had ever or would ever be born. Though they were faithless, He remained faithful. Though they were disloyal, He remained loyal. His loving-kindness, His *hesed*, His loyal love knew no bounds, and stronger than the cruel nails, held Him to the Cross.

The cock crowed, and Peter remembered. He remembered the Lord's warning, He remembered his boastful confidence in his own strength to remain loyal. He remembered he was cautioned to pray for God's help, but he had slept. Too late, for in his weakness, he had failed his Lord miserably; he had not actively returned the loyal love he had received. Peter went out and wept bitter tears—bitter because, unlike Judas, Peter truly loved Jesus Christ.

As we pause to review and relive that night of betrayal, of desertion, and of denial on the part of man, some of us are Judas, some of us are the frightened disciples, and some of us are the bitterly weeping Peter. We know who we are. But let us lift our eyes and behold our Christ Who loves us still with a *hesed* that led Him to embrace that terrible moment of separation—the penalty for our sins—separation from the Father. The horror of that separation cannot be fathomed by living men. But He did it for us. How will we respond to such great love?