

18 April 2019

**The Time of Trial (Luke 22: 31-53)**

*Maundy Thursday*

© Sarah Bachelard

For months now, Jesus has been predicting this moment – warning his disciples he’s to be betrayed into human hands and undergo great suffering, be condemned by the authorities and killed. Just an hour or so ago, Jesus has shared the Passover meal with them – and symbolically handed himself into *their* hands. He’s broken a loaf of bread and given it to them, saying ‘This is my body, which is given for you’; he’s taken a cup of wine which signifies his blood ‘poured out for you’. Knowing its inevitability, he’s been accepting his betrayal and death in advance, making meaning of it, creating possibility through it. But his disciples have never really understood. They haven’t been able to take his words in – haven’t been able to imagine it really coming to this – the armed mob arriving, the terrifying entrapment, their teacher taken away. But now, here it is. The moment is upon them. The time of trial.

Even for Jesus the actuality of powerlessness, cruelty, death, must be reckoned with in a deeper way. Must it really be so? ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me’. But his primary concern, even now, seems to be for his disciples and how they might come through. The gospels of Matthew and Mark emphasize Jesus’ agonized isolation at this critical moment in the garden – in these accounts, he goes off by himself to pray three times, and three times returns to find the disciples sleeping. But Luke’s Jesus goes off only once. And his prayer for himself is bracketed on either side, by his exhortation that they pray for themselves: ‘Pray that *you* may not come into, pray that *you* may not be overcome by, the time of trial’.

The word ‘trial’ in Greek is *‘peirasmos’*. It has the connotation of temptation, hard testing. According to Luke, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the Spirit led

him into the wilderness where he was tempted, tested – where his understanding of what it really means to be God’s anointed was tried and forged. Here at the end, it’s the disciples who are to undergo the same trial. Jesus has warned Simon Peter that ‘Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat’ (22: 31). Don’t get hung up on this personification of the ‘tester’. The word ‘Satan’ just means ‘the deceiver’, ‘the accuser’. It names that destructive but ever present possibility in human consciousness, that ‘little voice’ in our heads that seems to have its own independent life and by turns undermines us, whispers seductively of an easier way, and deceives us about the truth of ourselves and our situation.

Jesus has led his disciples into a place so hard and frightening that instincts of self-preservation, self-justification, self-deception are bound to be provoked. The little ‘Satanic’ voice begins to agitate, seduce, suggest plausible alternatives and escape routes. And so for Luke, what’s now underway is not just Jesus’ passion but the passion of the disciples – and what they’re going to discover is just how deeply rooted they are (or not) in the new possibility for being that Jesus has been inducting them into. After all, the way of truth is dangerous in a culture of lies; the way of generosity foolish in a culture of scarcity; the way of love positively suicidal in the face of oppressive authorities and fear-driven crowds. Who can remain to the end?

But one thing we know. The violence of the world cannot be overcome at the same level, striking with the sword and cutting off ears. ‘No more of this’, Jesus says. Nor can it be overcome by pretending it isn’t there and doesn’t impact – ‘this *is* your hour’, Jesus tells his captors, ‘and the power of darkness’. This night, Jesus is showing his disciples, showing us, that the only way truly to transform the world’s pain is by getting up to meet it, being willing to undergo it in the power of self-giving love. But they still don’t really understand. Which means they are intensely vulnerable to being swept away by fear, paralysed by grief, and co-opted by Satanic whispers. As are we, in the face of the terrors gripping our world – ‘it’s not that bad, you could save yourself, love – it’s an illusion’? Pray that you may not be overcome by the time of trial, Jesus says. Stay awake and watch with me.