

Yet Not My Will (Mark 14. 26-42)*Maundy Thursday*

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Once upon a time Jesus had burst onto the stage of Mark's gospel confidently and with authority. 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent – change your lives – and believe in the good news' (Mark 1.15). But today, as *his* end comes near, he seems increasingly troubled, even uncertain. Is this how it goes? Is this, God, what you meant? Is this the necessary way?

Three times this night, in this garden, Jesus withdraws to pray that if it be possible, this hour might pass from him. He pleads with the God who has been his intimate all his life. 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me'. But he receives no answer. Three times, he returns to his three closest companions, the ones to whom he has confessed, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death' and of whom he has asked, 'remain here, and keep awake', only to find them sleeping, incapable of sustaining their presence to his pain. And soon, three times, he will be denied by Peter – 'I do not know this man'.

The number three is always significant in Scripture. In the liturgy for Holy Communion, there is a three-fold acclamation of God's holiness, presence and power: holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest. This acclamation is called the 'Trisagion' – from the Greek, 'thrice' or three times holy. But here in the garden, it's as if we have its inverse – a pitilessly intensified inverse – a three times three refusal of acknowledgement and loss of power. The three-fold silence of God, the three-fold oblivion of the disciples, the three-fold disavowal of Peter – each unmistakable, each non-negotiable – Jesus undergoing a crescendo of anguished extinguishment.

'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'. But how do you even know what that is any

more? How do you discern the will of a God who won't answer? who won't give a sign? who is suddenly not near, maybe not even there? Is this how it goes? Is this, God, what you want? Is this necessary?

And in the end, it seems that for Jesus all that's possible is the decision to refuse or not the place he's ended up, the place his way has led. In the end, all that's possible is the choice not to run away. Fidelity, integrity, meaning – all are staked on the lack of a clear alternative, the realisation that he can't go back and start again, that the only way now is through the abandonment, the silence, the terror, the suffering, the dying. In the garden, all that is left to Jesus is bare faithfulness, beyond assurance, beyond consolation, beyond good reason. There comes an end to pleading and hoping for a different path, an end to the yearning for accompaniment. Jesus accepts his singular fate. 'Enough! The hour has come'.

He alone must carry the whole meaning, the whole weight of what is being wrought – if anything is being wrought. 'Nobody provides him with a framework for this, no one has written a script for him to perform'.¹ It's only his undergoing, his persistent yielding of himself, that will make the way – if there is a way. This is the extremity of faith to which Jesus is called. 'Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand'.

In a world that seems more than ever alienated from its own good, more than ever consumed by pain, is this the extremity of faith to which we too are called? Our only choice whether to deny or not, to run away or not? And will we, in the end, find ourselves able to say, not my will, but yours be done?

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.56.