

## TWO HOLY WEEK MEDITATIONS



**Giovanni Bellini** *Agony in the Garden* Jane Milligan

Matthew 26.36-46; Hebrews 4.14-16, 5.7-9

The real Gethsemane was a small grove of olive trees in the dark of the evening, just outside the city. But here we have no olive trees, no city, and plenty of light. Bellini was not intending a naturalistic picture, but one which captures the underlying reality of the story.

There must be turmoil, fear and loneliness in Christ's mind, knowing that pain and death is coming, knowing he will be betrayed or abandoned by most of his followers. That swirl of emotion is mirrored by this bleak scenery, apparently out in the middle of nowhere, bare ground and a bare tree, cliffs, rocky outcrops, and winding roads.

Our main focus is on Jesus himself, hands clasped, kneeling at a rock which forms a giant prayer desk. Jesus keeps his back to us, his gaze upwards, his focus on only his Father. This is a very private moment, not one for us to share, except at a distance. Jesus faces what is coming, and knows he can still turn back. It's that moment of truth before action – all the preparation is done – but now it's really about to happen. Oh God, it's really going to happen!

But does it really have to happen? He could take the human solution – leave Jerusalem, go back to work as a carpenter – let it all die down. He could take the divine solution, reveal his power, declare himself King. So he begs his Father – let this cup pass from me – but yet, your will be done. This is one of the crises of Holy Week, one of the turning points, as Jesus finally accepts what must be, and hands over all control.

So from Christ our eyes are pulled to the figures in the background. Judas and the temple police, eagerly hurrying to arrest Jesus. A river runs between – you might say, a gulf in understanding – or just that this spot is cut off from the world for a time. But soon they will be at the bridge, the waiting will be over.

And here are the disciples, sleeping again. Peter, James and John, the three he has specially asked to watch with him – all fast asleep, unable to offer any comfort. They remind us of our own discipleship – of our failings, the times when we too fall asleep on the job – but also give us hope, as this useless bunch went on to found and build the church.

As we think of hope, the eye comes round to Jesus again – but this time we move up and out, following his gaze. The angel comes to minister to Jesus, bringing the cup he fears, but also the assurance of God's presence.

And over the horizon, dawn is breaking, with a pink light in the sky. Bellini is reminding us that through betrayal and death comes salvation for all. We can approach Good Friday knowing that beyond all the failures, pain and betrayal, there is hope, and a new dawn approaches.

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Gerrit von Honthorst *Christ before the High Priest* Andrew Davey

Isaiah 50.7-9, 51.1, John 21.18-25

Arrest is a watershed moment writes Sheila Cassidy who was arrested and tortured for giving medical assistance to dissidents in Pinochet's Chile.

*One minute you are a free agent, at liberty to go where you will, to eat, to sleep, to pee when it suits you and the next you are powerless, an object, a thing to be numbered, photographed, catalogued...interrogated.*

It is night. A single candle lights the room. It is not yet the trial - maybe an interview, an interrogation, a friendly warning? Cords are apparent on the prisoner's wrists. He bends his head, trying to understand the charge. The interrogator raises his finger to make his point. On the desk a book lies open - the book of law, of prophecy or a charge book?

Is it a test of religious authority, of prophet, of priest, of book? What is the point that is being made? Or is it a threat? Who is on trial? A finger points towards the prisoner, yet three fingers point back towards the interrogator

*Are you the son of God?* In Matthew's gospel Jesus response becomes a verbal shrug - so you say, the words are yours. The priest seems caught in mid flow. Jesus seems to be saying - It is for you to tell me whether I am what you think I claim to be. You are a religious leader, a scholar of the scriptures. The world in which these words makes sense is your world.

The High Priest's interrogation should be rooted in his people's story yet his words are dead in his mouth, dead in the hands of those who claim power, because that power excludes the wisdom that sits on his desk. The truth lies still born in the darkness.

The artist catches the moment - almost as a mediation on Isaiah 50

In the shadows lurk five figures waiting for orders, ready to step forward when the interrogation is finished, the ones who know the physical side the process. The ones who spit, strike and slap. There will be no more information to extract. Jesus will be handed over. He will be the one whose cries are heard in the cells, the prison yard, the detention centre.

But the candle remains.

The gospels tell us of the darkness from noon till three on Good Friday.

After the Sabbath the women come to the tomb while it is still dark - it is they who discover that the darkness has not overcome the light.

Indian Jesuit Samuel Rayan has written: A candle light is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness I beg to differ.

