

Compline Reflection Holy Week 2026

The story of our salvation by Christ might well be called, 'A tale of three gardens,' because three significant ones are mentioned in the Bible. The *first* is the one where sin was originally committed. According to the *Book of Genesis* God created humans, endowed them with free will and gave them a garden called Eden. It was the place of primal innocence but also the place of trial. They failed the test by disobeying God, a failure replicated by everyone ever since – with the sole exception of Jesus the Son of God.

The *third* garden is the one we will hear about on Good Friday. According to St. John, where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden and, in the garden, a new tomb where no one had ever been placed. When they took him down from the cross, they laid Jesus there.

But between those two gardens - that of Eden and that of the resurrection - there was a *second* garden, located on the Mount of Olives. It was called Gethsemane and was just a short distance from the Upper Room where Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. That is the garden we have just heard about.

It is a stark and terrible story. A good man betrayed by his closest friends, whom he had chosen to assist him in his work. Having been alerted by a traitor, the temple authorities, eager to get rid of a troublemaker, sent a mob with swords and clubs to capture him. Next day, the execution process followed inexorably. Yet he was not unique in that. The Romans crucified many and throughout history many prisoners of conscience have also been subjected to such a fate.

But if his death was depressingly similar to so many others, Jesus' struggle in the garden was not. What happened to this person belonged to an entirely different order. Jesus was fully human, but he was also the eternal Son of God made flesh.

He had come to repair the breach of sin and death that our primal parents, Adam and Eve – symbolic of us all - had opened with God in their disobedience in the first garden.

As the new Adam, Jesus stared into that abyss and entered it because it was the will of his Father so to do. It is rightly called the ‘agony in the garden’ because for the first and only time in history a human will was perfectly aligned with God’s will, and we see up close what that cost: it had to be pressed and wrung out of Jesus in prayer. The cup symbolises the bitter drink that Jesus had to take.

The Anglican priest-poet George Herbert described it in his poem, ‘The Agony’:

*Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair
His skin, his garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through ev’ry vein.*

The poet plays with the word ‘Gethsemane’ which means an ‘oil press.’ On the Mount of Olives, the weight of sin pressed on Jesus but in that garden the abyss was closed over again. A new and unbreakable covenant was struck between God and humankind, sealed in blood the following day, and ratified by God on Easter Sunday when he raised his Son from death.

When Jesus stepped into that breach, he took on himself the sins of the whole world, carrying them from Gethsemane to Golgotha.

But he also showed us:

- How to persevere in prayer when God's will is difficult
- How to face the darkness
- And how to confront death when it finally comes.

As Newman put it his great hymn 'Praise to the Holiest',

*And in the garden secretly
and on the cross on high
should teach his brethren
and inspire to suffer and to die.*

And beyond the garden of the agony - and beyond the cross - lies the garden of the resurrection...