

Matthew 26: Passion - Matthew 26.36-56 VB

The New Testament scholar and bishop, Tom Wright enjoyed rock climbing as a young man. He tells the story of setting out one year to climb a famous mountain in the Alps. He describes standing, in the cold, among large boulders at the bottom of a rock face. It was cold because the sun never reached that side of the mountain. He looked up, but the summit, more than a mile above him, was hidden in cloud. Instead, all he could make out were the beginning of the various routes up the vertical, north face of the Eiger.

I think we can imagine a little of the dread that must accompany such a climb. But it was possible of course, for Tom Wright to turn back and not attempt it.

This passage from Matthew's Gospel gives us hints of the dread and terror which Jesus experienced in Gethsemane and that Jesus understood much of what lay ahead for him is clear from the Gospels. Although the details might not be clear, Jesus knew that humiliation and unimaginable pain awaited him. Crucifixion was designed to be a long, slow process of torture that would eventually but inevitably lead to death. (Indeed, we get our word *excruciating* from it.) No wonder that he became 'grieved and agitated'; that his prayer was so intense and so urgent – he longed for an alternative. 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.'

And, at the beginning of our passage, it was possible for Jesus to have turned back. Even at this stage, he could have slipped away in the night and returned to Galilee. We know that avoiding crucifixion was a real temptation, because earlier in the Gospel he had talked about his future death and Peter had tried to persuade him otherwise. Jesus turned on him, as though Peter were Satan himself. Much of the agony of the struggle in Gethsemane was Jesus fighting against his human nature, which naturally wanted to avoid such pain.

In addition, there was the additional temptation that Jesus had of misusing his spiritual power. 'Do you not think I that cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?' For Jesus, unlike us, this was a real possibility. In Gethsemane we see the agony of Jesus, struggling to remain obedient to his Father's will; 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done'.

So, what kept him there? I hesitate to tread on such sacred ground but Jesus' self-identification as the Messiah was forged, in no small part, by the prophecies of Isaiah. There God's suffering servant empties himself of his glory to be 'crushed with pain and become an offering for sin'. 53:10. 'To give his back to those who struck him – to insults and spitting' 50: 6. 'To be led like a lamb to the slaughter' 53: 7. And through it all God's suffering servant wrestled so as not to be rebellious – to be obedient, 'not to turn back' 50:5 'Yet not what I want but what you want', prayed Jesus in Gethsemane.

The Sunday before Lent, we read the account of Jesus' Transfiguration and saw him dazzling with the light and glory of heaven. Now we see him, of his own free choice, in the dark and alone – but longing to do his Father's will – and his Father's will? That, for love of us, Jesus should be 'wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities – that on him should be the punishment that made us whole.' Is 53: 4