

Falling To The Ground

It's a thing I only noticed late in life, that the Agony in the Garden is a favourite theme for meditation, but something priests never get to preach about. Anyone who says the Rosary - even those of us who use it as our healthy substitute for sleeping tablets - has meditated on Gethsemane (the First Sorrowful Mystery). The *only* time we read it out, however, is on Palm Sunday - along with the rest of the Passion; and few priests, in the brief moment of homily which a crushing Sunday leaves us, will choose to meditate aloud on the *beginning* of the Passion.

No Agony, John?

When you've registered that John's Gospel has no birth story for Jesus, and no Lord's Prayer, and no parables, and no account of the giving of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, you will easily get over the realisation that there's no agony in the garden. But so it is. The relationship between Jesus and suffering is different in the Fourth Gospel; I sometimes think the Beloved Disciple was so full of the experience of the Risen Christ, that he can't describe Jesus of Nazareth in any other mode. So there's no scene of the Transfiguration in John, because Jesus practically has glory shining out of him already.

An Incident On The Way

Notice on Good Friday the way the Beloved Disciple describes the crucifixion itself: no description of pain, or of the terrible desecration *we* feel looking at an eloquent fresco of it. For John the scene is already streaming with glory. That's why he reduces the nailing to a subordinate clause, and why Jesus says as he dies *It is accomplished!* It's a cry of triumph, a moment of utter fulfilment; because rather than "breathing his last", as Mark has it, John says "he gave up the Spirit!" - the Father's gift which he had promised the disciples was breathed into the human world. No - John has no place for agony by this time. Instead, we find the themes of Gethsemane passed over with immense subtlety in today's Gospel, which is set at the ending of Jesus' public ministry,

when the apostles find themselves approached by a group of Gentiles who come looking for him. Jesus recognises this as his call to become the Saviour of the Gentiles too, and a sign that his last days have come on earth.

A Seed Falling

Jews, and most ancient peoples, didn't understand the germination of seeds. They believed that seeds died when you buried them, and out of their immolation comes new life. Jesus believed this too (which implies that he wasn't omniscient about the theory of relativity or gene therapy either). He uses this theory to speak of his own oncoming death. Here is that "falling to the ground" which John dared not depict in the garden (indeed, there is a falling to the ground there, but it is the arresting party and its soldiers who fall, not Jesus).

The Words Of His Prayer

In the Synoptists' agony he cries out *Abba, Father!* (the beginning of the Lord's Prayer) and goes on to say *Thy will be done* as well. In John he says *Father, glorify your name!* - a thin difference from *Hallowed be thy name* in the Prayer. But in the Synoptic agony there is no answering voice, though Luke allows him "an angel, to strengthen him". Here, there is indeed an answer: A voice came from heaven: *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again!* How extraordinary it is that John includes Luke's angel: *some of those standing by heard this, and some said: It was an angel speaking to him.*

Instant Obedience

John's Jesus does not struggle to obey. This gives us great confidence. If the Son of God was so total in his trust, we can give ourselves to the Father with equal confidence. Jesus has made known to us his Father's name, and we are loved by the Father for loving him and keeping his commands. Our own falling, the very Fall of Man itself, he makes fruitful with eternal life. So in company with the Lord we

enter into Passiontide: safe in our weakness,
with such a Shepherd.

Fr Philip