

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Struggle Resolved

In Mark, and in Matthew and Luke who follow him, Jesus' arrest is preceded by a dark, terrifying experience in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus, prostrated by what they variously describe as fear, sorrow, or anguish, wrestles with the thought of his imminent death, and prays for some other way to be found for him by the Father. At last his struggle is resolved into a submissive obedience, which Luke ascribes to angelic help.

John's account is different

The Fourth Gospel never describes a single moment in the life of Jesus that isn't filled with divine power. It carefully eliminates from the Gospel tradition any hint of weakness, ignorance, surprise; Jesus' foreknowledge is perfect, his questions already answered, his mind made up. Comparing the two ways of telling the story, we may feel that John has almost hidden the humanity of Jesus away; and we should notice that, especially in the Catholic world, this is the Jesus we have been taught. Catholics always assume that Jesus already knew about the Resurrection even as he came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; I always raise the question in their minds: *did he know about the Resurrection when he was lying in the manger as well?* We can turn this all-knowing Jesus into a monster, not sharing our weakness at all; and that would be to refuse the gift of the Incarnation, by which God becomes *what we are*, truly human. I sometimes have to go to the dentist, and I hate the experience; but as long as I know the pain won't last for ever, I can do it with resignation. If the Cross was only that, on a larger scale - that Jesus had to undergo a gruesome three hours of pain followed by a victorious transformation which he knew about beforehand with perfect exactitude - then I can't see how it could save the world that I live in; it isn't even a proper human death, but a kind of masquerade. The first centuries of Christianity went through terrible struggles to preserve the Church from believing that. So even when we're reading John, *we need the story of Gethsemane that he doesn't tell.* How can we understand the two accounts of his Passion at the same time? Is one of them false? Most certainly not!

Now my soul is troubled

Today's Gospel gives us a clue. Here, at the end of Jesus' public life, John has gathered together the themes of that prayer in the garden. When you think about it, the first three Gospels can't claim to tell the garden scene itself from history. The three people who are nearest to him - "*a stone's throw*" from Jesus - are not only out of *earshot*, surely - but are also *asleep* whilst he prays; and we can't think this anguish of his was shouted out aloud.

We Know These Words Already

Rather, the prayer in the garden is reconstructed from the prayer of Jesus as the Church had learned of it from his life. We find here, indeed, the words of the Lord's Prayer, familiar to all Christians: he begins "Abba, Father"; he will end "Thy will be done". Luke's angel seems to add, "on your earth, as in our heaven". In John's Gospel Jesus could never be prostrated with anguish, but today he says: "Unless a grain of wheat *falls to the ground and dies...*". Here, if you listen carefully, is the struggle of Gethsemane, passing like a cloud across his mind: "What shall I say: *Father, save me from this hour?* But it is for this very hour that I have come."

A Prayer From Earth To Heaven

The whole struggle seems over in a moment, and then he prays: "Father, glorify (= *hallowed be*) your Name". It is a real prayer, and the last supper story will spell out its meaning, until the great priestly prayer of John's seventeenth chapter, which we should all read over the coming week. Soon those sleeping disciples from Mark, Matthew and Luke will make their escape from the Passion, as those in John will be dismissed by a Jesus who dominates the events of his own arrest; because these great mysteries are hidden from their eyes. But after Easter we can re-read the whole of human history, including the true events of the Passion. It is the Holy Spirit who has led us to know them, as Jesus promised He would.
Fr Philip