

Final Prayer

Bless, O Lord, everything I do in the course of my day. May what I do be worthy of Your Kingdom, and may all who come across my path know that I work for You. May all I do bear fruit worthy of Your Name, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer. AMEN

Matthew 26:1-5

No: 11 Week: 170 Wednesday 17/12/08

Prayer

Open the rich stores of Your blessings O Lord, not for us but for our sisters and brothers throughout the world. Then, whether literally or spiritually, the blind will see, the lame will walk, the captives will be set free and those who do not know You will have the Good News announced to them. This is Your blessing for all people; thank You Lord Jesus for the glory of Your blessings! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray for those who will be on watch over the Christmas, protecting others from the dangers of fire. Pray for any you know who will be away at Christmas because of their duties.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all those whose prospects are bleak this Christmas*
- *Thank God for the joys of preparing for Christmas*
- *Pray for the safety of young children in schools and institutions*

Meditation

This is the life you have given me, Lord God. I have none other.
I know you are my Saviour, and have redeemed me from sin; so

Help me to grasp the present and claim it for all that is good;
Save me from the evil of wishing things could be different;
Grant me the power of Your Holy Spirit to be victorious over evil;
Shape me into one who is generous of spirit in every situation;
Give me the courage to face all circumstances with honest intent;
Enable me to treat everyone I meet with humanity and equality;
Mould my words to make them worthy of one who serves You.

This is the life you have given me, Lord God. I have none other.
For I know You love me as I am, and will do so for ever: Alleluia!

Bible Study - Matthew 26:1-5

¹ When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² You should know that the Passover is coming in two days time, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. ³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace courtyard of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ where they planned to arrest Jesus by deceit and then kill him. ⁵ They agreed to do it away from the festival crowds, to avoid a riot among the people.

Review

The final chapters of teaching in Matthew's Gospel are a result of a complete breakdown of communication between Jesus and the Pharisees with the differences between the two being irreconcilable. Jesus was preaching a message of God so radical that the authorities felt they had no option but to try and stop Him, and at its heart was Jesus' claim to be God's Son. He did not merely brag and say 'I am God's Son'; He taught the people in such

a way that their only conclusion would be that He was indeed the Messiah. The authorities could have tolerated all kinds of debates and freedom of speech, but this 'blasphemy' threatened the heart of Pharisaic Judaism, and they could not countenance Jesus' implicit claim and all that it meant. As we have seen in recent chapters, He even claimed to know God's will for the end of all things and the 'Day of the Lord'.

So Jesus came to the end of His public ministry and teaching, and was intent upon one last special time together with His followers before the tortuous events that He knew lay ahead. He was no longer interested in what the authorities were planning; but He was interested in how His disciples would handle all that was about to happen, and there were some important last things to be said and done so that when Jesus finally completed His life's work, they would be in a position to receive the Spirit and lay the foundations of God's new people, the Church.

Jesus' words to the disciples Jesus summoned the disciples (26:2) and told them bluntly that after the Passover meal they would share, He would be handed over to be killed. The previous three times Jesus told the disciples He would die (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19) they reacted negatively, and Jesus went on to teach them about what lay ahead; but here, no reaction from the disciples is recorded. It was not a time for debates and controversies, for the disciples realised that what they had previously been told was now being fulfilled.

This is the first time that the Passover is mentioned in Matthew, but it is clear from the other Gospels that Jesus knew He would come to Jerusalem to die at the festival of the Passover (e.g. John 11:55). Passover was the great defining festival of the Israelite nation (Exodus 12), celebrating the Lord's deliverance of Israel on a night of death and destruction in Egypt, after which they escaped. The Passover was celebrated at other critical times in the life of God's people, before Joshua won the battle of Jericho (Josh 5:10,11); during the reforms of the great King Josiah (2 Kings 23:21ff); when King Hezekiah, influenced by Isaiah, attempted to ward off the invading Assyrians (2 Chron 30); and when Ezra led the exiles in the first Passover in Jerusalem after the Exile. It was the supreme expression of God's power to save His people, and that is what He would do through Jesus.

The time of the Passover Festival The Passover festival was a meal, normally celebrated in Jesus' day within the boundaries of Jerusalem using a lamb slaughtered at the Temple. Historically, the Passover was also linked to the festival of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 23:14,15), celebrating the beginning of the harvest season in early spring when the first wheat was harvested. Its link with the escape from Egypt was the ancient story of the eating of 'unleavened bread' the night before the departure from Egypt in haste, leaving no dough behind to indicate the possibility of return.

All this great history comes together in the meal of the 'Last Supper' to help us understand what Jesus did for us in His death and Resurrection. Jesus offered a new deliverance from the bondage of human sin, different from the religious systems that had developed over the centuries is Judaism, and Jesus Himself was the 'firstborn' of God's new Kingdom because of His death and resurrection. The whole thing must have seemed paradoxical and bewildering to the disciples at this stage in their discipleship. Jesus was their Master and Lord. They knew Him to be a man of God, indeed, the one Man of God, the Messiah. When the first Passover had been celebrated in Egypt, God's people had escaped the slaughter of the firstborn, but here, Jesus, the 'Son of God' would be killed. How could this possibly make sense?

I have sometimes wondered whether, given the history of the Passover, some of the disciples thought that Jesus and all of them might escape. They did not realise that Jesus was not a new Moses, but the 'lamb' that was indeed to be slaughtered in order to provide the protective 'blood' that would ensure the protection of all people. Perhaps Judas, of all

the disciples, misunderstood this most completely. He prepared to hand Jesus over, possibly expecting His escape and the ultimate glory of the Messiah. We can never know for sure, and there are many explanations of his actions. We will look at all this when the matter arises in the text of scripture.

The plans of the authorities Caiaphas (son of the influential family of Annas) is named by Matthew as the High Priest in charge of the Temple at Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death (26:3). The chief priests and elders gathered in his palace courtyard, convening, perhaps irregularly, the official court of the Sanhedrin; this is not specifically mentioned in verse 3, but there is no mistake that this was what Matthew described.

The plan for the gathered authorities was straightforward. They needed to be able to accuse Jesus of serious religious subversion which had the potential to create trouble in the capital, and this could be an effective basis for their call to the Roman Procurator for the death penalty. The difficulty was that their plan would clearly descend into farce, if when Jesus was arrested, the crowds supported Him and turned on the religious authorities! The Roman soldiers, who were known to show no mercy or respect, would then arrest the chief priests and the elders as the disturbers of the peace instead of Jesus, and have them put up before the Procurator! So in order for their plan to work, they needed to act with subtlety and more subterfuge, and they plotted accordingly; 'They agreed to do it away from the festival crowds, to avoid a riot among the people' (26:5).

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. The Passover is an essential part of what happened when Jesus died. In your group, share what you know about this festival.
2. The beginning of Matthew 26 is regarded as the beginning of the story of the 'Passion' of our Lord. What do you think this expression means?
3. What does the forthcoming death of Jesus make you feel? Is this something you can just accept, or do you have to search and enquire about it?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Have you ever thought of your Christian discipleship as a walk with Jesus along a path that may well lead to death, but having the promise of victory and life at the end? There are many ways to interpret this, so think about it carefully. I do not find it hard to think about death because I have faced it before, yet I have always been fascinated by how Jesus has won the victory over death. True discipleship is a matter of being able to walk through this life with the confidence of one who knows that its fulfilment lies beyond what we experience now.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Spend time thinking about death and what it means. Imagine what it must have been like to face death, knowing that violent death lay ahead, and ask Jesus to help you understand what He went through for you.*
- *Pray for those who face death today, and ask God to bless those who you know are close to the end of their lives. If you have a chance, try to make the opportunity to pray with people before they die, and assure them, if they can accept it by faith, that Christ's love awaits them.*