

The Path of Suffering

Adrian D. Van Breda

Sermon prepared for **9 April 2006 (Palm Sunday)**,
ninth sermon.ⁱ

Reading: **Mark 14 & 15**
(17 minutes)

Theme: *"Christ followed the Path of Suffering because of his love for us"*

1: Last Supperⁱⁱ

- Jesus reclining at the table.
- Good food, good wine.
- Enjoying fellowship with his closest friends.
- Been a long three-years of ministry – nice to have a timeout.

- Knows this is his last meal.
- Knows that this very night he will be hauled before a court.
- Knows that before sunset tomorrow, he'll be dead.

- Knows that Judas, one of his twelve disciples, will betray him.
- Even Peter, the rock on whom he'll build the church, will "disown" him.
- And all of them will "fall away", will "be scattered".

- How tempting to back out of the situation; to retain close relationships with his companions.
- What would I do? Would I stick to my guns even if I know my wife will leave me and son will deny that he even knows me? Would I not place these relationships ahead of my cause?

- How hard it must have been for Jesus to continue to walk a path of suffering, even though he knows that he will lose his closest friends.
- And yet, he does continue on this path. Indeed, he confronts them all – Judas, Peter and the others. Not with anger or resent. But with calm, direct and loving honesty.
- Why would he choose this path? What would give him the resolve to continue on a path that he knows will bring such pain? What resources would he draw on to keep walking forward on a path that demands such losses?

2: Gethsemane

- Yet he does continue on this path.
 - He confronts his companions and then goes out to Gethsemane to pray.
 - Such suffering – “my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”
 - He prostrates himself on the ground
 - Cries out that another path may be created for him – that “the hour might pass from him”
 - He knows what is involved – that he will carry the sins of the universe – that he’ll die – that he’ll struggle against the very forces of evil
 - “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me.”
 - Surely, he says, there must be another way?
 - God can do anything; can’t He find another way to save the world?
 - “Yet not what I will, but what You will”.
-
- So, for a second time this night, Jesus chooses to follow a path of suffering.
 - Despite his anguish, he sticks to the path of suffering.
 - Why would he choose to follow such a path? Where would he get the strength?

2a: Obedience?

- Perhaps there is a clue here in the passage, when Jesus says, “Yet not my will but yours”.
 - Perhaps his strength comes from obedience.
 - Perhaps he follows the path of suffering because he is obedient to God.
 - Jesus often talks about his obedience to the will of God:
 - He speaks only what God tells him (John 7:17).
 - He does only what he is instructed by God (John 14:31).
 - He talks about drinking the cup that his Father has given him (John 18:11).
 - Yet just as often, Jesus is critical of empty obedience – that ritualistic observance of the laws
-
- Anyone who has dieted or tried to give up a bad habit knows that obedience and self-discipline takes us only so far.
 - It works in the short term, but does not sustain us in the long haul.
 - Obedience can easily become hard-hearted and dogmatic, a withered, empty thing.
 - And this is hardly what we see in Christ in Gethsemane.
 - Obedience is certainly part of the reason for Christ’s choosing the path of suffering, but it cannot be the crux of it.
 - There must be something more to explain his choice.

3: Trial

- Judas now arrives, with a veritable army in tow – armed with swords and clubs.
- He is arrested and appears first before the Jewish leaders and then before Pilate.
- He is charged principally with blasphemy, for claiming to be “the Messiah, the Son of God”.
- Pilate virtually pleads with him that he defend himself – “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of!”
- But Pilate is “amazed” because Jesus does nothing to defend himself.

- Surely, in such dire circumstances, you and I would have folded under the pressure?
- Would God not forgive us if we denied his call, in order to save ourselves?
- Think of all the good Jesus could have done had he conceded this one ‘small’ point –
- All the people he could have healed, the teaching he could have provided, even written in his own hand, the social changes he could he initiated.
- If only he had renounced the charge of blasphemy.
- Yet he remains resolute in this path of suffering – knowing that it will lead to his death.
- He is either silent, or he provide answers that actually support the charges!

- Where does he get this courage?
- Why does he follow a path that is so obviously leads to the cross?
- What would cause him to choose this path of suffering?

3a: Vision?

- Perhaps there is a clue in this passage, when Jesus responds to the charges, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).
- Jesus has talked often about his suffering and death, but also about his resurrection (Mark 8:31; 10:33-34). And now he speaks about what will happen after his resurrection.
- He seems to have a clear vision of the future.
- He seems to understand that his death is part of a process that will lead to salvation.
- Perhaps his strength comes from his vision?
- Perhaps he follows the path of suffering because he has such a clear picture of the future?

- Stephen Covey writes about this in his books.
- Indeed, all management and leadership literature talks about the importance of having vision.
- Even we have a vision statement here at St Martins.
- Vision is supposed to lead us from the gut.
- But vision often tends to be cerebral – it is just some words in our heads.
- And under emotional pressure, these words become thin and meaningless.

- Surely in that personal crisis, Jesus’ vision would lose its power.
- Although I’m sure that his vision helped him keep to the path of suffering, I can’t believe that it is the core.
- There must be something more substantial that helped him walk those final hours to his death – something more than mere obedience or a sure sense of the future.

4: Crucifixion

- So Jesus is crucified – a horrible, slow, agonising death.
- As he hung on the cross, he was cruelly mocked by passers-by:
 - “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (Mark 15:29-30).
- Even the religious leaders taunted him:
 - “He saved others, but he can’t save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:31-32).
- Now surely Christ could have saved himself.
- Had he wanted to, Jesus could have called upon 12 legions of angels to rescue him (Matthew 26:53).
- He could have lifted himself off that cross in the blink of an eye!
- And this would have vindicated him.
- Can you imagine the satisfaction of showing all those people – who had slandered and doubted him for years – showing them that he was indeed the Son of God, the Christ, the King of the universe!
- If it were I, I have no doubt I would have done it.
- And yet, he chooses to stay where he is, suffering.
- Shortly before he dies, he experiences the sins of the world falling on him.
- And immediately, he experiences God’s condemnation.
- And he realises that for the first time since the beginning of time, he is cut off from the Father.
- And so he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)
- Why would he do this? Why choose such a terrible path of suffering?
- Surely, all the obedience and vision in the world cannot explain his choice on the cross.

4a: Love!

- Mark doesn't give us much clue. But the other gospel writers do.
- Luke tells us that Jesus interacted with the other two men who were crucified with him.
 - He tells the one that he will join Jesus in paradise that very day (Luke 23: 43).
 - In the last hours of his life, he continues to share the Good News of salvation.
- And John tells us that Jesus interacted with his mother and with John (John 19:25-27):
 - He looks down from the cross and sees his mother, who must have been in anguish.
 - And he says, "Dear woman, here is your son".
 - Even as he is dying, he continues to recognise and respond to our human needs.

- There is only one driving force that can begin to explain Jesus' choice.
- Only one thing to explain his path of suffering.
- He loves us.
- As I have meditated on these readings these past few weeks, I have become more and more convinced that as Jesus walked these final hours along this path of suffering, he was thinking about each one of us¹ – Cathy, Marti, Cynthia, Tubby, Adrian.
- As he encountered the many opportunities to deviate from the path of suffering, he was thinking about you – Neil, Rosemary, Mike, Mossie.
- It was not just obedience to the will of God. It was not just a clear vision of the future.
- It was his love for us. It was love that drove him up the hill to Calvary and onto the cross.

- And it is still his love for us that draws us to himself today.
- Each time we stray from our own life's path – he loves us.
- Each time we deny his call on our life – he loves us.
- Each time we turn our back on him – he loves us.
- Each time we hurt another human being – he loves us.
- Each time our suffering causes us to question him – he loves us.
- Each time we feel alone and abandoned – he loves us.
- Each time we question the very meaning of life – he loves us.
- Even when we deny his existence – Jesus continues to love us.

¹ At this point, we started the PowerPoint slide show. The screen had, until this point, been blank. The 183 names are some of the names of our parishioners. It played in the background while I continued with the sermon.

ⁱ This sermon was very special for me, as it is exactly one year since I prepared my very first sermon. I had applied for a preaching license in October 2004, although I only got my first chance to preach in August 2005. However, on Palm Sunday 2005 (20 March), I felt impelled to prepare a sermon as a practice exercise. It all came to me overnight and I wrote the manuscript in a few hours. I sent it to a few people, and got a fair bit of criticism from some. But it was my first attempt. Even on re-reading it now, a year later, although it has many flaws, I believe it was inspired and relevant. So, although it never got preached, this sermon was my first. And so the chance to preach this Palm Sunday is a like a full turn of a wheel, bringing to completion a year of preaching. Our new priest arrives in two weeks – just after Easter – which will, no doubt, reduce my opportunities to preach substantially. So, I feel as if I've reached the end of a brief era in which I have grown and deepened, and in which I have developed my preaching skills. It has been such a blessing for me; and I hope also for the parish.

ⁱⁱ I am preaching narratively – attempting to follow the long narrative of Mark Chapters 14 and 15, interjecting commentary along the way. (I have not yet studied the narrative form of preaching, so I'm doing this intuitively.) So, I am here jumping directly into the narrative – no introduction. My main point is, "Jesus stuck to the path of suffering despite repeated opportunities to detour." My main question is, "Why would he follow this path?" I am trying to weave these two thoughts into the fabric of the sermon, so that they grow and develop as we move through and so that the question is answered towards the end.

I have since read a text on narrative preaching, and am following the broad cycle described therein: (1) Upsetting the equilibrium – I do this in the section 1 on the Last Supper, where I introduce first the dissonance between the comfort of a meal with friends and the pending death of Jesus, and second Jesus' imagined ambivalence about the path of suffering. (2) Analysing the discrepancy – I continue to press into the disequilibrium in sections 2 3 & 4, where I continue to raise further instances of the path of suffering. I also suggest two possible solutions/explanations, both of which I find wanting (sections 2a and 3a). So the form is "Not, this, not this, but this". Hopefully by this stage the congregation is experiencing some considerable curiosity to see how it all turns out and to see what I suggest as the reason for Jesus' choice of this path of suffering. (3) Disclosing the clue to resolution – this happens very quickly at the beginning of section 4a, where I point to Jesus' words on the cross to the one criminal and to Mary. (4) Experiencing the Gospel – this is what I spend the rest of the sermon on (section 4a) – emphasising Christ's absolute and unswerving love for me and for you. (5) Anticipating the consequences – I chose not to pull the sermon through into life application. I want to leave people with a strong experience of God's love for them and not intellectualise or operationalise it. But I do hint at application by suggesting that it is Christ's love for us that enables us to follow our own life paths. This is hinted at throughout the sermon, especially when I refer to "If I were in his situation..." or "Those of us who have dieted...", and finally in the last section when I say that Christ's love is with us even when we deviate from His will for us. I could have pulled this through more explicitly – indeed, I think it is a key piece of learning for myself – but it would have drawn attention off Christ's love for us onto our response to His love, which I did not want to do. (The stages of a narrative sermon from Eugene Lowry's "The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form", 2001.)