

Dear Friends,

Mark 14: 46-52

A few moments ago, there was quiet in Gethsemane. Jesus was praying while his friends slept. Now the garden is filled with noise, panic and confusion. A well-armed mob have grabbed Jesus and are taking him away.

In the chaos someone takes out a sword and attacks. The slash of the sword removes the ear of the high priest's slave. In Mark's gospel it is not clear who uses the weapon. We are just told that it was "one of those who stood near". It could be anyone. Neither do we really know what the attacker was trying to achieve. If it was one of Jesus' friends, I don't suppose he was trying to delicately slice off an ear. I imagine he was going for a blow to the neck or head that would bring death.

The other gospels give us more details. John tells us that Peter was the one with the sword and the injured man was called Malchus. Luke and John are specific that it was the right ear that was severed. In Matthew, Luke and John, Jesus calls for the fighting to stop. In Matthew, his rejection of violence is particularly clear. He says, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword". In Luke, Jesus touches the man's ear and heals him. My focus however is on Mark's gospel. There we get a moment of chaos when blood is spilt and one man is left permanently disfigured.

Jesus does have something to say. I don't imagine that the mob stopped and listened quietly and respectfully. Their noise continued, but Jesus was able to make himself heard. He asks them a question, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a thief?" The Greek word translated "thief" is used for a person who robs openly and violently". It's what Jesus called the people in the temple. He said that they had made God's house of prayer into a den of thieves. It's as though they get their own back for his stinging rebuke. They arrest him, like a thief, then they have him crucified between two thieves.

Jesus continues speaking. He points out that day after day, in the broad daylight, he has taught in the temple. They had plenty of opportunity to arrest him. Why do they have to wait for the cover of night before they act? Jesus ends by saying, "but let the scriptures be fulfilled". These are words of acceptance. Jesus does not call his friends to defend him by fighting back. He offers no resistance. He accepts that this is the way that he must take.

When they see what's happening, all the friends of Jesus desert him and run away. One young man does follow Jesus. He is only wearing a linen cloth. Some of those in the crowd grab hold of him. He manages to get away, but in the struggle his clothes come loose. He is naked as he runs away. It's strange the small details that stick in moments of chaos. Some think that the young man was the writer of the gospel who has painted himself into a little corner of the canvas he has created. It's an attractive idea, but there's no real evidence for it.

There is however a contrast between the young man and Jesus. The same Greek word is used to describe both of them being seized by the mob. The young man is grabbed but he struggles and so manages to get away. Jesus is grabbed but he offers no resistance. He allows them to take him.

Jesus had said that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep would be scattered. Everything has happened just as he said it would. His friends have gone. He is alone as he walks on the lonely way that leads to the cross.

God bless you,

Tony

PS I have not paced myself well. My intention was to give time to looking at what Mark's gospel has to say about the crucifixion. I have however, spent too long over some of the events leading up to the cross. There may be an opportunity to return to this part of the story later. But it will soon be Easter, so we need to turn our attention from the suffering of Jesus to the triumph of his resurrection.