

Dear Friends,

Mark 14: 36-37

Jesus' heart is troubled. He is about to be immersed in suffering. He would like there to be another way. He turns to God and prays.

He calls God, "Abba, Father". "Abba" is the Aramaic for "Father". It's a bit like "Daddy", although it was also sometimes used by disciples to their teachers. As far as we know, it was not used as a way of addressing God in Judaism, where it was considered to be too intimate and to lack reverence. This is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is heard to speak to God like this. It is however such a unique form of address that many have concluded that it must have been Jesus' own special way of talking to God.

Jesus comes to God with confidence because God is his "Abba Father", but he also comes with the reverence that God deserves. He says, "for you all things are possible". He knows that all authority and power belong to God. In that knowledge, he makes his request, "remove this cup from me". He is about to drink the bitterest cup of deepest suffering and the thought of it appals him. He would like to be set free from this burden. But that's not what he most wants. What he most wants comes next. He says "yet not what I want, but what you want". Jesus is hungry to do what God wants. He says that it is his bread to do the will of God. He freely and whole heartedly yields all things to God's pleasure and disposal. He says "yes" to God in everything.

If prayer is about changing God so that we get what we want, then the prayer that Jesus offers fails. God says "no" to his request that the cup be taken away from him. If, however, prayer is about our transformation so that we become what God wants, then this prayer is effective. Jesus says "yes" to God. And that surely is at the heart of prayer. It is for us to enter into a relationship with God where we give our consent to God and to God's presence and action in us.

After praying by himself for a while, Jesus goes back to his friends. He asked them to "keep awake", but he finds them sleeping. We are given a contrast. The awokeness of Jesus is placed alongside the asleepness of his friends. Jesus is awake to God and the truth about God. He is awake to the truth about himself; he has confidence that he is God's beloved child in whom God delights. He is awake to the truth of what the world and people are like. He knows that he is experiencing temptation, that he is going through a time of trial. He is fully awake, fully aware.

His friends by contrast are asleep. He has taught them the truth about God. He has held a mirror in front of them to wake them up to the truth about themselves. He has shown them the realities of the world and other people. He has shown them that they are passing through a time of trial and temptation. He wanted them to know the truth so that the truth would set them free. But they have remained asleep. They have not been able to take in the truths that he has shown them.

To be fair, we understand how the disciples are feeling. It is almost unbearable to experience pain or be alongside it. We protect ourselves by doing what we can to numb it. We may develop addictions which distract us or mask the anguish we feel. When others are suffering, we may zone out. We may feel compassion fatigue and so close the door on the stories of the agonies that people endure. We put ourselves to sleep, rather than be alongside those who are suffering. And when we do, Jesus comes to us and says, "could you not keep awake for one hour?" Of course, we can't do everything, but we can do something. One thing we can do is to stay awake and remain aware. When we do, we watch with Jesus, we remain awake with him.

God bless you,

Tony