

Dear Friends,

Mark 14: 26-31

It's the night of the Passover festival. Jesus and his friends have shared the special meal together. The tradition says that they have to spend the night in Jerusalem. So, together they go to the Mount of Olives. Well, they don't all go. Judas Iscariot has something he needs to do. He'll be back later.

We have just been told the story of Jesus sharing bread and wine. Immediately before that we heard that one of his friends would betray him. Now, immediately after that story we hear Jesus telling his friends that they will all desert him. The suffering of Jesus is already taking hold. He's feeling it in the disloyalty of his friends. It's not only the temple that needs cleansing. Those closest to Jesus also need it.

One of the Passover rituals was for every family to clean the house from top to bottom and remove any old bread. As they did that each person also examined and cleaned their heart. They worked out what had to be removed so that God could fill it with something new. The friends need to go through a similar cleaning and emptying. That's uncomfortable. It includes being confronted with what's wrong and needs to be changed, what's broken and needs mending.

With great tenderness and love, Jesus opens the eyes of his friends to the truth about them. He says, "You will all become deserters. You will all fall away". He quotes a verse from the scriptures which gives them a picture of what's about to happen. "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered". They had always been slow to understand him, but at least they kept following. Now, they will not even do that. They will all run. They will be dispersed and go in separate directions.

Peter is convinced that this will never happen to him. He says, "Even if everyone else deserts you. I won't". Jesus does not let Peter off the hook. Peter may feel confident and secure. He may think that he's different from and better than the others, but actually he is the one who is going to fall the furthest. Jesus holds the mirror in front of him, shows him what he's like and what he will do. He solemnly tells him that on this very night, before the cock crows twice, he will deny Jesus three times. Peter insists that it's not true. He says, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you". And all the rest, not to be outdone, also insist that they are ready to die with Jesus. Maybe they remember the strong words of Jesus "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words ... of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father". If they sink to the depths of deserting Jesus and denying him, then they fear that it might be the end for them. They fear that Jesus might be ashamed of them and deny that they belong to him.

There is however one hopeful sentence in the middle of this distressing passage. Jesus says, "After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee". He says this straight after he's quoted the words from the scriptures, "I will strike the shepherd

and the sheep will be scattered". He will be struck down in death and they will be scattered. Then, he will be raised up. When he is, he will not desert them, as they deserted him, he will continue to be their shepherd. He will go before them to Galilee. The Greek word translated "go before" can be understood in two ways. It may be that Jesus goes ahead of them so that when they get to Galilee, they find him already there. Or it could be that they all go together at the same time with Jesus leading and guiding them in the way that they should take. My hunch is that we are intended to understand both as being true. Jesus is your guide who travels with you along the path. He also goes in advance of you. You do not go into any situation alone. Jesus is always already there to meet you. You may be wondering what life will be like after the dust of the pandemic settles. You may be wondering that for yourself or for the Church. Whatever the future holds of this you can be sure, Jesus has gone before you, he will be there to meet you.

Jesus is warning his friends that they are about to be scattered. They are about to go through an unbearable experience. They will fail to live up to their own hopes of themselves. They will feel crushed and devastated. But they do not need to be overwhelmed. Jesus their shepherd won't give up on them. He will gather them again. They will still be his flock. He will continue to make them lie down in green pastures, lead them beside still waters and restore their souls.

And when they have been restored, they will be even more convinced that they belong to Jesus. They will know his acceptance and love more deeply because they have experienced it more fully. From this place they will be more able to live as his people in the way that he wants. And maybe sometimes they will think that it was all necessary. Perhaps the shepherd had to be struck, they had to be scattered, they had to fail, so that he could rise again and they could be restored as he led them as his people once more. In that way, not only does he rise again, but they also rise with him.

God bless you,

Tony