

Matthew 26:47-56; The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' 49At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. 50Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. 51Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. 52Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' 55At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. 56But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Presently, we are being discouraged, restricted and even prohibited to interact physically with people outside of our immediate household. We are learning and have learnt to practise social distancing. I have had reason to consider this in a particular way that brings it home – that what we have had to give up this Lent goes much deeper than giving up chocolates, alcohol, crisps, meat. Shortly before the restrictions came into force our new and growing family – daughters and son-in-law and grandson moved in with us. Our grandson is now 14 months old. He loves to be picked up and passed around. Often he is stretching up his little arms asking through that endearing gesture to be picked up and carried. He likes to hold someone's hand as he toddles around the flat. There is much physical interaction. And we can be sure that this physical interaction strengthens the bonds of affection between us. Many are having to forgo this kind of interaction with loved ones and those who are dear to them. Our grandson's other grandmother had such a longing to see him in person and so it was arranged that she should, but naturally our grandson could not understand why she couldn't hold him.

We are learning and have learnt to practise social distancing. Christ's life and passion is not embedded in an immediate crisis like ours; his was of a different order, going to the heart of our existence. On the Sunday when the churches were closed for worship many will have heard the episode of the man born blind. "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see." (John 9.5-7) No social distancing, actually quite the opposite.

No one is practising social distancing in the Passion Narrative and especially in relation to Jesus. Jesus in obedience to the Father's will suffers interrogation, spitting, ridicule, mocking, scourging, beating, and the crown of thorns is pressed down upon his head. He will carry a cross. He will be nailed to a cross. The cross will be lifted up so that this defeated human being becomes a display for all to look at and at the foot of the cross will stand those who did not desert or flee.

A large crowd comes out to meet Jesus. They meet him with clubs and swords. The material world as a life-threatening force is present in these weapons. The crowd that comes out to meet him is made up of those with authority in Jerusalem and amongst the Jewish people as a people of faith, the chief priests and the elders of the people. We see Judas clearly. We seek to fathom his motives, but what we need to see clearly is that there is a group of people Judas can betray Jesus to. Judas has power, because there is a group of people whom Jesus can be handed over to.

So that the chief priests and the elders know whom to arrest, so that they don't make a mistake Judas says, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." What does this tell us? It tells us that the chief priests and the elders themselves were not even sure what Jesus looked like. This is indeed peculiar. They have heard about Jesus, but they have not set eyes on him. Besides it was night. The crowd that comes out to meet him must make sure that they arrest the right person. Only someone who knows Jesus well will clearly be able to identify him. And how well Jesus and Judas know each is each other is underlined by Jesus' salutation of "friend", which contrasts with Judas' salutation, the betrayal of his friend with a kiss and possibly an embrace?

Jesus greets Judas with the salutation of "friend"! A friend is someone you don't abandon even if they have strayed from the way like a lost sheep. So be it. Amen.