

MEDITATION FOR HOLY THURSDAY AT THE ALTAR OF REPOSE

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

[Read very slowly and meditatively – pausing for silence and reflection]

Read from the Gospel: Jn 18:1
 Mk 14:32-40
 Lk 22:43,44
 Mk 14: 41,42

1. Night has fallen. In one of the streets of Jerusalem a door opens and a dozen men come out of the house. The full moon is shining. It is Jesus with his intimate companions after he had finished his LAST SUPPER. Judas alone is absent. He disappeared in the night at the end of the supper. The little group walked down the hill and out of the city. Ready to fight in defence of their Master, Peter and another disciple bring two swords with them. Jesus then descended to the brook of Cedron and crossed it. They then walked up the valley and turned left to climb the mount of Olives. Then Jesus enters a garden called Gethsemane. Jesus has often sat there with his disciples. Never before did he make his disciples feel how near was this awful calamity which his friends had never been willing to accept. Now they feel that things are drawing to a close, and are not surprised when he tells them to wait while he prays. Only the three who had recently been with him on the mount of the Transfiguration, Peter James and John, accompany him. This detail seems to be of no importance. Actually it has a great significance. By inviting them again to be with him at the darkest hour of his life, Jesus wants to remind them of the light that is in him, the same light which was manifested on Mount Tabor and which will shine again in his resurrection. But for now the three friends of Jesus do not understand and they fall asleep. Jesus is completely alone.

[Pause in silence]

Let us in silence walk with Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane
and accept Jesus' invitation to Watch and Pray with him.

[sing a suitable hymn after some silence]

2. The scene of Gethsemane is one of the Gospel events in which we can best contemplate the humanity of Jesus. A terrible sadness overcomes the Lord – sadness “unto death” as the Scriptures say. Then Jesus tells the three that they should watch with him – perhaps they are surprised to hear him say this; it is probably the first time he has ever asked them to. Alone he advances a few paces, falls on his face and prays.

Jesus is now rejected by his own people and misunderstood by the authorities who feel that he is a dangerous man. He has gone through tremendous strain and now the breakdown: the journey to Jerusalem, the entry into the city, the terrible waiting of the preceding days, the treachery of Judas and the Last Supper. Here we must come with living faith – no mere passive acceptance of a story. What we are anticipating is a mystery and the content is our own sin.

Each one of us is very much part of the agony of tonight. The ultimate consequence of mankind's sins of yesterday, today and tomorrow is present before Jesus here in the agony of Gethsemane. Every one of us must participate in the great mystery of Christ's suffering. It is only in the measure that we understand our own sins and the sins of the world, and their

consequences that we can experience what Jesus experienced when he sweated blood in the garden.

Gethsemane was the hour in which Jesus' human heart and mind experienced the ultimate burden of sin he was to bear as his own, before the countenance of God; the hour in which he suffered the unspeakable agony of "abandonment" before an all holy God. Sin finds no place in the presence of infinite holiness.

[pause in silence]

Let us recall to mind the many times we have sinned.

Let us bring before our mind the terrible sins committed

in the world that call down the punishment of the almighty God

We need to realize that we are the cause of Jesus' agony in the garden.

[sing a suitable hymn after some silence]

3. In this terrible moment of suffering we see Jesus accepting the Father's will and surrendering his own. "His" will was not a revolt against God - that would have been sin. It was simply the contradiction of a supremely pure and holy being taking on himself the evil of the whole world. That was the heavy price of Jesus' self-sacrificing love accepting to be the one on whom all God's judgement would fall, through no fault of his own. To accept this was the meaning of his words, "yet not what I will but what you will."

It was not from death that he was asking his heavenly Father to save him. He did not shrink only from the suffering of bodily torments, scourging and tearing of flesh, nailing and death, which he knew already in every detail. It was far more than that. The agony beginning in him no other man has known. The prophet Isaiah had foretold it "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows, He was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins. The Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all."

It was no token suffering that he was offering to God in expiation for the sins of all mankind. Jesus took the sins themselves, everything of them except their guilt. . It is what St. Paul tells us: "Him, who knew no sin, God has made into sin for us." 2Cor 5:21 All the sorrow sinners ought to feel and have not felt came flooding in on him.

That was the heart of his agony. There the real struggle took place. That was the chalice which he prayed might pass from him. All that came afterwards was the realization of that hour His Passion would be the actual execution of what had been painfully anticipated by heart and spirit in the garden. His Father sent an angel from heaven not to lessen the agony but to give him the strength to bear it. Our own salvation will be seeing sin as Jesus saw it and experiencing his rejection of being the one to incur the judgement of the Father.

[pause for silence]

We ask Jesus to grant us the grace of conversion. We decide to give up that bad habit of sin that is ruling our life.

We join Jesus in atoning for the sins of the whole world through our prayer and penance.

[sing a suitable hymn after some silence]

4. Through all this Peter, James and John slept. The first time he woke them, reproaching Peter. He urged them to pray. They slept again and again he woke them. But the third time there was a difference: their waking or sleeping no longer mattered. His hour was come. The conflict within for Jesus was over. The sufferings might intensify, but from now on he was master of himself and the situation. The Redemption was fully and freely willed.

Jesus is still speaking to his disciples – the words about the “hour” that is now come – when Judas appears, accompanied by a large crowd sent by the high council. Some carry clubs, others swords to maintain order. Judas has arranged a signal with them. What a treacherous act “Whomever I kiss that is he; lay hold of him”

Read from the Gospel Mt 26: 47-50
 Jn 18: 5-8
 Mt 26:51-54

Now the cohort closes in on Jesus. Peter unable to bear the sight of men’s hands on the Lord, draws his sword and slashes right and left. But Jesus would show him that no earthly sword could cope with the gravity of the situation. If he wishes protection Jesus could call it down from heaven, but the Scriptures had to be fulfilled.

With Christ’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane the temptation he had warned them to pray against came upon the Apostles. The flesh proved weak indeed. They took to flight, all of them. And this within an hour or two after they had eaten his Body and drunk his Blood at the Last Supper Terrified the disciples flee – not only for fear that they too might be seized, but out of utter dismay and confusion. Up to this point they had expected their Master to crush all opposition by some mighty sign of mission. How wrong they were in trying to read the mind of God. They concluded that he was not the bearer of all power in heaven and earth and they abandoned him into the hands of his enemies. They have lost faith in him. They had created their own opinion of the Messiah and how wrong they had been, although Jesus had three times instructed them about the reality.

Then the soldiers bind Jesus and lead him away to be tried, condemned and put to death.

[pause for silence]

Tonight as we go to bed our thoughts are with Jesus
 in the hands of his enemies, mocked, scourged and crowned.
 We follow him, not like Peter, but with humble sorrow
 for our sins and grateful love for the suffering
 by which he obtained pardon for us.

[sing a suitable hymn after some silence]