

Reflection for Holy Week

You may be wondering why I have chosen the arrest of Jesus as a reading for today when, strictly speaking, it belongs to Maundy Thursday. Well, I chose it because it is a pivotal point in the Gospel of Mark as David Newman will know well, since I remember with pleasure his recitation of the whole of that Gospel from memory some years ago in Holy Week at Asfordby. In Mark, things progress at quite a pace, driven by the actions of Jesus and viewed from his perspective. He prefixes descriptions of people or situations with 'Jesus saw'. At the Transfiguration Peter, James and John don't just accompany Jesus – **he** took them with him and led them up a high mountain. In Gethsemane, **he** finds them sleeping. Everything revolves around Jesus, until his arrest. Thereafter he says very little. He replies to the High priest's question – Are you the Messiah? – and to Pilate when he asks, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Although we think of the Seven Last Words from the cross, Mark records only one 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' He does nothing – everything that happens after his arrest, happens to him; it is not at his instigation. There is a sudden switch from activity to passivity, from action to passion, in the original sense of the word. This may not be news to you – and I can't claim it as my own insight. It comes from a book that I read while I was training for ordination in the early 1980s, the *Stature of Waiting* by W H Vanstone. It is a book I return to more frequently as I get older because it has a lot to say about aging and speaks to all of us in the curious times we are currently living through. Last Wednesday evening I watched *DNA Journey* on ITV in which father and son, Martin and Roman Kemp, were taken on a tour around their family history. Just as interesting was the relationship between them. Roman said to his father 'There was a time when I was a little kid and you were my Dad, then you became my elder brother, then my younger brother and now I'm more your Dad and you, my child.' He was joshing his father, who at a mere 58, is scarcely in his dotage, but those of us who've gone through those stages with our own aging parents will recognise the basic truth of that. The sudden turnaround from activity to passivity is not often as rapid as it was for Jesus, unless someone has a horrendous accident or perhaps a severe stroke, but it does come.

We value action over inaction – our whole society is geared up to that way of thinking. The Victorian distinction between deserving poor, who were poor despite working hard, and undeserving poor – those who were thought to be idle – is still with us. 'I don't want to be a burden to anyone' is a phrase you still hear from older people. But as we go on in life, we end up waiting more and more, waiting for other people to do what we need when at one time we did such things for ourselves. Care homes have been very much in focus over this last year for all sorts of reasons, but the residents are in many cases still waiting – not for their afternoon cup of tea and biscuit – but to see their family again in any meaningful way that involves human contact not just on a screen or on the other side of a window. Somehow those who are dependent are seen as diminished.

We are made in the image of God, God the creator who sustains his creation. We think of the Holy Spirit in action. We say things like 'Let's find out what God is doing and join in'. Yet if we stop and think we know that God, too, waits. He waits, like the father of the Prodigal Son, for his child, hoping that he or she will sooner or later turn up – yet, since he has given us free will, who can say how long that will be, or, indeed, if the child will ever come back. Why does God wait in hope? Because he loves us, and that is his very nature. Why is God in Christ handed over into the power of his own people, the Jews? Because that is the

greatest possible manifestation of his love. And, if we look at John's gospel, in particular, that is when Christ is glorified even, or perhaps especially, in his helplessness to direct what is going on around him and is done for and to him. Care homes are sometimes referred to as the waiting room for heaven. Those who wait and are waited on because of their inability to care for themselves, still bear the imprint of the image of God, are still enfolded in the love of God and have a Saviour who placed his life into the hands of others. And we place ourselves and the whole of his creation into the hands of God.