

In his second Holy Week lectures at Canterbury Cathedral, Archbishop Justin reflected on the agony of Christ in Gethsemane and how we can follow His example to have faith in and submit to the will of God. Read an abridged version of the talk below.

In your Grace, O Lord, may we join with you in Gethsemane neither sleeping nor caught by terror, but amazed at your love. Amen.

Psalms 88, a couple of verses. The Psalmist writes: 'Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreaded assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. From all sides, they close in on me. You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me. My companions are in darkness.'

It's the Psalm with the least hope in the whole of the Book of Psalms. If you want to look for the increasingly sad Psalms, it's easy to remember: it's 22, 44 and 88. I discovered that accidentally. I'm so pleased there isn't 176.

Mark 14:34 - Jesus says my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. The Bible is full of moments of despair. It is one of the most common emotions expressed in the Psalms. The Book of Job wrestles with its overwhelming force and the consequences. It is linked narratively to fear and to the intense and constant stress of extended conflict, whether physical, emotional or work-related.

Despair is a deeply human emotion, which is often seen as the culmination of the impact of a series of events which remove all optimism or reasons for optimism. It is a moment of total breakdown, of seeing no acceptable way forward, of having exhausted all the measures that one can imagine.

In the first book of Samuel, King Saul faces defeat at the Battle of Mount Gilboa. For years, he's been fighting David and steadily losing. The stress and sense of failure have grown in someone who was already psychologically fragile. The Philistines take advantage of Israel's division, and they attack. And at the very end, he sees his sons have been killed, his armies are fleeing, his hopes of victory are gone and he falls on his sword.

And yet, until that moment of despair, it is characteristic of human nature to retain shreds of optimism, a search for life in the face of near-certain defeat. A parishioner of ours who'd been an RAF pilot as the first jets came into service after the Second World War, spoke to me once of the number of crashes he'd had with the new technology. There had been several.

I asked how he dealt with the fear when something went seriously wrong. His answer was that he was always sure that if he tried one more thing, he could save the situation. Presumably the people who ran out of things to try never told the story. He said there was always an element of optimism, even when it looked almost fatal. That is not despair. Despair is further.

Saul was in despair. A losing king in the Bronze Age may sensibly have chosen to die rather than to be made a prisoner and tortured. A pilot is, however, conditioned to work through solutions again and again.

A society without God is a society for which despair may become the only way forward. A worldview without God may still enable a person to act

well in love, mercy, and justice. They may still surrender their lives in love for one another.

But such a philosophical view, for to be an atheist, is a courageous form of philosophy. Such a philosophical view makes autonomy an idol, and all idols let us down. None of us are really autonomous. We see here because someone makes the electricity run. We drive home safely in all probability because the roads are kept safe by other people. We are all interdependent. None of us is autonomous for one moment of our lives.

In typical Hollywood apocalyptic films we see the image of a Hobbesian society depending on the lone hero who protects his, usually, loved ones in a world where life indeed is nasty, brutish and short. But it is nevertheless a world of despair and a world of autonomy.

It is, like all worldviews, described in the Bible. As it happens in the Book of Judges, we find the Hobbesian description of life. In the Book of Judges, it is written three times, "In those days, there was no king in Israel, hence no law. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes." Autonomy.

In many parts of our society, severe shame, and the despair that so easily follows, is seen as a medical condition. Despair itself is seen as treatable, it's not a new idea. Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, published in 1932, has a drug called Soma, which relieves all anxieties and depressions, even in the terminal wards of the Brave New Worlds' hospitals. It is said to have and I quote from the book, "All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol with none of their defects." Fascinating.

The advantages of Christianity and alcohol. There isn't even the virtue of a comma or an 'or'. Christianity or alcohol, I could cope with. But of course, in Brave New World, the result is a world that should be utopian but is dystopian. Full of those whose emotions and responses are so completely suppressed that in the end they are conditioned to emotional and relational numbness.

But there's nothing wrong with medicalizing the treatment of illness. It would be very cruel not to. Mental illness can bring despair in the most irrational of moments.

The writer of Psalm 88 is in despair but, as many people do, suffers from depression. The Psalms cover every emotion and do so without judgement. They are so honest, that's why I love them.

Jesus himself is in torment in Gethsemane. It is entirely rational. He sees what is likely to happen, what is going to happen to him in the next 24 hours, and he knows his calling. He's told the disciples since Mark Chapter 8 that he will be arrested, tried and executed. That the imminent reality is now upon him. And so, all the normal physical responses to great fear and immeasurable stress begin to function.

Adrenaline and cortisol will have been flooding his body, causing massive changes to his physiology. His heart rate would have been enormously elevated. He would probably have felt sick and had a profound desire to compromise on what he was doing, or simply to run away.

Physiological and emotional reactions to immense stress, especially imminent death by violence are normal for human beings. I met someone who had attended to the body of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Saint Oscar Romero, shot dead in March 1980 for standing up for the poor in Central America.

This person said that when they were taking his clothes off, he had been shot dead during the Eucharist and was wearing robes, they were encrusted with salt. As in the moment he saw the gun turned towards him, he sweated such vast quantities.

That's a physiological reaction. The body does what it does. The disciples sleep because they're worn out by grief. They are in despair. They do not understand, unlike Jesus, what is happening. Where are the crowds now? Where's the political momentum gone?

They had built all their expectations, their optimism, on a profound misunderstanding. Exhaustion is a natural response. Go to sleep, and perhaps when I wake up it'll all be better somehow. And at the same time, they too were dreading what might happen, a response from the authorities. And they are yet to see what Jesus does.

And as we read of these Gethsemane and post-Gethsemane moments, it feels as though we're looking through a window into the private agony of Jesus and his followers. And too often we put them together and don't see that they are two very different things going on here. Often, we find the pain, the need of others so difficult to see and be present with.

Which of us, maybe there will be some, hasn't perhaps put off calling someone who is sick for fear that in the face of such suffering, our own inadequate offers will only feel more obvious?

I'm very struck by Jesus's desire for companionship. Very often we don't go to be with those who are in despair because it is so hard. You fear you'll catch it as though it were a disease.

And yet, I can think of times when I've gone to be with someone and come away in a sense of near despair myself, thinking I did nothing. And then a relative of theirs has said, "Oh, mum was so grateful that you came." Grateful that someone was there.

Jesus wants the fellowship of the disciples. He doesn't want answers. He just wants them with him on such a terrible, raw and fearful evening. Yet those who just earlier that evening had promised to stand by him, cannot even stay awake in his hour of need.

Maybe the thing that is worse than being alone is being with people who make us feel alone. There's a fascinating history from the Russian purges under Stalin of the 1930s. The purges of the 1930s that Stalin led, in which millions were killed, many, many millions, possibly as many as 20 million, were principally at the beginning of what were called the Old Bolsheviks. Those were the people who'd been part of the Communist Party and part of the growing revolution against Czarist Russia from long before the revolution happened.

And they had gone through prison camp, they had gone through Siberia, they've gone through torture at the hands of the Czarist police and had never given in. In the 1930s, the longest recorded time any of them survived before cracking and being willing to accuse anyone of plotting against Stalin and to agree to the most ludicrous plots - that they were Japanese agents, when they didn't speak a word of Japanese, that they were working for MI6 or whatever. The longest that any of them lasted was five days.

They lasted years under the Czars. And do you know the reason? They were taken down to the cells, beaten, yes, but they had gone through that before. And the interrogator said, "Listen, it's very simple. You are going to die. We're going to execute you, and no one will ever know. If you talk, we'll give you a show trial. You'll be visible again, just briefly. If you don't talk, we'll just shoot you. You'll have all the pain. Your family will never know. Nobody will ever know." And what cracked, what broke them was that sense of isolation. The only people around them made them feel even more alone.

We can imagine the loneliness of Jesus, can we? Probably not. But we can try to, at this point. The next 18 hours will be a solitary agony for him. And this abandonment by the disciples foreshadows the abandonment by God he will experience as he hangs on the cross.

It is a stark contrast to the crowds we thought of yesterday, who accompanied him as he rode into Jerusalem. It's very easy to follow God's will when we think he will do exactly what we want, what we've been hoping for.

It's easy to cheer Jesus when he rides into the city, when we think he's offering us success and strength, when the signs make us optimistic. But Gethsemane plunges us into observing a moment when all optimism - I'm using my words very carefully - is smashed, when planning is useless.

The moments where we feel abandoned, rejected and alone, and with the sense that the worst is still to come and all we can do is abandon ourselves to our fate. When we hear this story in Luke, as we did a few minutes ago, are we listening to the despair of God?

Luke the physician tells us that Jesus sweated drops of blood; this rare medical condition has been documented: "Acute fear and intense mental contemplation are the most frequent causes as reported in six cases in men condemned to execution. A case occurring during the London Blitz, a case involving fear of being raped, a case of fear of a storm while sailing."

In the World War One trenches, it was recognised that those who sweated blood died less than a minute later from a heart attack, whether what was happening caused them sweat blood, or the other way around, I don't know. But let's be under no mistake, Jesus here, in an olive grove, is being pressed like the olives.

And what comes out isn't just blood, but faith. This is not despair. His disciples flee in fear-filled despair, but Jesus acts in faith-filled obedience.

They seek for strength within and find nothing. He finds something from outside.

It was only after Mother Teresa's death that her writings and her letters revealed the true extent to which she had experienced the absence of Christ. In one particular letter, she wrote, "The silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear. The tongue moves in prayer but does not speak". And yet, she added in this letter, "I want you to pray for me that I let him have a free hand."

And in Gethsemane, that is the prayer that Jesus prays. As does the first martyr, Stephen, as they stone him. Jesus is not despairing any more than Mother Theresa was. He has an understanding of God that is so profound that when we see it today, we call those who show it saints, because they have walked hand in hand with God.

In Genesis 18, the story of Sarah and Abraham, God promises Sarah and Abraham a child - something so improbable that Sarah laughs out loud. God says, I think slightly grumpily, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

And Jesus says the same, repeating something he has said before, "All things are possible with God" - Mark Chapter 10, verse 27.

Despair is a void, it is the absence of options. It's not a sin, for it may just come to us from what is happening to us physiologically, psychologically, it may be acute depression. Even in Gethsemane though, Jesus does not despair, although he has no options ready that he thinks are takeable, but neither is he optimistic. He accepts that his Father chooses and determines to go ahead, and Jesus decides to go ahead with what is right, whatever the cost.

That is not pessimism either, any more than it is optimism or despair. It is finding a way forward that is not depending on oneself, on us, or anything we can see or trust.

In his Screwtape Letters, the imaginary correspondence written by CS Lewis of a senior devil to a junior devil, who has been given charge of a fresh convert, the senior devil writes this to the junior one, "Do not be deceived Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human no longer desiring, but still intending to do our enemy's will" - the enemy is God, of course - "looks around upon the universe from which every trace of our enemy seems to have vanished, and asked why he's been forsaken and still obeys."

It is just at the moments when we're without options that we throw ourselves unconditionally, if we're sensible, like Mother Teresa, on the mercy and grace of God. And we find that there are options.

We say the Lord's prayer so often that I wonder if sometimes we skim over the consequences of what we're saying. If God's will is done that means our will has to be laid down. God's will is so large that we can't carry ours and his in the same hand. If God's kingdom is to come, we have to be willing to relinquish all the kingdoms that we build for ourselves that we hold so dear.

That's not despair, it's faith. Those next few hours of Jesus's life are what makes all faith by us possible.

As the son, who is God, puts himself in the hands of the father, who is God, and finds an absence for the first and only time in eternity. Jesus did not want to die so brutally. He prays three times, the first time saying, "Take this cup away from me."

The second time is slightly different. He says, "If it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." The emphasis changes. The first time, Jesus begs not to have to drink the dregs of human suffering. The second time, he's willing to do it if it's the only way.

Matthew says, "He prayed a third time saying the same thing." The exact words are known only to God. But it feels from that first prayer to the second, although both in absolute obedience to God, Jesus is already strengthened by prayer, by the Angel and by his faithfulness. Perhaps the final prayer was simply the one he taught his disciples and teaches us - that hardest of prayers: your will be done.

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