

Wednesday in Judica, the 31st Day of Lent
April 1, 2009

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

MOUNT OLIVET Luke 22:39-46

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Over the past few Wednesdays we have visited several mountains in the Old Testament, Horeb, Sinai, Carmel and Zion. Tonight we will shift our attention to a very important mount in the New Testament, the Mount of Olives. This mount was one of Jesus' favorite lodging spots. It was only about five hundred yards to the East and overlooked the ancient city. There he would retire from the crowds of Jerusalem when He visited that city, although sometimes the crowds would even follow Him there. It was from Mount Olive that He made His triumphal entry into the city. Now, having celebrated the Passover one last times with His disciples and having humbly washed their feet, He retires there again.

All of the disciples accompany Him to the Mount and He leads them to the Garden of Gethsemane. Pausing, He instructs the disciples to stay at a certain place and pray. He tells them: "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." Taking only Peter, James and John with Him now He advances a little further, as St. Luke tells us, about a stone's throw away. Jesus himself gets down on His knees and prays to His heavenly Father. "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." An angel appears to give Him strength. Then He prays al the more earnestly. St. Luke tells us that He prayed so hard and was in such agony of spirit that sweat poured out of Him like great drops of blood.

Now the disciples were supposed to be praying as well. But what does Jesus find them doing instead? They are all asleep. He wakes them up and says: "Why do you sleep, Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation." St. Matthew elaborates the account for us, telling us that two more times Jesus broke from His prayer and went and found them sleeping. Matthew tells us that the last time Jesus came and said to them: "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

Now the time for praying had passed. Now Jesus was betrayed and taken captive. And what do the disciples do? St. Matthew tells us: "Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled." Later Peter and another disciple, probably John, followed them to Caiaphas' house where the trial was going on. And there, the disciple who swore that He would never deny Christ, does so three times. Indeed, all of the disciples fail somewhat in these days of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. For all of them feared losing their lives. All of them forsook Him. Only John braves the trial and crucifixion openly. The rest hide and watch.

I think all of this leads back to the garden where the disciples were supposed to be watching and praying, but rather were sleeping. Had they prayed as they were instructed to do, perhaps they would not have fallen to temptation. Perhaps they would have been stronger. We don't know. All we know is that they did fall to temptation and did not pray as they were told.

We too are instructed to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Mark: "Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is." The time spoken of is the last day. And Paul tells us in First Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing." James also tells us "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray."

Prayer is important to our Christian lives. For we, like Jesus and like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, are constantly under attack by Satan. He is continually providing temptations for us, trying to lure us into sin; trying to lure us into forsaking Christ. For he would like nothing more than to drag us into judgment with himself. As God wills to fill heaven with the faithful, so also Satan wishes to fill hell with unbelievers.

In the Garden we are given two models to choose from: the model of Jesus or of the disciples. Which one will we choose? Will we pray diligently and earnestly as Jesus did? Or will we fall asleep in our sorrow and not pray at all, as the disciples did? Oh, it is easy to choose the second option, to not pray. It is easy to go about life with a *que sara sara* attitude... whatever will be will be, so why bother praying. But making that choice leaves us poorly armed in the fight against Satan. It cuts us off our lines of communication to our greatest ally, the Holy Trinity.

But if we choose the first option, to pray diligently as Christ prayed, those lines are kept open and we are well armed in the fight against the devil. For we have the promise of aid from God. As we chanted in the Psalm this evening: "God will hear... Even He who abides from of old... Cast your burden on the Lord, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved." For this reason the Psalmist proclaims: "Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, And He shall hear my voice." The Psalmist is teaching us to pray diligently, to pray without ceasing.

It is the same lesson that Jesus Himself teaches us by His prayer. As the hymn for this evening put it:

"Go to dark Gethsemane,
Ye that feel the tempter's power;
Your Redeemer's conflict see,
Watch with Him one bitter hour.
Turn not from His griefs away,
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray."

Here, in the midst of torment and temptation, Christ Jesus is once again teaching us. The great prophet and Savior gives yet another lesson to us as He prepares to go up to Jerusalem to die for our sins and win our salvation. He teaches us not only to pray, but how to pray in the midst of temptation.

For Christ did suffer great temptation. We can see it in the very words of His prayer. The temptation that attacked His human nature was the temptation to flee from the cross. Luke tells us that He prayed: "Father, if it Your will, take this cup away from Me." Matthew gives us a fuller description of His words: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me;" and again a second time: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." Each time that Jesus prays to escape the torment of the cross, He concludes with the words: "nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done."

This is the kind of prayer that we too ought to pray when confronted with temptation. For our human will is often to set to give in to temptation. Therefore we must abandon our weak wills and pray to our Father: "not my will, but Yours be done." When we pray thus, we have the promise that God will

answer our prayers in the affirmative. His good and gracious will will be done. As Luther so aptly puts it in his explanation to the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism: "The good and gracious will of God is done indeed without our prayer; but we pray in this petition it may be done among us also."

And what is God's will in regard to temptations that assault us? It is the same will that was shown when Jesus suffered from temptation. His will is that we overcome and not fall into sin. As Luther says again: "God's will breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow God's name nor let His kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh." God's will is that we join with Christ in His victory over Satan.

For Satan has been defeated. He was beaten when Christ died on the cross the day after He was arrested on Mount Olive in the Garden of Gethsemane. Through Christ this victory is ours as well. Victory over sin, over temptation, and over the devil. All this through the grace of God our Father who hears our cries for help, and in the words of Psalm 55 brings down our enemy, the great tempter who is the devil, "into the pit of destruction." But "never permits the righteous to be moved." Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠