

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 81”

Matthew 26:14-30

The tension continues to build. This amazing story of the life and ministry of Jesus is reaching its climax and in the last two chapters particularly, Matthew has been drawing us into the action, heightening the expectation and hinting at the tragedy that is about to unfold. As we've said so many times on the way through this Gospel, it's all so familiar to us: we've heard it many times before. We know the ending. In many ways, it's difficult for us to get that sense of foreboding as we read this passage again this morning. We know where it's going. And we know there's a happy ending. Those people who were with Jesus couldn't work out what was going to happen, but they sensed it wasn't going to be good. And the very first readers may also have been ignorant of all the things that were to happen to the one whose story Matthew is relating here.

We've noticed all the way through this Gospel that Matthew has been at pains to demonstrate that all that has happened to Jesus is part of a plan, a plan that was hatched in the days of the Old Testament. This is not some skilfully worked fictional account of the life of yet another Messianic pretender. And in the passage we've read this morning, there is quite an emphasis on the fact that there is a clear plan inherent in all this.

For Matthew's first readers, there is this continuing need to show that following Jesus is an acceptable option. You see, the people for whom Matthew was originally writing – most likely the people who made up the little church of which Matthew was leader – were Jewish. At this point the Gospel hadn't really spread far into the Gentile world, so those who were wanting to commit to following this Kingly Messiah were the kind of people who had seen and heard Jesus in Palestine – Jewish people. And they needed convincing that he was, indeed, the Messiah. They needed to be reassured that following him was not betraying their heritage and culture and faith. Matthew is showing that, actually, far from being a betrayal, following Jesus is an integral part of that faith, a logical consequence of all the stuff in their Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – the fulfilment of all the prophecies and predictions that they heard read in the synagogue each week and proclaimed at all their festivals, the anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God and the Kingly Messiah who would inaugurate it. So there's been an awful lot of quotation from those Hebrew Scriptures and a good many parallels drawn between the prophets' pictures of the Messiah and the life of this Jesus.

And for those who, like you and I, are reading this Gospel from a Gentile perspective, trying to work out if it all makes sense, there is reassurance too. The Holy Spirit takes what Matthew wrote for that specific audience and tells us that this is something that you can believe in, something you can trust.

The one-time Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once reputedly asked by a journalist what was most likely to blow governments off course and he is said to have replied, “*Events, dear boy. Events.*” There’s an idea that history is just a series of random events and we make of them what we can. Ambrose Bierce was an American journalist, short story writer and satirist who wrote a satirical lexicon in 1906 called *The Devil's Dictionary*. In it he defined history as “*an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.*” It’s what many people have referred to as “*the cock-up theory of history*” – we simply blunder along and stuff happens: we try and make the best of it.

Matthew is clear that that’s not the case. There’s a plan. God has always had something worked out – right from the very first blunder that humanity made in disobeying the only rule he gave them. Things are moving towards a conclusion that is just what God wanted in the very first place and he is doing all he can to expedite things to that end. That end will be the fulfilled Kingdom of God, when his creation will be restored to what he originally intended for it and all will be under his benevolent rule. Jesus is a key player in that plan and the events which mark out his life are not random. God is not simply making the best of a bad job as the coincidences of history happen to fall in with what he wants. Every bit of this story is foreshadowed in some way and knits together with the other stuff that’s going on around Jesus. Look at what happens here.

In the part of the story we’ve just heard, Judas goes off to betray Jesus. Many Bibles have a heading here that says something along the lines of “*Judas agrees to betray Jesus*”. Judas does not **agree** to betray Jesus – he **offers** to betray Jesus. This is done on his initiative – maybe under some kind of demonic influence, maybe for some other reason. No-one can be sure why he did it – and there have been thousands, tens of thousands of books and studies written about this. Was it simply for money? There wasn’t a lot involved. In *Exodus 21:32* thirty pieces of silver was set down to be the compensation to be paid by someone whose bull had gored someone else’s slave. Was it out of jealousy – a Judean fed up with this Galilean getting all the limelight? Was it an attempt to force Jesus’ hand – trying to get Jesus to act a bit more Messiah-like and not expecting things to turn out as they did? Had Judas come to believe that Jesus was a false prophet who needed to be silenced? There are all kinds of other theories as to why he did it, but we’ll never know.

The point is that he did what he did in a way that was hinted at by the Hebrew prophets. This was part of the plan. In *Zechariah 11:12* there’s a reference to the wages given to a rejected shepherd – and the rejected shepherd was seen in this context as a Messianic figure. The wages were thirty pieces of silver. Jesus needed to die for God’s plan to be accomplished – as we’ll see in later weeks – and so there needed to be some mechanism to allow that to happen. Judas supplies the opportunity.

When Jesus is telling his disciples how to get the Passover meal sorted out he says they are to tell the man who is renting them the room, “*My appointed time is near*”. The word for “*time*” there is not the Greek word *chronos*, from which we get “chronology” and “chronometer” – the passage of time – but the Greek word *kairos*. That means a critical moment, a special time. (Someone was talking about that distinction on *Pause for Thought* this week, if anyone heard it.) This “*appointed time*” is clearly part of an overall plan. If you read John’s Gospel, you’ll see that this idea of God’s timing for the events of Jesus’ life is a very strong one. But here it speaks of the inevitability of its happening. It’s not just a random occurrence: it’s what God has willed will happen.

And this part of the story is inextricably linked to the Passover Festival. The Passover is a rich source of imagery and metaphor for what is going on. Not only is there the symbolic significance of the bread and wine, but also the overarching theme of sacrifice – the sacrifice of a lamb, mirrored by the approaching sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Passover is shot through with talk of liberation and salvation – it is, after all, based on the narrative of the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt centuries before. And Jesus now re-interprets all that story in terms of his mission of liberation and salvation. He, the Lamb of God, will be sacrificed to enable all humanity to be delivered from its slavery to the forces of sin and evil. For centuries the Jewish people have been celebrating by looking back to God’s grace in action, freeing them from foreign powers and from exploitation and helplessness. Jesus now looks forward with his disciples to God’s grace in action, freeing us from the power of sin and the sense of helplessness and lack of fulfilment that sin brings with it. For centuries, God has been preparing his people for this moment.

And as Jesus talks to his disciples about betrayal by those closest to him, so he gets them thinking about what this all means for them. When they ask who is to betray him and express their shock at such an idea, Jesus says it will be someone who is very close to him. He doesn’t initially identify Judas. The NIV says, “*The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me,*” but it would probably be better translated “*Someone who has dipped ...*” That could be any of them, as they would all have dipped their bread in the communal bowl of oil with Jesus. But he does say “*The Son of Man will go **just as it is written about him.***” Phrases like that are used time and time again by Matthew in his Gospel. It’s his way of saying, “*Look, this has been planned all along. You’ve read about it. You’ve heard about it. Just put it all together in your mind and believe it!*”

And that plan goes on into the eternal future. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus has been preaching and teaching about, the Kingdom of God which he has told stories about, the Kingdom of God which he has offered glimpses of in his own life and ministry, is going to be fulfilled. As Jesus drinks this Passover wine with his disciples, as he highlights its symbolic representation of his spilled sacrificial blood, as he

refers to its connection with the forgiveness of sins, he tells them that they will one day meet up with him again. He'll be in his Father's Kingdom, celebrating with a glass of wine – a bit of a blow for teetotallers, I'm afraid! Again and again in Jesus's stories and in the prophecies and poetry of the Old Testament, the Kingdom of God is likened to a feast. And here's another reference to it. It will be the climax to this great plan of redemption that God has hatched and which is drawing close to its most crucial phase here.

You see, God is a God of order. He has his plan. History is not simply a series of random events which have somehow got us to this point and we can't really see where it's going from here. There is a big picture, a great canvas of grace in which every little brush stroke has its place. Next time you're in an art gallery, get up really close to the pictures – and you'll probably be grabbed by an attendant! Get up close and look at the brush strokes. At that distance they make little sense – just apparently random daubs and blobs. Stand back and look at the whole picture and you can see what the artist intended. Look at the circumstances and events of Jesus' life, or of the biblical story, one by one and they seem to be hopelessly random, odd coincidences and weird happenings. Look at the overall story and you can see God's plan unfolding as we can in this snatch of the story this morning.

Look at what's happened in your own life during the past week. All sorts of stuff's happened that you probably can't really make sense of. Why did that happen? What's the point of that? What are the chances of that happening like that? Look back over a year, over ten, twenty years and you can see patterns emerging. Look forward with the eyes of faith and you can spot the feast of the Kingdom on the horizon. God has got it sorted. No need for unnecessary anxiety. There's a plan for it all – and the way Jesus' life panned out should give us all confidence in the God who has a purpose and a conclusion in view. As Billy Preston once sang, *That's the way God planned it*. Trust him. It worked for Jesus.

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Questions for discussion

1. Should we blame Judas for what he did if it was part of God's plan? What if Judas hadn't betrayed Jesus?
2. If Jesus knew Judas would betray him, why didn't he intervene?
3. Do you think God has a plan for each of our lives? What happens if we deviate from it? What about our free will?
4. Can you see God's hand at work in your life as you look back over the years? Share some of your testimony about that.

5. Do you find the idea of God's plan reassuring? Why/why not?