

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 83”**

*Matthew 26:47-56*

It's dark. The moonlight and a skyful of stars give just enough light to make it possible to walk through the olive grove without bumping into too many trees and shrubs, but the flickering glow of lamps and lights in nearby Jerusalem gives an orange tinge to the horizon. In the stillness there are the soft sounds of sheep, and the distant sounds of the last Passover parties in the city float across the Kidron Valley. The few quiet and querulous voices in the garden are almost muffled by the darkness.

Twelve men gather their cloaks around them and start to shuffle blearily to their feet, eleven of them still expecting to walk back to Bethany before the dawn breaks. There's an air of foreboding hanging over them, a sense of fear. It's almost tangible as they gradually get themselves sorted out. But one is standing up straight, the Teacher. He seems ready for anything and even in the darkness his steely determination is obvious as he looks over towards the silhouetted walls of the city. Suddenly he speaks out loud, almost barking out an order, it seems. "Come on then. No more sleeping and resting. On your feet. It's time to get a grip."

And hardly have the words dissipated into the cool night air than a group of armed men walk up through the olive trees, the lights of their torches flickering over faces and uniforms. There are some of the Temple Priests, their extravagant turbans and flowing robes signalling their office. Trotting along beside them are the Scribes, weaselly little men, there to add some kind of legal legitimacy to the whole affair. There are Temple guards, the metal of their helmets glinting with reflections of the moon, their spears clipping the low branches as they walk. And there are a few Roman soldiers there at the back, sent along as they always were if a crowd gathered during the Passover Festival to keep order of anything untoward started to kick off.

One man detaches himself from the group and strides over to the Teacher. He puts his hands on the Teacher's shoulders, and looking over shoulder so as not to make any eye contact, leans forward and kisses him cordially on the cheek. The Teacher looks into the man's soul and says simply, "Well, friend, this is it, then."

The armed men, now that they know who their quarry is in the dark, now they can identify Jesus in the group of nervous disciples – because, of course, most of them don't really know him from Adam – step forward and grab him. One of the Teacher's companions lashes out with a sword he had concealed under his cloak, but his clumsy attempts to defend his Master succeed only in slicing off the ear of the High Priest's servant, who happened to be in the way. Jesus tells him not to be so stupid, that such behaviour will only make things worse. And anyway, if he needed any help he could call on his Father God to send

a legion of angels for each and every one of them – 72,000 celestial beings buzzing round the garden: that would sort it out!

But Jesus is not going to do that. That's not the way it should be. Shows of force – even heavenly force – are not going to accomplish what he is there to do. That's not part of the plan. God knows what he's doing and Jesus is prepared to go along with that without the need for violence. It's not part of the plan because it was always going to be like this. That's why Jesus wasn't taken in the Temple, where's he's been teaching and preaching for the last few days. They could have had him there without the need for all this skulduggery and the need for identifying kisses in the dark – but the leaders didn't want to risk any trouble with the people, the people who had cheered him into the city only last Sunday. They thought that was their clever idea, but it was all planned well beforehand, written down in their Scriptures, preached by their prophets. It was always going to happen like this. Even the flight of the disciples, who are now legging it off through the trees back to the relative safety of their lodgings in Bethany – that was predicted, too. Their loud protestations of solidarity and loyalty are now forgotten in the panic of the arrest.

The situation has descended into farce. Clumsy attacks, deserting disciples, soldiers who don't know who they're supposed to be arresting, people milling around in the dark of the olive grove. What's going on? Who's in charge here? Clearly it's not **the disciples**. The first glint of a sword in the moonlight and the first sign of trouble and they're off. Even the one who has so often spoken for them, their blustering spokesman and leader, **Peter**, has offered only a pathetic attempt at defence, swinging his sword like a fish knife, when there were so many more defenders that Jesus could have called on. **Judas** was the one who seemed to be making the running at one point, the one who identified and exposed the Teacher, but he has disappeared and will not be seen again until he is swinging from his noose in The Field of Blood. **The Leaders** – all those priests and scribes and soldiers – are powerless without the help of Judas, unable to work out who they're supposed to be arresting and not really sure what to do about it even when he is singled out.

Look at the scene. **Jesus** seems to be the one setting the agenda. He's probably the only one who really knows the plan, knows what's got to happen if his Father's will is to be fulfilled. He greets Judas with a sense of purpose – it's difficult to translate his reply as Judas kisses him, but there's a sense of destiny in the words he used. It's Jesus who rebukes Peter for his ineffective and superfluous attempt at defending him. He speaks with the certainty of someone who knows that he could bring this episode to a dramatic end with a couple of words to his Father: but he has chosen not to. It's Jesus who taunts the soldiers, laughing at their apparent show of strength – “Do you really think you need all this weaponry for one

harmless teacher?” – and questioning their strategy – “Why didn’t you get me when I was right in front of your noses?” There’s no doubt who’s in charge here – as he’s always been and as he always will be.

Once again we see Jesus not as the helpless victim of fate, the bewildered Messianic pretender, out of his depth and being swept along by events beyond his control. Once again he is the only one who knows what’s happening – and, more importantly, why it’s happening. This is Jesus, the willing sacrifice, the Kingly Messiah, walking confidently towards his destiny.

Why is this happening? Why is Jesus going through all this, now that he has committed himself totally to following his Father’s will? He’s going through it to secure our salvation, to make possible the redemption of all creation and move towards its fulfilment, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. It’s all in his hands. No-one else can go through what Jesus is about to go through – and no-one else could accomplish through that what Jesus is about to accomplish. This is cosmic stuff. This is the turning point in human history. This is Jesus – Son of God and Son of Man – about to make possible the restoration of your relationship with the God who made you and who loves you more than you can know. Here, at the centre of this story, is the Saviour who can transform your life, and he’s about to walk willingly towards it because you matter so much to him. Never, ever forget that.

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As the sermon was more narrative than usual, it doesn't lend itself to a digest of notes and headings, so you'll need to look at the text of it online (Go to [www.wadestreetchurch.com](http://www.wadestreetchurch.com) and look for "Sunday sermons"). These questions can be used with it, though.

**Questions for discussion**

1. Wasn't Peter's reaction to the arrest a natural one? What would you have done? Why do you think Jesus rebukes him? Is this an argument for pacifism? Why/why not?
2. What does Jesus mean by "*All who draw the sword will die by the sword*"? Are there any implications of that for national defence policy?
3. What can we learn from Jesus' attitude here to:
  - a. The Old Testament?
  - b. Unjust accusations?
  - c. Betrayal?
4. Is passivity always the way to respond? Why/why not?
5. Jesus went through this for you. How does that make you feel? How will you respond?