

Luke 22/31-62: JESUS' LAST NIGHT (Tough and Tender)

This passage contains various events from Jesus' last night before his death: the tail end of the Last Supper; Gethsemane; Jesus' arrest; and Peter's denial – in all a passage of time of about 4–6 hours.

In all these events, the greatest contrast is between the disciples' weakness and Jesus' strength (toughness), between the disciples' callousness and Jesus' tenderness.

DISCIPLES...

Still arguing about who would be the greatest (v24 cf. 9/46) –even more callous given the context than last time

An emotion of faithfulness but without the character for it (v33 cf. Jn 13/37: “I will lay down my life for you”) – boundless self-confidence but little self-knowledge (||think more highly of ourselves than we ought [Ro 12/3], complacently think we are standing firm when we are prone to fall [1 Co 10/12])

Thinking still worldly and immature: misunderstand Jesus' instruction, fail to discern the times (the fulfilment of prophecy, what must happen – v36-38,53b)

Still ruled by the flesh (spirit willing but body weak: Mk 14/38): unable to support Jesus at his most vulnerable time (v45); or to pray when faced with imminent and overwhelming temptation (to desert/deny Jesus)(v40,46)

Still not discerning the times and the nature of Jesus' instruction in the light of this, they resort to violence in an attempt to resist what must happen (v49-50)

They deserted Jesus and fled when their own flesh/lives/safety was at stake (Mk 14/50)

Peter denied Jesus – not just once or twice but thrice, over a period of more than an hour (he had time to reflect and repent – or get out of there)(v56-60). He was cowardly and unfaithful.

These 7 instances make a litany of weakness and failure – of ambition, callousness, immaturity, ignorance, worldliness, fleshliness, cowardice, unfaithfulness, desertion and betrayal.

But there is no room for judgement: *we* probably would have done just the same – and possibly have...

Peter ‘broke down’ (Mk 15/72) and wept bitterly. But it was the greatest turning point in his life: this piercing moment of self-knowledge, this revelation of his true weakness, removed all the previous bluster and self-confidence from his life, and enabled Jesus to begin rebuilding him in his image – and so be able to use him so extensively in the years thereafter.

“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter” (v61): if we have failed him, that same look may have broken us. But it can be a great turning point for us too – it means he can at last remove the rubble of our ‘strength’ and rebuild us with the rock of his.

JESUS...

Graciously brings the same correction to their desire to be the greatest (v25-27), truth which has been backed up by his own example (v27c) – and promises them status and authority in his kingdom (v29-30). Most remarkably, he focuses on what they *have* done not on their imminent total failure to stand by him (v28)!

They will shortly fail to pray for and with him but, in the hour of his own crisis, he prays for Peter (v31-32). It is Jesus' prayer (He 7/25) that keeps our faith from failing – even turning it back when we have failed him!

“you [pl]...you [si]”: all Twelve will be sifted but Jesus specifically assures Peter of his prayers for him. Knowing by the Spirit what would happen (“when you have turned back” implies a prior turning away), Jesus has prayed specially for Peter and both lets him know this and graciously assures him in advance that there would be afterwards be restoration and ministry despite what happened. These words must have been of some comfort to Peter between his denials and his public reinstatement (see below).

“that your faith may not fail”: letting Jesus down, however serious or sore, is not (does not need to be) a failure.

Jesus has called him Simon(reed) when speaking of Satan's sifting but calls him Peter(rock) even as he predicts his denial. Jesus looks past our present falling to our future standing; he speaks and believes prophetically of us.

He discerns the times and that what is about to happen to him is a necessary fulfilment of prophecy (v35ff,53c).

Jesus unflinchingly embraces his and his Father's plan for the salvation of man (v39-46). For some time already he has "resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9/51, 17/11), despite knowing what awaited him there (9/22&44, 13/31-33, 18/31-33). Now, with the cross imminent, he faces his greatest and final test – and never flinches. Yes, he understandably asks his Father to remove the cup if at all possible, but is fully submitted to his Father's will. Perhaps nowhere else is his humanity more evident: the prayer for removal of the cup; the need for angelic strengthening; the mental, emotional and spiritual anguish of anticipation; and the profuse perspiration this resulted in (he sweated so much that it ran off him like blood, which has a thinner consistency, would do). In Gethsemane we see both vulnerable tenderness and superhuman toughness side by side. [Cf. Mk 14/32-42: "...he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'...he fell to the ground..." –and the fact that he prayed three times, possibly for up to an hour each time]

He calls Judas "Friend" (Mw 26/50 cf. Ps 41/9). Judas' heart towards him had changed but his heart towards Judas had not. Our heart towards Jesus may drift but his heart towards us never changes. (This is not to deny that such was Judas' sin – his free moral choice – that he did not incur the awful judgement spoken against him)

Even as he is betrayed by one of his own disciples, and about to be forcibly arrested by the leaders of his own people, he does not resist himself (because it is part of his Father's will) nor does he allow others to use violence in their desire to protect him (v49-51) – "for all who draw [live by] the sword will die by the sword" (Mw 26/52). More than that, his grace, goodness and gentleness are demonstrated amidst malice and violence by his healing of the servant of his 'enemy' – the last healing he performs!

"The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter" (v61) – one of the most potent and poignant lines in the Gospels. What was in that look? We may never know – but my best guess is that it contained both deep pain and disappointment and unshakeable love for and faith in him. That look – and the self-revelation – 'broke' Peter.

Jesus' tender mercy, grace and forgiveness is shown finally in his reinstatement of Peter (Jn 21). Once more, Jesus looked at Peter across a fire of burning coals (v9). How vivid and painful the memory of this night must have been to Peter on that morning. But instead of the rebuke, condemnation or disqualification he expected, the faith and love in that 'look' in the courtyard found expression in his reinstatement, commission and destiny.

To acknowledge (v disown, be ashamed) of Jesus before men is part of the cost of discipleship (9/26, 12/8-9). We may blow it – but no failure is irredeemable. If there is remorse and repentance ('he broke down and wept bitterly'), and we truly do love Jesus with all our heart (Jn 21/15-17), Jesus graciously restores and uses us!

P.S. As an alternative to the above (examining first the disciple's behaviour through the whole passage and all 4 events, and then Jesus'), you could contrast the disciples and Jesus event-by-event:

v24-30	Supper (i) 'greatest'	D dispute v J response
v31-34	(ii) 'sifting'	J prayer/prediction v P protestation
v35-38	(iii) 'times'	J discernment/instruction v D dullness
v39-46	Gethsemane	D fleshly v J unflinching
v47-53	Arrest	J submission/compassion v D worldliness/cowardice
v54-62	Denial (&Reinstatement)	P cowardice/unfaithfulness v J grace/faithfulness

Jesus – tough: in his embracing of the cross (discerns the time but submits to the Father and to his persecutors)
& tender: in his patience and gentleness with the disciples despite their fleshly/worldly weakness/dullness
in his compassionate prayer/reassurance, his loving look at, his gracious reinstatement of, Peter
in his honesty and vulnerability before his Father [tender even to Judas and high priest's servant]

Gospel [i] Here as much as anywhere Jesus demonstrates that he *is* The Ultimate Man – both tough and tender.
This strength and beauty draws us to him – this is somebody we can put our trust in!

[ii] The necessity of the cross – why it was not possible for the Father to take this cup from him.