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A MEDITATION FOR THURSDAY EVENINGS

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

THE Rev. E. F. F. Bishop was known to many visitors to Palestine in happier days as Head of the Newman School of Missions. More recently he held the post of Senior Lecturer in Arabic in Glasgow University, and now lives in "retirement" at Redhill. His rare knowledge of the Palestinian countryside, with its life, language and outlook, was put to admirable use a few years ago in his fascinating companion to the gospel narrative, "Jesus of Palestine". There are few men who have the true welfare of Palestine so passionately at heart as Mr. Bishop. This "meditation for Thursday evenings" is specially appropriate for the Thursday before Easter. The non-Biblical quotations in the article are from "The Pilot".

IT was one Thursday evening in the bright moonlight over nineteen centuries ago, that a band of twelve men walked out of the City of Jerusalem towards Olivet. A thirteenth member of the group had left them a few hours before and gone out into the night solitary and determined. The gate through which the twelve left the City may well have been not far from the site of the Zion Gate today; and the road they took from the House of Mary the Mother of Mark would have led through that section of the modern city within the walls which houses the Armenian Quarter with its Cathedral of St. James. Not far away, close to the present Jaffa Gate, rises the Citadel of David, with memories of Herod, for the lower courses of its stone-work were much as they are now, in the days of Christ.

This group of men had spent the previous night in Bethany, further removed from the clamour and glamour of the commercialization of a national feast. The Feast was Passover and during it the friendly village of Bethany was regarded as within the confines of the Holy City, crowded as it was with pilgrims from the districts round and even from overseas. There was a change in plan this Thursday evening; and the party stopped half-way to Bethany; and sat beneath the olive trees in the Kedron Valley, casting their gray shadows up and down the mile or more of grove.

Later four of the group moved some distance away. They were the Leader and His special friends. He left them to pray alone and bade them do the same; for they were to face the acid test of life and death. He was but a stone's throw from them—the Palestinian Baduin yet use the phrase, more picturesque than "sixty yards or so." Fatigue overcame the three and they drowsed while Jesus prayed. The test was too much just then. But He knelt prostrating Himself in the shadow of the trees, well knowing as He told them of the eternal struggle of the spirit with the flesh. "Not my will, but Thine be done."

In these days long after we do well to make this same "pilgrimage" (we may call it) in reverent thought and humble hope and kindled imagination from the Jerusalem home with its Upper Room, the Cœnaculum, the place of the Last Supper, as we call it still, to Gethsemane, the place of "strong crying and tears," but the place of utter willingness for the consummation of the Father's will—the place for ever reminiscent of the eternal victory of the eternal Son. "Not our will but Thine be done."

The road they trod led round the walls—not very far from where it runs today, past the church built on the traditional site of the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest that same year. They call it the Church of St. Peter Gallicante, the Church of the cock-crowing, the scene of the denials. Here we pilgrims must rest awhile for a few moments of recall, not of Peter's sudden collapse, but rather in contrite recollection of our own deep delinquencies and in prayer that we may be more faithful, and as loving as Peter really was, in the witness of our daily living.

The stony path continues on its steep and downward way till we are parallel with the Kedron Valley. Here should we stop in retrospective reverie, as we look across and up to Olivet, remembering the days successive to the Cross and Passion, when the "Author and Finisher of our faith" gave these same men the great commission to carry into all the world the "sacred and imperishable message of eternal salvation."

So to the olives in Gethsemane, more sparsely scattered up and down the lower slopes of Olivet and along the Kedron Valley than 1900 years ago. There must we wend our way for quiet. "Jesus oftentimes resorted thither with His disciples."

This is our "Maundy" Pilgrimage; but we must first foregather in the Upper Room, the Passover prepared for thirteen of them and the rest of the millions (ourselves included) looking back on the simplicity of the Palestinian setting with the bread and wine,

and looking on until He drinks new wine with us in the Kingdom of God.

When the hour was come, He sat down and the twelve apostles with Him. And He said, "With desire did I desire to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." He received a cup and when He had given thanks, He said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves." And He took a loaf and when He had given thanks, He brake it and gave it them, saying: "This is My Body." During supper, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that He came forth from God and went to God, He riseth from supper, layeth aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. Then He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded So when He had washed their feet . . . and had sat down again, He saith unto them, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you"

Yearly in Jerusalem is this "example" re-enacted by the Oriental Churches with their different genius—the stately ceremonial of the Orthodox, the impressive dignity of the Armenian Gregorians, the democratic concern for the sharing of the congregation in the Coptic rite and the graphic, primitive simplicity of the Syrian Orthodox (their church and convent built in accordance with their tradition on the site of the House of Mary the Mother of Mark).

Outside in the courtyard of the Syriac Church it is easy to visualize the Upper Room, for the Convent proper is up two flights of stone stairs. It was in some such room, but presumably secluded, and reserved for guests, that the Master washed the disciples' feet and bade them eat and drink for ever afterwards in memory of Him. "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show forth the Lord's death." "My flesh is meat indeed and my blood is drink indeed." The table in His Kingdom is for all.

The meal was over and the Lord had much to say, some of it as they walked together in the silence of the olive grove. But first they sang a hymn together in the Upper Room and then they left . . .

Their Paschal *hallel* over—and who can doubt that with the tenseness of the days through which they passed, it was Passover indeed?—with Judas already departed in the dark before the moon was up, the little band with growingly apprehensive minds and overburdened hearts, descended slowly towards the Valley,

past the house of the High Priest, to which some of them would return later that evening. It was a house that Peter was never to forget, even when he was a forgiven soul. "As Christ forgave, so also do you."

"All you," said Jesus, "shall be offended because of me this night; as it is written, 'I will smite the shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered' . . . Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not." Peter said unto Him, "I will lay down my life for Thy sake." Jesus answered, "Wilt Thou lay down thy life for my sake? Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice." Peter said, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." Likewise also said they all.

"The God of all grace, who called you unto His eternal glory in Christ, after that you have suffered awhile, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." So wrote Peter, looking back over quarter of a century of his own "shepherd" service, when his love was made perfect, his enthusiasm stabilized, his leadership confirmed, his motives and relationships pure and true. But that evening he was overwrought, with the false confidence that comes with too little discipline and unthinking devotion—devotion that he later learned more wisely to express, more gladly to communicate. He remembered the evening of his failure, as the moon rose higher behind the mountain and the little party almost drifted down towards the Kedron gorge.

There is history embedded in this valley as everywhere else in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem. "And all the country wept with a loud voice and all the people passed over; King David also passed over the Brook Kedron, and all the people passed over towards the way of the wilderness." So too, Jesus, Son of David, as He lifted His eyes to heaven in the starlight and said: "Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son that Thy Son also may glorify Thee . . . I have manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest me out of the world. Sanctify them in Thy truth. As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so send I them into the world. I have made known unto them Thy name and will make it known, that the love wherewith Thou hast loved me may be in them and I in them."

These things spake Jesus and went forth with His disciples over the Brook Kedron, Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones, the Brook that, but for the Passover Moon that evening, would have been true to its name of "Very Dark"—"Blackwater" indeed. In these days the *wādī* rarely has water unless the rain be heavy and continuous.

Did Jesus think of the Valley and its history in the days long past? Did He glimpse the future? The Valley was destined to bear His Mother's name—*Wādī Sittina Mariam*, the "Valley of our Lady Mary." So do Arabic-speaking Palestinians know it today. That night for her was black; but for Judas it was night indeed.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The "Valley of Achor" shall become a "Door of Hope."

"AND SO TO GETHSEMANE . . ."

The road now goes gently down and then up towards the Olive Grove. Jerusalem traditions connect this tiny corner with very different persons—Absalom, who rebelled against his father; Zechariah the assassinated High Priest, and James the Brother of the Lord, to whom He appeared down there in the dark valley three days later. "Then He was seen of James."

In Gethsemane we are never far from Jesus Christ. The very olive trees in the Franciscan Garden at the foot of the mountain today may well be as much as 800 years old, so that we are not more than three "olive generations" removed from the days of the Lord Himself. There are other trees in the vicinity which have centuries to their credit. The Palestinian plants olives for his grandchildren. These trees bridge the history of the families in Palestine.

And Jesus came out and went as His custom was unto the Mount of Olives. The disciples also followed Him. And when He was at the place, He said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; abide ye here and watch with Me." And He was parted from them about a stone's throw. He kneeled down and prayed saying, "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me; but not my will but Thine be done." "There is a cup in the hand of the Lord, and the wine is red; it is well-mixed and He poureth out of the same." And being in an agony, He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.

Into the woods my Master went,
Clean forspent, forspent,
Into the woods my Master came,
Forspent with love and shame.

But the olives, they were not blind to Him,
The little gray leaves were kind to Him,
The Thorn tree had a mind to Him,
When into the woods He came.

Out of the woods my Master went,
 And He was well content,
 Out of the woods my Master came,
 Content with death and shame;
 When death and shame would woo him last,
 From under the trees they drew him last,
 'Twas on a tree they slew Him last,
 When out of the woods He came.¹

There appeared unto Him an angel from heaven strengthening Him. He rose from prayer and came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow; and He said unto Peter, "Simon, couldest thou not watch with Me? Rise and pray that you fail not in the test." And He went away again and prayed saying the same words. He returned and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him; and they were those who had continued with Him in His tests. "Steadfastness in a time of testing is a corporate achievement."

Thou wast alone in Thy Redemption vigil,
 Thy friends had fled:
 The angel at the garden from Thee parted,
 And solitude instead

"Not My will but Thine be done." "Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are Thy ways. Who, going through the vale of misery use it for a well and the pools thereof are filled with water. They shall go from strength to strength."

"Consider Him, who in the days of His flesh offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard for His godly fear. Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience through the things which He suffered; and having been made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation unto them that obey Him."

"Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of; and to be baptized with the baptism wherewithal I am baptized?" They say unto Him, "We are able." "Whosoever will come after Me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me." "To take up the Cross of Christ is no great action done once for all; it consists in the continual practice of small duties which are distasteful to us."

O Saviour of the world, who by Thy cross and passion hast redeemed us; Save us and help us we humbly beseech Thee, O LORD.

Redhill, Surrey.

¹ Lanier.