

On the way to Calvary - Hilary McDowell
Week 5 Choices
Thursday -Odds Against



A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Jesus Before the Sanhedrin

They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. Mark 14:51-54 (NIV) also read 55-72

The traveller smiled as the young man raced away, leaving his linen robe behind him. At least he had shown the bravery to continue alone in Christ's footsteps as the Lord was led from the garden as a prisoner. The lad had the ingenuity to slip out of his slim garment when he also was grabbed by the mob, and he ran for his life, naked but free.

Had he intended to come so close to being arrested? Did he with youthful bravado dream of sharing the danger with Christ all the way to Calvary? Did he imagine that he could glean enough information 'under cover' to report back to the others? Or did the brashness of youth blind him to dangers? Who was he, anyway? She couldn't quite see. If Mark alone recorded the event in his Gospel, it must have been more significant to him than to the other writers. Maybe he had a personal investment in the memory. Perhaps it was young Mark himself who had fled naked from the scene, having followed Jesus longer than the others?

Was this, she wondered a well-respected Gospel writer's plaintive attempt to say, 'I tried, I really tried'? Writing his account of the events of that historic week as a mature established missionary and leader of the early Christian Church, did Mark still carry with him frustration of that feeling of utter helplessness in the face of insurmountable odds which must have haunted the young lad as he ran?

If he had felt like this, how much more frightened must the other disciples have been? And here was Peter, she thought, still smarting from Jesus' rebuke and command to put up his sword, yet still following wherever his discipleship would lead, right into the lions' den. No wonder the Lord entrusted the leadership of the Church into this man's hands. But first, Peter had to learn an important lesson. First, this strong man, this big fisherman, well used to physical labour and winning through by the power of his muscles, had to feel what it was like to be in the ultimate 'odds against' situation, without redress to his sword.

At that moment, in the courtyard of the enemy, how was he feeling? Like Gideon, about to face the Midianites with a reduced army, much too small for the task? Like Samson, without the strength his hair had once afforded him? Like Jonah, trapped in the belly of the whale? A mere stone's throw from him, across the courtyard, the divine power that helped to create a universe stood in chains awaiting trial. And all Peter could feel was fear.

The traveller had followed Peter into the courtyard, and stayed with him there. She had no desire to hear the falsehoods spoken by witness after witness at the mockery of a trial that was now getting under way. No two witnesses were able to agree on their fabricated stories, so the lawyers could make nothing stick according to the Old Testament law. In an attempt to make the defendant incriminate himself, the high priest was questioning Jesus about his own nature: 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One? In contrast to his previous silent refusal to defend himself or to incriminate the false witnesses, Jesus replied, 'I am.'

The traveller heard none of this, but the cheers of victory that emanated from the court as the high priest tore his garments in ritual mourning at the sound of what he considered to be blasphemy from the lips of Jesus were clearly heard by Peter and the others warming themselves by the fire outside. The disciples' face was ashen. It was obvious that the high priest had secured evidence enough for the Lord's own lips to proclaim a verdict. But what the Jews could not do at this point was to secure a sentence or proceed with an execution. That lay with an authority and a court higher than theirs. The Roman authorities would have to become involved.

She wondered if, even at this point in the proceedings, Peter desperately hoped that there would be a way out - something he could do with those strong muscles, a way to set Jesus free. The jeers of the bribed witnesses, the insults of the 'rent-a-crowd' at this false trial, mocking Jesus with shouts of

'Prophecy!' and the sound of the guards raining down blows upon him as they moved him out of the courtroom, all were clearly heard in the courtyard, and beads of perspiration began to run slowly down Peter's forehead.

The maid perhaps thought he looked a bit odd, huddled there, close to the fire, his cloak pulled tightly around his face, intent upon warming himself further despite the beads of sweat upon his brow. 'Were you with him?' she queried. It was unnerving for Peter. A challenge from one of the men he could have coped with, even from a guard. A strong right hook would have taken care of it. But the maid of the high priest, what was he supposed to do with her? Denial and flight seemed the only form of self-defence open to him.

Still the maid pursued him to the gateway, where the crowd often lingered to catch the gossip after a juicy trial. She kept asking their opinion, and they glanced at his clothes and heard his accent as he denied the charge a second time. But still Peter did not leave. After a while, the whole crowd began to accuse him. 'You are a Galilean,' they shouted, a little too loudly for comfort. The guards were in the process of leading a prisoner across the courtyard now and if he didn't do something quickly the growing interest of the crowd would attract their attention. In desperation he swore that he did not know Jesus. For a second time a cock crowed and, remembering the words of the Lord (Mark 14:30) Peter dared not even glance up to see what prisoner was even now watching him across the courtyard.

The traveller did not know whom to feel for the most at that moment - a failed disciple, broken and weeping tears of deep repentance as he fled to the safety of home, or an innocent prisoner in chains being roughly pulled to his cell, the spit of scoundrels running down his face and the echo of his chief follower's voice, in denial of their very acquaintance, ringing in his ears.

Dear Lord,

It must have been horrific. Pain is pain and the body breaks with it. Torture is brutal and the mind weakens under the strain. But betrayal, that's by far the worst, for it crucifies the heart.

Judas began the sword thrust, but Peter's denial must have turned the blade in an open wound, and what is more painful than that?

He didn't mean to be cruel- he was so scared - and I thank you that you forgave him, Lord. Forgive us, your followers, when our fear betrays you daily. Amen.