

It's my privilege here to meet volunteers working with vulnerable and homeless people and discuss their activities. Most caring teams out on the streets nightly around the year belong to churches with a heart for serving the poor. Some say how they learn from and admire those who survive on little, patiently enduring the trial of having no place of their own. *'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'* and *'As you do this to the least of my little ones, you do it to me.'* are phrases which spring to mind. The homeless may be mentally ill, addicts, abused, estranged from family, asylum seekers. All need help, but when asked what they they most need, often they say - someone to talk to, someone to listen, take me seriously. They suffer from loneliness. Feeling you have nobody to turn to, no choice, nothing to share but your need. Loneliness is such a curse.

Housing demand grows with more people living alone. The widowed, people from broken homes, compelled to be single again. Many are lucky being able to afford somewhere to live. All know about loneliness. Look at the personal ads in the papers, those dating and social networking websites. When people must move or commute in search of work or self-improvement, fewer than ever know their neighbours. So many are constantly looking for friends, for community, for enduring companionship.

Companionship - a great word - from the Latin, meaning *'someone with whom I share bread'*. Something we do far less of nowadays. Sitting together around a table, taking time to share meals and talk. Another casualty of hecctic modern lifestyles. Another contributor to loneliness.

Before God created Eve to be with Adam at the start of Genesis, God declares: *"It is not good for anyone to be alone'*. It expresses the creator's concern for our well-being. Jesus travelled everywhere with a group of disciples, men and women, surrounded by crowds, and had to escape into the hills to be alone with God for un-distracted prayer. Crowds surrounded by him in Jerusalem, but on the eve of the Passover Sabbath, he and his closest friends, like a family withdrew into the privacy of a home where they had been welcomed to keep Passover, to remember the defining story of their people's liberation from slavery in Egypt, to praise God for his providence and mercy since

then. Social and spiritual companionship were one on such occasions, as in any Jewish household for the weekly Shabbat meal.

This time however, something different happens. Jesus gives thanks for the bread and the cup of wine they share as part of the prayers at this special meal, and adds into the traditional blessings words none of his companions have heard before. *'This is my body broken for you', 'This is my blood poured for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven. Whenever you do this, remember me.'* After twenty centuries of Christianity, from the other side of the Cross we read deep meanings into his words. But what did his disciples understand by them?

Jesus ministry is inspired by and modelled on God's suffering Servant as portrayed by Isaiah. The Servant is a prophet, spokesman for God to his people. Prophets declared God's Word by actions, and signs as well as in speech. Jesus makes a paralysed man walk saying *"your sins are forgiven"* So too his words and deeds at table, changing the content of a time hallowed ritual, mark him as a prophet, making God's power and presence real. Even if his companions take time to work out the meaning of what he says, they won't forget this word, this unique moment.

To a Hebrew or an Aramaic speaker *'this is my body'* declares *'I am here'*. The broken bread for Jesus means *'Here I am, broken for you'*. To speak of blood is to speak of life itself. Blood out-poured refers to violent death, and in Temple rituals, sacrifice. A cup of wine, poured for sharing means *'My life, sacrificed for you'*. Then Jesus says : *'Do this to remember me'*.

Jesus knew his challenge to religious hypocrisy put his life at risk, and several times he warned his friends of this. But they were in denial, they'd seen such success with him, they were so optimistic about the progress they'd made, failure they could not comprehend. How on earth could anyone reject let alone destroy, such a wonderful, appealing and compassionate man, evidently blessed by God? Surely everyone would come around to his way of thinking eventually? What do they make of discomfoting talk of brokenness and sacrifice?

The mood darkens further when he declares that someone at the table will betray him. All but Judas are bewildered. Each wants to know, *"Is it I, Lord?"* Jesus knows he's

up to something though Judas hasn't shared the plan to take him to the authorities. Judas keeps the common purse; it's no surprise when Jesus appears to dispatch him on an errand, giving him a piece of bread dipped in the gravy of their passover lamb. After he's gone, another disconcerting thing happens. Jesus calls for water and towel, disrobes and washes the disciples' feet, as a slave would, despite protests from Peter. He's indignant his Master will stoop so low, when they owe Jesus everything. Jesus gives them an example of what real leadership means - acts of humble service that value highly those who are being led. The Gospels were written by men, for a world in which men dominated public life. Yet we know from small references that women accompanied and supported Jesus. In this household, the meal would have been prepared and served by women. Were there women un-reported among those whose feet Jesus washed – just too awkward to mention in telling the story to others who wouldn't understand how unconventional Jesus could be in the company he kept, and his behaviour. One can see so often in the Gospel, whether in dealing with children, crazy people, or women desperate to touch him as he passed, Jesus' responses embarrassed his straight laced Galilean peasant companions. One way or another, this would have been an awkward meal, with nobody understanding what was happening. I imagine the disciples were relieved, finally to sing their closing hymn and go out for fresh air in the Garden of Gethsemane, across the valley from their city lodgings. There they relax in the still air among the olive trees under a Passover moon, singing, chatting, musing, dozing, while Jesus, Peter, James and John go apart from them for quiet seclusion to pray. Did they ponder the meaning of his references to brokenness, sacrifice, betrayal? Were they perturbed, just a little? Can we put ourselves in their places, these companions of Jesus, at home with one another in his company, happy, despite awkward moments, having a sense of purpose and calling to serve God with him. But as they rest awhile, Jesus is alone struggling in prayer, nobody to turn to, waiting for God to confirm that he has put himself in the right place at the right time to allow whatever God wills to happen. Already the time of conviviality at the table is far from him and his thoughts. You can tell this is a hard moment for him to face. Peter James and John go to pray with him.

But soon they are asleep, unable to watch and pray as he earnestly requests. There they are, close by, sleeping like innocents, unaware of danger approaching. After the intimacy of supper companionship, he is lonelier truly lonelier here than at any time since he confronted Satan in the desert.

Here is where he has to battle with his fears. He's a man, he loves life to the full. He doesn't yet know what he will have to face. He's still not sure if he can measure up to the test of doing his Father's will in complete obedience. "*If it be your will, let this cup pass away from me.*" is his prayer. "*But not what I want, but your will be done.*" He has offered his life for the Father's cause, declared this symbolically in his actions at the supper table. It's only natural he should shrink from a violent fate. How much Jesus did or didn't know of what lay ahead, isn't ours to speculate. In a way it's harder not to know, to be alone with unknowing, in the dark in every way. All he could do from now on is trust, and keep trusting. "*Your will be done.*"

Out of the darkness Judas arrives, and embraces Jesus to identify him to the Temple police and accompanying officials. The disciples are rudely awakened. Peter at least, is ready for a fight, behaves dangerously with a sword, earning another memorable rebuke: "*Those who live by the sword will die by the sword*". Jesus stands his ground commandingly, but refuses to defend himself, or let himself be defended.

But does question his captors. They'd had plenty of chances to take him before in the Temple. Why now? Why like a thief in the night? His only resistance is to embarrass his assailants, challenging them to consider their motives. Judas has delivered him, but so far, there are no miraculous deeds, no revelations of power and glory. And the longer into the night Judas waits for the expected sign that doesn't come, the more his false optimism plummets into despair. The despair of the former terrorist, who knows he only has himself to blame for failing to realise he didn't understand the mind of Jesus. All had been wishful thinking on his part, far away from the plan and purpose of God. He'd been duped by his own ambition and hunger for power. Now it was all too late.

St John, the beloved companion of Jesus, refers to Judas as a thief, bitter that he was instrumental in advancing this tragedy. Whether or not Judas stole from the common

purpose, as John alleges, we don't know. But he did steal from Jesus the choice of how to conclude his ministry, substituting his own plan for whatever Jesus had in mind before his agony in the garden.

Jesus' inner struggle, to the point of sweating blood, as he prayed, was to trust and accept that no matter what was to happen, God would still be present and active within it. This would be the ultimate test of his faith. All of us come to the same place whenever we face up to things in life over which we have no control, long before we arrive at the final frontier of death.