**29th March 2015**

**Luke 22.1-48**

**Crash investigators say that the Germanwings Airbus was probably crashed deliberately by co-pilot Andreas Lubitz. The way pilots are screened is now under intense scrutiny.**

Lufthansa, the parent company of Germanwings, has said that there had previously been nothing to suggest that Lubitz was mentally unstable.

The inexplicable nature of the pilot's actions has put the focus on to how pilots are psychologically assessed. The process of training a pilot does apparently involve an element of psychological screening. Candidates are asked about their background, including their interests and family relationships, as well as whether they had suffered depression or had suicidal feelings.

But the screening processes appears to rely on the candidate's answers and the examiner's judgement of their answers. "There is an element of trust in it’. This medical is carried out by a specially trained aviation medical examiner. It is repeated every year or six months depending on age. Incidents of pilots trying to crash the plane are "utterly rare" but they have happened – on average one every five to 10 years.

David Cameron and Ed Miliband were interviewed, or rather interrogated, by Jeremy Paxman on Thursday night. It was the first televised debate, although it wasn’t a debate more of a consecutive job interview, to try and decide who has got the right stuff to lead the country. Ed Miliband, in particular, got some hard questioning from Paxman. Mr Miliband, when asked by Paxman whether he was tough enough to be prime minister, responded "hell yes", before adding: "Let them underestimate me". He said he did not care when Paxman said he was seen as a "North London geek" and added: "I don't care what the newspapers write about me, because what I care about is what happens to the British people, and I know that this country could be so much better." No doubt these leaders will be tested further over the coming month.

The passion story is a test of character. The disciples, especially Peter and most of all Judas, fail the test. Jesus comes through the test. The disciples will betray and disown Jesus. Jesus will not disown them nor will he betray his calling to bring salvation for the world.

Luke’s account of the Passion of Christ is our reading today covering the account of the last supper and the Garden of Gethsemane – it brings into sharp focus how Jesus was disowned and let down but how he didn’t disown or let down us.

Maybe we have been in the situation whereby we have uttered the words ‘and I thought you were my friend!’ Maybe they have been said to us or said in our presence referring to someone else. It’s one thing to cheat someone – in business, in politics, in love. It’s always ugly and mean. It’s always wrong. But betrayal adds a different dimension. It’s like setting deceit to music. And the music is always the sort that makes you squirm in your chair, going cross eyed with discords and clashes and wondering if it will ever resolve itself.

Well, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t. There is something horribly final about betrayal. Oh, it’s possible to forgive someone, and of course we are commanded to do so. But forgiveness – going without revenge, continuing to love the person as we love ourselves – doesn’t necessarily mean we can ever place the same trust in them again. Would you walk along the branch of a tree that had been sawn through, even if you were told it had been mended?

The fact that these very searching human questions are raised here shows what kind of story we are dealing with. The figure of Judas is one of the deepest and darkest not only in the gospels but in all literature. People have written books trying to get to the bottom of what precisely he did and the reasons why.

Was it for the money – thirty pieces of silver?

Was it angry disappointment at the fact that Jesus, having caused such a stir in Jerusalem, was now talking about going to his death, instead of planning a great moment when he take over Jerusalem and become King.

Maybe Judas had hoped, as James and John had hoped that he would be Jesus right hand man in the new regime; after all he was the group’s treasurer, trusted and valued.

Maybe he’d been cherishing all sorts of plans for what he could do when the kingdom came – maybe a nice little farm back in Galilee.

Luke and John both suggest in their gospels that Satan had entered Judas and therefore he was under satanic control at this point – the thief who comes only to steal, kill and destroy.

Who knows what motivates Judas? The suicide of Judas does suggest he had remorse for his actions and of a plan gone wrong.

In the middle of this last supper sits Jesus, almost serene but deeply sad, sitting with the twelve and telling them what was about to happen. The sorrow of his approaching ordeal was overlaid with the sorrow of betrayal. And in that moment we glimpse one element of the meaning of the cross.

Jesus was going to his death wounded by the wounds common to humanity. Greed, lust, ambition, pride: all kinds of natural drives and desires turned in on themselves rather than doing the outward-looking work the creator intended them to. When we say that Jesus ‘died for our sins’, we don’t just mean that in some high flown, abstract and distant sense. We mean that what put him on that cross were precisely the sins that we all not only commit but wallow in.

As I was preparing for this sermon the most powerful thing that hit me when I read this passage about the Last Supper was how Jesus said to the 12 disciples gathered around the table ‘one of you is going to betray me’. The other eleven disciples didn’t at once turn round and point knowingly at Judas. It wasn’t obvious who was going to betray Jesus. Hence their answer ‘surely you don’t mean me, Lord?’

‘It isn’t me, is it, Lord? Only when you’ve said that knowing that it might well be you, can you begin to appreciate what it meant for Jesus to sit at that table and share that Passover meal with them, with Judas too. Or what it means that he has promised to share his feast with us as well. Do we **not** continually let our Lord down – even betray him and our faith – who is without sin – who is worthy to receive from the Lord’s Table? But it is the Lord’s Table – the Lord Jesus invites us to gather to eat and drink with him. We are made right through faith in Christ – here is grace and love and mercy in bread and wine. Never take it for granted, nor take it lightly. But like the mother of the convicted killer Jesus still stands by us and says ‘you’re still mine’

Jesus takes bread and takes wine and draws into one event a millennium and more of Jewish celebrations. The Jews had believed for some while that the original Exodus of Moses pointed on to a new one, in which God would do at last what he had long promised; he would forgive the sins of Israel and the world, once and for all. Sin, a far greater slave master than Egypt had ever been, would be defeated in the way God defeated not only Egypt but the Red Sea. And now Jesus sitting there at this secret meal in Jerusalem was saying, by what he was doing as much as by the words he was speaking: this is the moment. This is the time. And it’s all because of what’s going to happen to me.

Jesus action at the Last Supper was, the equivalent in symbolic language (and symbols are the most powerful form of communication) of those sayings about the son of man being handed over, and giving his life as a ransom for many. Somehow identifying the bread and the wine with his body (about to be broken in death) and his blood (about to be spilt on the cross), and inviting his followers to share in it and find in it the gift of forgiveness for sins, of new life, of God’s kingdom – somehow this action had then, and still has today, a power beyond words. A power to touch and heal parts of our broken and messy lives. A power to tell the world around that Jesus is Lord.

But perhaps because that power always remains mysterious, and never in our own control, many people found then and find still that’s it’s all too much. The disciples, instead of being heartened and encouraged, were all about to be scattered, as Jesus went alone to face the darkest night of the world. Peter, big strong, blustering Peter, was about to be reduced to a spluttering lying, weeping fool. Perhaps that tells us something too about the power of Jesus action. Perhaps when it starts to have its effect the first sign is that we learn just how weak and needy we are. Perhaps the combination of the Last Supper and the cock crowing will always haunt us, always challenge us, always lay bare our continuing need for God’s redeeming love, until the new day dawns and Jesus shares with us the new wine of the kingdom of God.

My father was an orphan and my only grandmother died when I was just 15. I remember her as a strong tough woman. She had to be because she was one of eleven children born into poverty in working class Burnley. I remember as a small child going with her to the butchers just before they closed on Saturday night to get the cheap cuts of meat that they wanted to sell off. Despite being tough she always seemed to care for me and had a ready smile. She was always someone I could go to. Then one day I caught a glimpse of a very different Grandma that made a deep impression on me. We were about to move house and grandma was selling her house and coming to live with us. She had lived in this house all her married life – about fifty years (my grandfather had been dead for 5 years). It was school holidays and I was at my Grandmas – there was just her and I. She was in the middle of clearing out a cupboard in the front room where I was and she suddenly collapsed in the armchair and started crying. ‘I’m going to miss my home’ she sobbed. I was shocked. It was the first time I’d seen my Grandma in tears, breaking down. This tough strong benign person was a wreck in front of me and I didn’t know what to do. And it made a deep impression on me.

Perhaps Gethsemane was the equivalent moment for the disciples.

Oh, Jesus had been sad at various times. He’d been frustrated with them for not understanding what he was talking about. He’d been cross with the people who were attacking him, misunderstanding him, accusing him of all sorts of ridiculous things. There has even been tension with his own family. But basically he’d always been the strong one. Always ready with another story, another sharp one-liner to turn the tables on some probing questioner, another soaring vision of God and the kingdom. It was always they who had the problems, he who had the answers.

And now this.

Jesus was like a man in a waking nightmare. He could see, as though it was before his very eyes, the cup. Not the cup he had spoken of, and given them to drink, in the intense and dramatic atmosphere of the last supper an hour or so before. This was the cup he had mentioned to James and John, the cup the prophets had spoken of. The cup of God’s wrath. God’s judgement on sin and injustice and evil. We talk about the full weight of the law coming crashing down on a lawbreaker. This was the full weight of God’s judgement coming crashing down on a sinful world. The cup of God’s wrath.

Jesus didn’t want to drink it. He badly didn’t want to. Jesus at this point was no hero-figure, marching boldly towards his oncoming fate. He was no Socrates, drinking the poison and telling his friends to stop crying because he going to a much better life. He was a man, as we might say, in melt down. He had looked in to the darkness and seen the grinning faces of all the demons in the world looking back at him. And he begged and begged his father not to bring him to the point of going through with it. He prayed the prayer he taught his disciples to pray: lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

And the answer was NO.

Here in Luke Jesus kneels down and prays ‘Father if it be your will, take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours be done.’ In Matthew’s gospel Jesus prays this prayer twice. In Mark and Luke it is prayed just once. In John’s gospel you have an extended prayer for the Holy Spirit and the protection of all believers.

We are looking at Luke’s version of events. To begin with, a straight request ‘my father if it be your will take this cup from me by’, with a sad recognition that God has the right to say ‘no’ if that’s the way it has to be. Then, a prayer which echoes another phrase in the Lord’s Prayer: if it has to be, ‘Yet not my will but yours be done’.

The disciples probably didn’t realize that when Jesus gave them the Lord’s Prayer this much of it would be so directly relevant to Jesus. He had to live what he taught. Indeed the whole Sermon on the Mount seemed to be coming true in Jesus, as he himself faced suffering and sorrow of which he’d spoken, on his way to being struck on the cheek, to being cursed and responding with blessings.

Here for the second time in the gospel narrative (the first being the temptation story in chapter four) we see Jesus fighting in private the spiritual battle he needed to win if he was to then stand in public and speak, and live and die for God’s kingdom. The victory of the cross was won through this prayer in the Garden.

The shocking lesson for the disciples can, of course, be turned to excellent use if we learn, in our own prayer, to wait with them, to keep awake and watch with Jesus. At any given moment, someone we know is facing darkness and horror; illness, death, bereavement, torture, catastrophe, loss. They ask us, perhaps silently, to stay with them, to watch and pray alongside them.

Distance is no object. In any one day we may be called to kneel in Gethsemane beside someone dying in a hospital, someone being persecuted for their faith, someone losing their job, someone waiting anxiously for a doctor’s report. Once we get over the shock of realising that all our friends, neighbours and family, and even the people we have come to rely on, are themselves vulnerable (like my Grandma showed) and need our support – if even Jesus longed for his friends support, how much more should we! – We should be prepared to give it to the fullest of our ability.

And when we ourselves find the ground giving away beneath our feet, as sooner or later we shall, Gethsemane is where to go. That is where we find that the Lord of the world, the one to whom is committed all authority, has been before us.

As we will continue to reflect over the coming weeks up to Easter, God did not spare his only Son – but he became one with us in all our life and suffering, pain and despair. Things happen to every one of us in this world that we just don’t understand why? It is then that faith is tried to its utmost limits, and at such a time like this we may find ourselves on our kneels next to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane trying to accept what we cannot understand – ‘if its not possible then your will be done’

Jesus speaks to his heavenly Father in a childlike, trustful and intimate way. If you are a parent you know how your children speak to you or how they spoke to you and what they call you. Here is Jesus in the midst of agony and painful struggle calling out like a little child needing help. ‘My father.. if it is possible …. But your will be done.’

From this honest, vulnerable and searching prayer Jesus rises from his knees ready to face his betrayers and accusers and bring the salvation of the world. May our prayers and communion with the Lord, who will not disown us nor give up on us, strengthen us for all our earthly struggles.

*With thanks to Tom Wright Matthew for Everyone SPCK*