

# UNDER THE OLIVE TREES

## *A meditation for Holy Week*

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### THE HILLSIDE OF LONELINESS

The Garden of Gethsemane was a fruitful place - it was on the Mount of Olives, where the olives were grown and harvested. Olives for oil to light the night, for food to nourish the body.

But on that night nearly 2000 years ago, it was not a place of fellowship, or happiness or joy as people gathered the harvest. It was a desolate place. It was night.

For Jesus and the disciples it had been a familiar place, where they had met together on many occasions. Perhaps they had spent other nights under these olive trees on their way to Jerusalem. Perhaps they had appreciated the cool night air after a busy day. There may have been many memories of those earlier exhilarating, exhausting days - memories of life, miracles, sermons. But this night all they felt was exhaustion.

It was a desolate place, where Jesus was alone. Though his disciples were there, it was a lonely place. For on this night the forces of evil were gathering. This night was to be their triumph. This night was to be their victory to lay waste to the purposes of God. This night perhaps even the birds were silent, the wind still, and was there an eeriness to the place? Was the earth also waiting in stillness for the marshalling of the forces of evil?

### THE HILLSIDE OF TEACHING <sup>1</sup>

On another hillside a couple of years before, but to the disciples asleep in the garden, that other hill side must have seemed a lifetime away, and yet perhaps the memory was as clear as if it had been yesterday.

On that hillside Jesus had probably sat down under a different olive tree, surrounded by crowds. There was no loneliness then - no desolation. He had sat down and taught - preached, if you like, and the people hung on his every word:

"Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven  
Blessed are the hungry for they will be filled ... <sup>2</sup>

Those were some of the words he spoke. And he said how we should forgive one another, help each other bear our loads; to turn the other cheek.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."<sup>3</sup>

They were wonderful, heady days - new and exciting ideas that challenged the whole of society and even the religious traditions. Well, of course, the traditionalists did not like it, they felt threatened but the everyday people lapped it up. They realised that Jesus is the Word.

That hillside, that olive tree was so long ago. But tonight the hill side, the garden, is a silent place.

## **THE HILLSIDE OF FEEDING<sup>4</sup>**

On another hillside, a couple of years before, but to the disciples asleep in the garden, that other hill side must have seemed a lifetime away, and yet perhaps the memory was as clear as if it had been yesterday.

On that hillside Jesus had probably sat down under a different olive tree, surrounded by crowds. There was no loneliness then - no silence. The crowd must have been well over 5000, and they had been there all day. Jesus saw that the crowds were hungry, and they had forgotten to bring their food. But he got them organised. He told them to sit down in groups and, you know what, they obeyed him. They recognised an authority that they had not seen in anyone else. Not an authority that came from power and status, but one that issued from compassion and love.

Surrounded by people in the evening sunlight Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish - everyone had enough to eat - and to spare.

Nobody was lonely that day; nobody was left out. New friendships were made as people eat together and they all got the message of a new way of living and sharing together. Well, of course, the authorities did not like it, they felt threatened, but the everyday people lapped it up. They got the message that Jesus is the good shepherd.

That hillside, that olive tree was so long ago. But tonight the hill side, the garden, is an eerie place.

## **THE HILLSIDE OF CELEBRATION<sup>5</sup>**

On this hillside, under these same olive trees just a few days before, the disciples gathered together. Was it really the same place - are these the same olive trees? It must have seemed to be a very different place then. They were all here and the atmosphere was so different. There was no loneliness then - no eeriness.

On that day there was excitement, enthusiasm, jollity and cheering. Jesus and the disciples started their descent into Jerusalem. Oh! That poor donkey - it didn't know what was happening. How did it manage to carry on through the noise and the frenzy of that day? It didn't show any fear or concern, but then neither did the crowds. It was a time of celebration. It was the festival. When the crowds saw Jesus and the disciples trailing behind, they went wild - shouting and singing:

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord ... <sup>6</sup>

And the clothes that got ruined that day as the donkey trampled on them, but nobody seemed to care. And the trees just about denuded of their branches, but they seemed to be quite happy to join in the celebration. Surrounded by rejoicing there was no loneliness that day - you might not have known the name of the person next to you, but you all shared that hope and joy. Well, of course, the religious leaders did not like it, but the everyday people lapped it up. They knew that Jesus is the way.

That hillside, those olive trees were so long ago. But tonight the hillside, the garden, is an anxious place.

## **THE HILLSIDE OF EXPECTATION<sup>7</sup>**

On this hillside, under these same olive trees just the day before, the disciples gathered together. Was it really the same place - are these the same olive trees? It must have seemed to be a very

different place then. They were all there but the mood was more sober. There was no loneliness then - but perhaps there was anxiety.

On that night Jesus seemed to be fulfilling the words of Zechariah that:

"on that day the feet of the Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives"<sup>8</sup>

Jesus was there with his disciples and the future was all before them. There was great expectation that God would act - the great day of the Lord would come. Things were going to change. The old ways were going to be overthrown. There would be a new order. There would be freedom. There would be peace. The life of Jesus, the teaching, the healings, the miracles, the celebrations - the journey to Jerusalem were all coming to a climax.

On that night the Temple looked awe inspiring as the stones shone golden in the evening sunlight and it would seem that it would stand forever. But did the disciples hear the words that spoke of destruction of the Temple and a city lying in ruins? Did they want to understand that there would be violence and betrayal? Could they remember that Jesus had said that the Messiah would suffer and die? Well, of course, the disciples did not want to hear it, but the politicians lapped it up. Did they know that Jesus is the life?

That hill side, those olive trees were so long ago. But tonight the hill side, the garden, is a frightening place.

## **THE HILLSIDE OF DESPAIR<sup>9</sup>**

Tonight, this hillside, this garden, under these olive trees, it is a desolate, silent, eerie, anxious, frightening place. It is night and Jesus is on his own.

Tonight, on this hillside, Jesus alone fights the temptations of uncertainty and despair. Tonight he alone struggles with the forces around him and with the fear of the future. Tonight the sweat pours from his brow and drops of blood drip down.

Tonight he is alone, and the disciples sleep, weary and exhausted from all the celebrations, all the experiences, all the excitement, all the expectations. They sleep while Jesus struggles alone.

Tonight, the crowds have gone, the disciples sleep, the birds do not sing and even the trees seem to mourn. Is creation itself the only companion to share the struggle and anguish? Is creation alone aware of the fear of returning to primeval chaos as the forces of death gather this night? Is creation aware that the struggle that Jesus is going through is for us and the whole universe? <sup>10</sup>

Tonight the garden is desolate, and the night is dark - but the morning will come! The light will shine! The forces of darkness may seem to be victorious and for a while chaos might reign, but hope and love and life will be victorious on Sunday morning.

Jesus says: "Get up, let us be going, my betrayer is at hand." <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5 - 7

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5: 3 & 6.

<sup>3</sup> Matt.5: 9.

<sup>4</sup> The feeding of the 5000, Matt. 14: 15 - 21.

<sup>5</sup> The entry into Jerusalem, Matt. 21: 1 - 10.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 21: 9, Psalm 118: 26.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 24: 3 - 31.

<sup>8</sup> Zech. 14: 4.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 26: 36 - 46.

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 8: 19 - 23.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 26: 46