

When the group from St. Johns went to Israel a year ago, we saw and touched the reality of so many of the things we had read about in the Bible. We sailed on the Sea of Galilee and stood on the hills of Nazareth. We walked into the Jordan river, where I used my hat to pour water over my head. But of all the places we went, one of the most powerful was the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is a terraced hill, gently sloping down from the Mount of Olives above, to the Kidron Valley below, looking across that valley to the hill where the City of Jerusalem stands. It is rough grass and shrubs, olive trees and wildflowers. Our guides had arranged for us to be there at a time when no one else was present, so it was quiet except for faint noises that floated across from the city. We each found our own place to sit, to meditate on what had happened here. Although we were a group, we were each alone.

This is how it would have been for Jesus. The disciples were also scattered through the garden, but were not really with their teacher. The three whom he particularly asked for company could not stay awake. The loneliness was deep.

In this Garden, he prayed that if it were possible, the fate of brutal execution might be taken away. But he was also crystal clear that in the end his choice was obedience to the will of the One whose call had led him here.

That issue of obedience is a hard one for us. We want it from our children; we aren't sure we want to give it to others. We tend to see it as being about demand and submission, weakness giving in to superior power. But that is not the true nature of obedience. The word itself comes from the Latin 'audire', which means to listen. Obedience is an intimate, loving listening to the other.

Obedience from Jesus to his Abba was exactly this - listening which desires only to be one with the God who is one with him, in a connection of cosmically deep love. Such obedience was central to Jesus' entire ministry, the heart of his life of prayer.

It was this obedient love that took him to the beginning, at his Baptism, where he experienced the presence of God poured down on him

with the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And it brought him next to the wilderness temptation, where the the devil began each assault. "If you are the son of God.... Make bread from stones so the hungry can be fed; jump off the top of the temple so that God will have to rescue you; open your eyes to see all that you could do to rule the world as it ought to be ruled. If you are the son of God... there is so much you could do and be." Through it all, Jesus responded only out of his intimate, listening obedience to God's love.

After those trials passed, Jesus went about his work of gathering disciples, teaching, preaching, healing. But now that was all finished. Now, as he was nailed to the cross, the devil returned once more to tempt: "If you are the son of God...come down from the cross, save yourself, so you can be seen as the King of Israel. If you are the Son of God..."

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, writes, "At every moment of his life Jesus has given his heart to God in such a way that God is able to work through him with no interruption, with no diversion.....At every moment Jesus has done what God wants....[his] single -minded gift of his heart to the Father, leads him to the shedding of his blood, because obedience to God in this world of sin, oppression and violence puts you lethally at risk....it's that kind of world."

Obedient love brought Jesus to the place of confronting "that kind of world": in which the powers of evil seem free to dehumanize, torture and maim; free to force people into slavery; free to send them to gas chambers and killing fields; free to murder the children, the holy innocents.

When we see Jesus on the cross, to which his obedient love has led him, we see the suffering of every victim, past, present and future, who has been abandoned to agony without rescue; we see the weight of all the sins which have so casually brought about such suffering. But most importantly we see Jesus, struggling for every breath, bearing the force of all that we have been and done - and in his love, the reflection of God's love, forgiving us.

The chain of history, in which evil deed has led to evil retribution, has been broken. The intense shock of the breaking of that chain is marked by earthquake, and the tearing of the curtain of the temple from top to bottom.

We who have heard all of this must now decide how we will respond. Will we believe that everything changed with this crucifixion? We could decide that God has not acted in our world, could be among those who say, "If you are the Son of God.... behave in power as I think God should." Or we can believe that we stand on the far side of the break with the old history, on ground hallowed by the obedient love of Jesus. We can join the Centurion who proclaimed in awe and reverence, "Truly this man was God's Son."