CHAPTER THREE:

*The Garden of Gethsemane, Jerusalem*

_Scarce had He spoken, suddenly appeared_
_A horde of slaves, a crowd of vagrants, glint_
_Of swords and torches, Judas at their head,_
_A treacherous kiss shaped ready on his lips._

‘The Garden of Gethsemane’
‘The Poems of Yuri Zhivago’, Boris Pasternak:
*Dr Zhivago* (1957)

If the olive trees could talk... The thought takes root in my head in the Garden of Gethsemane, which owes its exotic but (thanks to Christianity) now familiar name to the Aramaic for ‘olive presses’. This, I should confess, isn’t the first time I’ve wanted to start a conversation with an ancient tree. There was the morning I once spent sheltering from intermittent downpours under a 3,000-year-old yew in Fortingall churchyard in Perthshire. What images, I wondered then, were imprinted onto the rings of its trunk, if only I could access them?

The same thought returns to tantalise me now, though examining the gnarled, split and blackened trunks of Gethsemane’s olive trees, some of them said already to have clocked up two millennia, I worry that the warm sun, even on a winter’s day like today, will have burned away all traces of the past. When all else fails, writes Thomas Pakenham, in his book, *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, he resorts to bouts of trunk-hugging to try
and unlock centuries of secrets. As a halfway house, where that’s not possible (and there are so many other pilgrims around, I’m not sure if I would be able to risk the puzzled stares), he suggests that these witnesses to our past are akin to great cathedrals, so can be experienced by ‘stepping beneath their domes and vaults to pay homage at a mysterious shrine’. I think I can manage that without blushing.

There is only one ancient olive tree here where such a pared-down ritual is physically possible. The rest are protected behind greyish-brown railings from the unwanted attention of pilgrims. A lone specimen nudges up close to the wall of the Basilica of the Agony, the modern Franciscan church that completes this cloistered garden on the spot where, 2,000 years ago, Jesus was arrested after being betrayed by the infamous Judas kiss.

Given their great age, these trees are, in theory, the next best thing to eyewitnesses to what happened that night, though the Catholic Encyclopedia does sound a gentle note of caution about the reliability of their evidence. ‘If they were not found there in the time of Christ, they are at least the offshoots of those which witnessed his agony.’ Just as children do not have their parents’ memories, neither will these offshoots. And there is a story, too, that in 70 CE the Emperor Titus Vespasian ordered all the olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane cut down, to punish the Jews for their uprising against Roman rule, but it is unclear if it actually happened, or if some were spared.

I pick my moment carefully. The lone accessible tree is, inevitably, popular with visitors for photographs. Next to its broad girth, a tangle of knots, lumps and periodic bursts of regeneration, some of them bolstered by stone crutches, my fellow pilgrims line up to say cheese – or olives. There is a break in the procession, my cue to step swiftly and decisively forward, and get too close for comfort. None of the trinket-sellers who hover nearby bat an eyelid. I close mine and nestle in as snugly as I can so as to hear
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the beating heart of this old-timer. ‘Somewhere inside the ancient bark,’ wrote the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in a poem about his own visit here, ‘a voice has been before us’.

By shuffling a few centimetres to one side, the branches seem to close in on me from above. There, that’s as close as I am going to get, I figure, and wait to experience a quiet power. Or the sense of being transported back. Or anything. And I wait. The tree’s embrace is certainly making me feel small, both physically and as a speck of dust in the flow of human history that it spans, but the hoped-for insights into its past are not so easily unlocked. All that I am now sensing is the presence of others – the next party of pilgrims has arrived, straight from the coaches that queue outside and all the way back along the road that runs round the foot of the Mount of Olives. As I open my eyes, they are staring back at me. One is even taking a photograph of my ad-hoc séance.

I make my excuses and leave. There is, though, and inevitably, another spot for reconnecting with Gethsemane’s part in the gospel narrative. This time, it is officially sanctioned. A lump of exposed rock is contained within the Basilica of the Agony itself. The church may be a recent building – dating back only to 1924 – but, as is often the case in this city of layers, it is the latest in a line of places of worship on this site, resting on foundations that go back to the sixth century. Older still is the large slab of rock, which I find in front of the main altar. It is reputedly where Jesus momentarily faltered that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the face of all he knew was going to happen to him. ‘He threw himself to the ground,’ Mark writes, ‘and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. “Abba, Father!” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me.”’

Unlike that other scene of despair at Hakeldama, Judas is frankly acknowledged here in Gethsemane. Acknowledged and damned. To the left of where I have just knelt to touch the rock is
JUDAS

a large-scale fresco of the kiss – though, in line with Luke, the traitor’s face hovers several inches short of Jesus’, as if held at bay by the force-field of the golden halo that surrounds the latter’s head, and those of the other apostles present. But not, of course, of Judas’.

The fresco is one of a pair. The other, The Last Miracle, is to the right of the altar. Mark and Matthew both describe how, as Jesus is arrested, one of his followers draws a sword in protest and cuts off the ear of a servant of the high priest. Luke adds to this and has Jesus restoring the ear to the servant’s head in the supernatural act that gives the fresco its name. John’s even fuller variation names the servant as Malchus, places the sword in Peter’s hand but, curiously, leaves the ear detached.

The artist has conflated these last two gospels – as is often the case in the telling of this episode – and has Peter brandishing the sword and Jesus reattaching the ear. Judas, though, is a notable absentee. Having pointed out Jesus (or not, according to John), he has evidently left the garden immediately, fearing quite rightly that the other disciples would rise up to defend their master. It could otherwise have been his ear that was hacked off. Would Jesus have healed it? I’d like to think he would. ‘Get the traitor,’ you can hear the other apostles cry out, echoing down history.

It is another symbolism in the pairing of the two frescoes, though, that stays with me. Judas and Peter are both flawed. Both do the wrong thing, left and right, but Peter’s sin is redeemed. Judas’ isn’t. All four gospels elsewhere report Jesus predicting that Peter would either disown or deny him ‘before the cock crows’. And, despite his protestations at the time, all then show Peter doing precisely that. The language, of course, is different – denial and disowning on Peter’s part, betrayal on Judas’. And the consequences are not the same. Judas hands Jesus over to his death. Peter fails to stand up for him through fear, but would not be able to save him even if he had found his courage. But what
really makes Peter and Judas into a contrasting pair, the good apostle and the bad apostle, in these frescoes and elsewhere in Christian art and literature, is that Peter seeks and is granted forgiveness.

Beyond the basilica and the neat, tended, cloistered garden with a handful of tress, the olive groves of Gethsemane spread further afield. Most are locked away, but below one section a rough-hewn cave grotto can be visited via a corridor that runs down the side of a neighbouring Orthodox church. This cave is where, tradition has it, Judas arrived with the guards to find Jesus and the other apostles sheltering.

Cave-like chapels are as common in Jerusalem as men with guns, uniforms and the smell of fear. Here, as at Hakeldama, where Saint Onouphrius’ memory has been elevated to push Judas’ prior claim into the shadows, the memory of the Judas kiss is played down in favour of a rather loose attribution to the Virgin Mary. In the next-door church, the Orthodox watch over what they claim as Jesus’ mother’s tomb (though there is another grave with her name on it in Ephesus). Western Christians, in the game of musical chairs that is religious custodianship in Jerusalem, used to be in possession of that church but, since having to vacate it (reluctantly) in favour of their eastern cousins, they have been using the cave-grotto as the next best thing to recall Mary’s final resting place. So, though the visitor noticeboard at the entrance claims that this is, indeed, where Judas handed Jesus over for trial, there is not a single image of the moment on display in this curious hollowed-out lair, with bare rock mixed in with concrete panels, and ugly modern storage heaters with flaking frescoes, believed to date back to the times of the twelfth-century Crusaders.

I arrive just as preparations are being made for a mass. The Franciscans have been in charge of the grotto for 600 years, and a brown-robed brother is busy sweeping the floor and tidying the
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altar. A coach party of Italian pilgrims is soon to arrive, with their own priest in tow, he explains, and I would be welcome to join them. I take my place in the pews.

Probing the historical claims made for sites like this in Jerusalem is not a very fruitful quest, so I banish at once the knowledge that the gospels make absolutely no mention of a cave that night in Gethsemane. Outside the Basilica of the Agony, I had spotted a notice, intended to silence the procession of tour guides who go inside: ‘Please No Explanations in the Church’. Extending its remit, I decide that it is enough that people have believed in the grotto’s particular place in history for so many centuries.

The ‘Pilgrim of Bourdeaux’ describes a precise spot where Judas did the deed, but not a grotto. ‘As one goes from Jerusalem, in order to ascend the Mount of Olives,’ he writes of his visit here in 333, ‘is the valley called that of Josaphat. Towards the left, where are vineyards, is a stone at the place where Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ’.

Well, there are plenty of stones here, beneath, around and above me.

By contrast, Peter the Deacon, writing in the twelfth century but purporting to translate the chronicle of another fourth century visitor to Jerusalem, describes ‘a grotto at the place where Jesus the Saviour was captured’. Peter the Deacon, it should be added, though librarian of the prestigious Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino in Italy, has something of a reputation as a forger. Another monk, Theodosius the Cenobiarch, however, is held in higher regard by historians, and tells in his account of going to Jerusalem in 450 and seeing a grotto at Gethsemane where Judas betrayed his master.

So, once again, I’m walking in centuries of pilgrims’ footsteps, but not necessarily those of Judas’. My mind wanders, seeking something to fix onto. The frescoed ceiling above me offers little. It hangs so low over the altar that it has been blackened beyond detail by the smoke of the candles. Only a few star motifs stand
out. Alone in the cave, save for the brother who has now stopped brushing and is kneeling in silent prayer, I simply wait. ‘Dieci, dieci,’ he says, looking over towards me. The mass will be in ten minutes. He cups his head in his hands and resumes his devotions.

And so we remain, as if caught in a hole in time. Into the vacuum drifts the faint sound of chanting from the Orthodox neighbours. I think I am only imagining the smell of incense, but it feels real enough in my nostrils, carrying me backwards. Or is it incense? In the quiet and the semi-darkness of the first Easter, the olives would just have been harvested, giving off in this place of Gethsemane the pungent aroma of crushed fruits. There might also be a small fire burning, to take the chill out of the night air on this spring evening, using the cuttings from the pruned trees. The apostles are littered around the cave, dozing, keeping warm, utterly unaware of what is about to happen as they wait for Jesus to return from his prayers elsewhere in the garden. It has been a tumultuous day, and a tiring one. Too much to think about, they conclude, so probably better to drift off to sleep. And then suddenly they stir at the sound of heavy footsteps approaching . . .

What I am actually hearing, though, is not a party of guards led by Judas, but a rotund, red-faced tour guide who bursts in, full of breathless apology, to inform the brother along the pew that the party of Italian pilgrims, plus priest, is not coming after all. Mass is off.

I head off to a vacant bench outside the cloistered section of the Garden of Gethsemane, to take in the view it offers of the Old City. The spirit of reverie is hard to dispel. So much for communing with trees, or imagining myself into the past, I decide: why not try, as a cure, a bit of old-fashioned geography? Can the gospel accounts of Judas’ betrayal be reconciled with the
topography of the city that stretches out ahead of me on the other bank of the valley?

The first act of the drama – where the Last Supper takes place – was in the Cenacle or Upper Room. I had been the previous day to what has long been regarded as its site, just south of the Old City Walls on Mount Zion, hidden away from where I am sitting by the great platform of Mount Moriah, or the Temple Mount, crowned today by Jerusalem’s main visual landmark, the giant orangey-gold bulb of the Dome of the Rock. Next, Jesus and his apostles headed from the Cenacle to the Garden of Gethsemane. They could, I suppose, have taken a wide sweep and walked round the south and east of the Old City, outside the walls, and then up the Kidron Valley, but there is no suggestion in the gospels that they ever skulked in the shadows. Quite the opposite, indeed, which is what got the authorities so worked up that they struck a deal with Judas. So, the group would have come the quickest way, through the Old City and out of the Golden Gate, now directly in my eye-line.

It requires a little imagination to picture the scene. The Temple Mount now has new tenants; the current city walls date back only to the sixteenth century, after being destroyed and rebuilt several times over; the Golden Gate is blocked up. Its twin arches, set within a buttress that juts out on the east side of the Temple Mount, were sealed in 1541 on the order of the Ottoman ruler, Suleiman the Magnificent, to dash Jewish hopes, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, that one day the Messiah would return and enter the city via that particular gate. But it requires no great vision to be able to spot Jesus and the twelve, heading down the hillside towards me.

What are they talking about? They have just participated in the first-ever Eucharist, though they don’t know that, but still they will be puzzling at what has just happened. Body and blood, bread and wine: the connection will be turning over in their
minds. Jesus’ words, too, have given them much to debate. In
Luke’s account, he promises to ‘confer a kingdom’ on them, that
they will ‘sit on thrones’ to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.\textsuperscript{14}
Head-turning stuff for fishermen from Galilee. And then he has
quoted a line of scripture at them that suggests he is about to be
arrested. ‘If you have no sword,’ he says, ‘sell your cloak and buy
one’.\textsuperscript{15} Are they glancing nervously over their shoulders, preparing
for a fight, wondering where to get weapons?

Worse still, Jesus has made plain at supper that there is a traitor
in their midst. John gets Jesus to spell out it is Judas, but even
then he gives the impression that the apostles still don’t realise
what has been said. They must be pondering, looking askance at
each other. Matthew tells that, in between the Upper Room and
Gethsemane, Jesus has spoken to Peter, the natural leader among
them, predicting that ‘this day, this very night, before the cock
crows twice, you will have disowned me three times’.\textsuperscript{16} He says
this publicly, so all twelve will have overheard. Is Peter the one?

Only John detaches Judas from the walking party, showing him
leaving the Upper Room, possessed by the devil, as Jesus instructs
him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly.’\textsuperscript{17} And John also pro-
vides sufficient time for Judas to go and find the guards because
he then describes Jesus’ lengthy ‘farewell discourses’,\textsuperscript{18} a pep talk
that is not mentioned in the other three accounts.

So where might Judas have gone? If he remained with the group
I have in my mind’s eye, he may have been relieved that suspicion
was now directed at Peter. Soon, though, when they arrive here in
Gethsemane, Jesus will take Peter (and James and John) with him
as he seeks out a quiet place to pray.\textsuperscript{19} That surely absolves Peter
of the charge of being the traitor, and reopens the debate among
the rest of them. Perhaps Judas waits until they have fallen into a
troubled sleep, then doubles back to rouse the group of guards of
the chief priests, somewhere in or around the Temple, close to the
Golden Gate.
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By now it will have been nightfall. The party of guards heads into the darkness of the countryside as they leave the gate, and so carry flares. It really isn’t a long way down to the garden. Five minutes at the most, over exposed terrain. Had any of the apostles been awake and looking back towards the city walls, they would have seen them coming. Jesus, though, knows to look and spots the approach of Judas and the guards. ‘The hour has come,’ he says in Mark, ‘. . . My betrayer is close at hand.’

Again, it is all possible, even plausible. And the walk back into Jerusalem from Gethsemane after the betrayal? From where I am sitting, once more the geography works. Jesus is surrounded by his captors – ‘Take him in charge,’ Judas says in Mark, ‘and see he is well guarded when you lead him away.’ He sounds efficient, in charge and a little nervous of trouble. Matthew and Mark both say Jesus is escorted to the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. In Luke, presumably because it is so late in the evening, Jesus is taken to Caiaphas’ house. The site earmarked today for that high priest’s residence is back on Mount Zion, where the modern church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu stands. There are ‘holy steps’ leading up to it, and cave-like cells in its deepest basement where, tradition holds, Jesus was chained that night before his death.

And where does Judas go? Mark, Luke and John say nothing. Yet it is human nature to be curious, so perhaps he hides away, near the route back from Gethsemane to Mount Zion, and follows the guards and their prisoner at a distance, to witness what he has precipitated. It is as impossible to know as it is for trees to speak. But a final thought occurs to me as I get up from my resting place and set off to retrace this route. What lies directly beyond the traditional site of Caiaphas’ house, on the next hillside if I were to draw a direct line from where I am standing now in the Garden of Gethsemane, is Hakeldama.
G

Goat

A Judas Goat is by tradition trained to herd other animals somewhere they wouldn’t normally want to go, but more specifically to lead sheep into an abattoir to the slaughter. Unlike Judas Iscariot, his namesake goat is spared death having accomplished his task of betrayal.

H

Hole

A Judas Hole is found in a prison door, allowing guards to spy on the inmate without him or her being aware they are being watched. The connotation is that it enables them to watch as the prisoner betrays himself, but it might also enable the watchers to prevent a suicide.