

Reflections on Good Friday from John's Gospel.

Introduction

A couple weeks ago I mentioned that John's gospel is a theological reflection *on* historical events as much as it is a description *of* those events. Concerning Easter Week, John's chronology differs from the other three gospels in that—for John—Passover was on *Saturday*, rather than Good *Friday*. The symbolic parallels with Passover are then different. The first three gospels make a connection between the Passover meal and the institution of Holy Communion. In John the symbolism links the death of Jesus with the slaughter of the Passover lambs. While this is subtle, it's sometimes instructive to consider one gospel writers' account in parallel to the other accounts, rather than to try and merge them into one narrative. John emphasizes different things; let's look afresh at elements of the Good Friday events through the eyes of John. We need to see the crucifixion of Jesus in the wider context that John presents, because without it, the other images of brutality would be simply too much to bear. Without it, we might prefer not to enter into the story. Without it there is little that is good about Good Friday at all.

Scripture Reading - The Arrest: **John 18:3 – 8; 12-14**

³ So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.

⁴ Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"

⁵ "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

"I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) ⁶ When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

⁷ Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they said.

⁸ Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go."

¹² Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him ¹³ and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

In John's account, we have no kiss from Judas, the betrayer. Judas, a man with dark thoughts carrying out a dark deed on a dark night, arrives at the garden carrying artificial light and weapons. John continues to portray Jesus as someone who knows that "his hour has come." There is no Gethsemane moment of sorrow in his account. Jesus knows that he is about to be "lifted up" and glorified; I preached on that topic two weeks ago. You may remember that I talked about a kernel of wheat

falling into the ground and dying, but in dying, it produces many seeds.¹ After Jesus said that, he went on to say, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? *No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!*”² While the humanity of Jesus is acknowledged - in that his heart *is troubled* – nevertheless, he is a man committed to completing the divine mission that he came to do. That commitment and obedience to the divine will is revealed in the way John describes Jesus as being in charge of events. While for John, the death of Jesus is associated with the death of the Passover lamb, Jesus himself is not a passive victim. And while that may raise all sorts of challenging questions for us, let’s not wrestle with them here today, but to continue on our pilgrimage as we *witness* the events of Good Friday. It is in this context that John writes:

⁴ Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

⁵ “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said.

Jesus doesn’t wait for his captors to come to him, Jesus goes out *to meet them* and is proactive in asking, “Who is it you want?” They seek “Jesus of Nazareth.” And the response that Jesus gives, “I AM HE” carries that same, simple-but-potent “I AM” statement that John has used throughout his gospel and which echoes the holy name for God himself, the one God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. John repeats “I AM HE” *three* times, that emphasis is significant, and the added twist is that the Roman soldiers and Jewish leaders “fell to the ground,” which depicts the powerful presence of God. In John 10:30 we also read the bold statement of Jesus. “I and the father are one.” This intimate bond between Father and Son is reiterated as part of Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples. He says to Philip, “Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”³ It is *this* Jesus, says John, who steps forward to be arrested – and asks for, and is seemingly granted, mercy for his followers who were evidently not arrested at same time.⁴

John then puts these words in the mouth of Caiaphas, the high priest, “*It would be good if one man died for the people.*” Not only does this link with Passover - and even the kernel of wheat that goes into the ground and dies - but it is ironic that this false high priest can speak words of truth concerning Jesus, who is both the true High Priest and the willing Passover Lamb. The link with the Passover Lamb is *not* a connection to sacrifice for sin, but to a lamb that was killed and whose blood was sprinkled on the door lintel and doorposts so that all who lived in that dwelling were spared death. That protection was the effectiveness of the blood of the Lamb, and is another way to view the cross!

¹ John 12:24

² John 12:27-28.

³ John 14:10. See also John 8:28-29: So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that *I am he* and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”

⁴ This is needs to be seen in the context of John 10:29 – “. . . no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Scripture Reading - Jesus Before Pilate: John 18:28 19:1

²⁸ Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and *to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace*, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹ So Pilate came out to them and asked, “What charges are you bringing against this man?”

³⁰ “If he were not a criminal,” they replied, “we would not have handed him over to you.”

³¹ Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.”

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” they objected. ³² This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die.

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “*Are you the king of the Jews?*”

³⁴ “*Is that your own idea,*” Jesus asked, “*or did others talk to you about me?*”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

³⁶ Jesus said, “*My kingdom is not of this world.* If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now *my kingdom is from another place.*”

³⁷ “You are *a king*, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am *a king*. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

³⁸ “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. ³⁹ But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘*the king of the Jews?*’”

⁴⁰ They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

19 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

In John’s gospel there is no formal trial in front of the Jewish religious leaders. There is no mention of Jesus being charged with blasphemy. But they wanted Jesus *executed*, and Roman justice was required for that to take place. But what was his crime? There is some kind of communication because Pilate then asks Jesus, “Are *you* the king of the Jews?” Of course, we don’t know his tone. But it is not out-of-keeping with what we do know about Pilate for him to be mocking and incredulous. How could this poor man of no significant birth from the rural Palestine be royalty! What Pilate found, to his eventual cost, and what many have found since - and we still find today, is that when someone asks Jesus a question, he asks one or two back! “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?” Jesus responds eruditely; he is not silent, and he says, “My kingdom is *from* another place.” This does not mean that Christ’s kingdom is vague or purely spiritual; his kingdom is *for* the world, just not *from* it. In speaking about a “kingdom,” Pilate says, “Ah, you are a king then!” But as the conversation continues Pilate realizes the man in front of him is not a threat to his power, or the Roman peace; if anything Jesus is a philosopher not a politician! Pilate concludes, “I find no

basis for a charge against him,” a phrase John has Pilate say *three* times in his account of the trial. Throughout John’s description of event the emphasis is on Jesus being the “king of the Jews.” For Pilate, it is used in ridicule, and the religious leaders are offended this title is used at all, claiming “We have no King but Caesar,” which is – on the face of it - a denial of their covenant with God.⁵

Before Jesus is condemned to death, Pilate tries to placate the crowds by presenting them with a choice: Jesus or Barabbas – who was already condemned to die. We don’t know much about him other than to the Romans he was a terrorist and, to the Jews, he was at best a freedom-fighter, someone who wanted to establish Jewish independence by force. Given *that* choice, we could say that, “Jesus died in place of Barabbas.” And yet we must also have in the back of our minds the claim of Caiaphas, “It would be good if one man died *for the people*.” This *broader* element of substitution is clearly present in John’s thinking; Jesus is the King who is prepared to die for his subjects, the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Understandably, many we find image peculiar today – it’s too hard to believe, or too good to be true. Yet in the news recently, we heard of a French policeman who is being hailed as a national hero. Yet just over a week ago, in a terrorist shooting spree and hostage situation at a supermarket in southern France, police officers had managed to get some people out of danger but the gunman held one woman back as a human shield. Lt-Col Arnaud Beltrame volunteered to swap himself for her. After he traded places he was subsequently shot and stabbed, but his actions helped bring an end to the siege that left three people dead. He later died from his wounds. His brother said, “He gave his life for *strangers*. He must have known that he didn’t really have a chance.” And his cousin said, “Even though we were surprised and shocked when we heard what happened, we were *not* surprised in the sense that that’s the thing he would do without hesitation.” While a good person may lay down their life for a friend, an exceptional person will give up their life or a stranger.

Scripture Reading - The Death of Jesus: John 19:25-30

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” ²⁷ and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “*It is finished.*” With that, *he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

In John’s account, we are told that Jesus carried his own cross; Simon’s assistance is not mentioned.⁶ And Pilate had a notice, written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek, fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF

⁵ John 19:15; hear the echoes of 1 Sam 8:7 (but

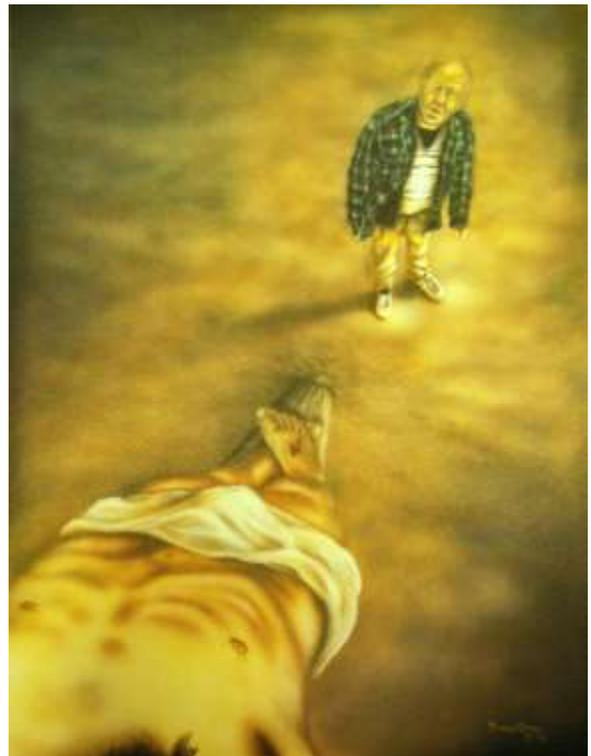
⁶ John 19:17.

NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.⁷ This was not only a potent warning to other trouble-makers, but a further mocking of the people he governed.

We are also told various women were present at the foot of the cross along with “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” presumably John himself. Jesus spoke to them in his final moments, to ensure that his mother would be cared for afterwards. And his mother was witnessing event that no mother should ever see. In all the drama of the day, here is an intimate moment of tenderness and connection. If you go to Dennis’ art studio, you will see one of his paintings, which shows a man at the foot of the cross.⁸ It is taken from the perspective of what Jesus would see looking down at this individual, who has a quizzical expression on his face. Imagine yourself at the foot of the cross looking up into the face of Jesus. What would be *your* facial expression? Would it be one of confusion? Lost hope? Fear? Anger? Sadness? Gratitude? What would you *say* to him? And what *would he say to you*? Perhaps there is too much to be said too short a time. Perhaps nothing needs to be said because you both understand the true reality of the wider picture. Regardless, Jesus would want *you* to know – with his outstretched arms - that this is the extent of his love for you. He would do anything for you, even die in your place.

Earlier in John we read these well-known words: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”⁹

John tells us that at the end, Jesus said, “It is finished,” and “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”¹⁰ There is no, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” a quote from Psalm 22. The death of Jesus is full of dignity in John’s account. The work that Jesus has come to do is now “completed” or “accomplished.” He has been faithful to the divine mission, and it has now been achieved. The Greek tense of the verb “finished” here is one signifying a past action but whose effects continue in the present. Yes . . . right up to today, now. The events of Good Friday have reached their climax, but the story is far from over.



⁷ John 19:19-20.

⁸ The picture is reproduced here with Dennis White’s kind permission.

⁹ John 3:16-17.

¹⁰ John 19:30.