

EVANGELISATION AND SALVATION 4

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4. The Fourth Gospel: serving love

Welcome

As you can imagine, exploring salvation in the Fourth Gospel could be the study of the life-time. We have 45 minutes, so we must do our best in that time! For this presentation, I want to follow these steps:

1. The Fourth Gospel
2. Healing
3. Love
4. New creation
5. Service
6. Synthesis
7. Jesus of History?
8. The Joy of the Gospel?
9. And so...?

Some of these steps will be quite brief and the central focus will be on no. 5 service. Before doing that, it is helpful to notice the distinctive features of this Gospel. We will not delay on these details, as this is just a reminder.

1. The Gospel tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, whose parents are known, who live in Galilee, was crucified in Jerusalem and was buried.
2. As with other Gospels, the narrative is told so as to proclaim the life-giving death and resurrection of Jesus.
3. The Gospel adds the perspective of the pre-existent Word, who was made flesh. His death was his return to the Father.
4. The Gospel adds into the story the later experience of the community; in particular the separation from the synagogue.

1. Three year ministry
2. The miracles are more dramatic
3. Five visits to Jerusalem
4. Three Passovers
5. The Twelve are not important
6. The Beloved Disciple is more important than Peter

It is historically much more like that the ministry of Jesus lasted three years rather than under one year as in the Synoptic Gospels.

1. No birth stories
2. No parables
3. Long symbolic tableaux
4. Long, involved speeches
5. One-to-one encounters
6. Unique characters / characters with special emphasis

Even though there are no parables, the discourses pick up the images embedded in the parables: e.g. good shepherd, true vine, light of the world and so forth.

1. Climax: chapters 19 and 20
2. Jesus knows his identity and destiny throughout
3. Roots in the Synoptic / Jesus tradition
4. Always in dialogue with the Hebrew Bible / Septuagint

We pause on numbers 3 and 4. The Fourth Gospel is itself a kind of new creations and a revolutionary reading of the Jesus tradition. Nevertheless, the writer is a conservative innovator. That is, even at his most creative the stories have roots in the Synoptic traditions. It is not clear that the writer had on his desk, so to speak, one of these Gospels (we can exclude Luke as much later), but he knows and presumes the Jesus tradition. Secondly, the original creator of the text was Jewish and, in the richest way imaginable, he explores the reality of Jesus in constant dialogue with his Bible (the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint). A clear example is the wedding feast at Cana. This must be read in the light of OT traditions about the covenant as a marriage bond, the end time banquet and the abundance of wine as a symbol of salvific joy.

With this minimal background in place, we will now look at understanding of salvation in the Fourth Gospel under four rubrics: healing, love, new creation and service, with special emphasis on the latter.

Healing

The most famous verse in John's Gospel must be 3:16. Of course, it is beautiful and appealing. A good deal of its meaning, however, comes from the context in the Gospel itself. The verse is found between the wedding feast of Cana (ch. 2) and the woman at the well (ch. 4). The wedding feast sets up the symbolism of love, so central to this Gospel. The woman at the well explores the symbolism of living water, our access to the mystery of God in Christ. In between, our verses flow on from the story of Nicodemus.

Jn 3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

John 3:16 For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him.

In this passage we overhear the catechetical vocabulary of the Johannine community. We notice as well the rootedness on the Hebrew Bible, with references to Jacob (and the ladder), Moses (and the bronze serpent) and Abraham (and the almost sacrifice of Isaac). In this Gospel, the expression to lift up is used exclusively of Jesus' death and resurrection. The lifting up is physical and visible, on the cross, and at the same time spiritual and invisible into resurrection. These citations illustrate this:

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. (John 3:14)

Then Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and I do nothing on my own initiative, but I speak just what the Father taught me.” (John 8:28)

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

Then the crowd responded, “We have heard from the law that the Christ will remain forever. How can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?” (John 12:34)

Behind the imagery is an OT story, that of the bronze serpent.

The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live. (Num 21:5–9)”

What do we make of this? Once we park the folkloric elements, the passage is teaching that we can set free from what is harming us by facing it directly. There can be a contemporary ring to this in counseling. In counseling people are brought into a safe space in which they can look at what has wounded them and thereby lessen its power or even be released from it. With this reference, John’s Gospel is teaching us that Jesus looked death in the face for us and we can come to that salvation by looking at (one of the verbs of believing in this Gospel) the one who was lifted up. Jesus looked at death and went through it for love of us. This takes us to our next moment.

Love

We can do this more briefly because it is so richly present across the whole Gospel. The careful, even solemn, beginning of the Passion Narrative sets the tone:

Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end. (John 13:1)

The link to the passion is a bit invisible in English. The expression “to the very end” is literally in Greek *eis telos* which has two meanings: perfectly or completely and to the very end. Both meanings are intended and are echoed in the final words of Jesus on the cross “it is completed,” in Greek *tetelestai*. The love motivation is reflected upon so frequently in this Gospel that one example may serve:

But I am doing just what the Father commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:31)

The link with the cross is clear. What about the link with the resurrection? Here the Gospel springs a surprise. We read in the resurrection scene,

He saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, and the face cloth, which had been around Jesus' head, not lying with the strips of linen cloth but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, came in, and he saw and believed. (John 20:6-8)

The writer wants us to remember another story,

The one who had died came out, his feet and hands tied up with strips of cloth, and a cloth wrapped around his face. Jesus said to them, "Unwrap him and let him go." (John 11:44)

Why recall this story? For two reasons. Firstly, Jesus' resurrection is the cause of ours. But more intriguingly, the writer is obliquely giving us God's motive for our resurrection.

Jesus wept. Thus the people who had come to mourn said, "Look how much he loved him!" (John 11:35-36)

In this gentle way, the Fourth Gospel teaches that the love of God is disclosed not only on the cross but also in the resurrection.

New creation

Already, St Paul had been using the language of new creation to speak of Jesus' death and resurrection.

So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come! (2Corinthians 5:17)

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that matters is a new creation! (Galatians 6:15)

The Fourth Gospel, in its turn, frames the whole story of Jesus with the language of creation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. (John 1:1)

The echo of Gen 1:1 is unmistakable. Perhaps John took his inspiration from Mark.

John 19:30 When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

This is the seventh day, the day on which God complete (*sunetelesen*) all he had been doing (Gen 2:1-3)

Now very early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been moved away from the entrance. (John 20:1)

The first day of the week recall the beginning of creation, as in “There was evening, and there was morning, marking the first day.” (Genesis 1:5)

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the disciples had gathered together and locked the doors of the place because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. And after he said this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:19, 22)

Finally, there is an echo of the second creation story, when God breathed life into Adam (Gen 2:7).

Service

We will explore at a little more length the teaching of Jesus death as an action in which God served humanity. We begin by reading the whole text:

John 13:1 Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end. 2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, that he should betray Jesus.

3 Because Jesus knew that the Father had handed all things over to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 he got up from the meal, removed his outer clothes, took a towel and tied it around himself. 5 He poured water into the washbasin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to dry them with the towel he had wrapped around himself.

John 13:6 Then he came to Simon Peter. Peter said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” 7 Jesus replied, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand after these things.” 8 Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet!” Jesus replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head!” 10 Jesus replied, “The one who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not every one of you.” 11 (For Jesus knew the one who was going to betray him. For this reason he said, “Not every one of you is clean.”)

John 13:12 So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am.

14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Within the Fourth Gospel, our passage comes from the long farewell scene, beginning with the Last Supper. Although the Johannine community certainly celebrated the Eucharist, there is no Lord's Supper at this point (John 6). Instead, it is replaced by the washing of the feet. Although the (prophetic) gesture changes, the function remains the same, that is, the interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The washing of the feet is unattested elsewhere and therefore lacks multiple attestation. However, there is a significant foreground in the synoptic tradition, as may be seen from the following passages.

Mark 10:43 "But it is not this way among you. Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Already, Jesus' death as service is indicated.

Luke 12:37 Blessed are those slaves whom their master finds alert when he returns! I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, have them take their place at the table, and will come and wait on them!

This reversal of the usual roles anticipated the disturbing reversal in John 13. The "normal" relationship is to be found in Luke 17.

Luke 17:7 "Would any one of you say to your slave who comes in from the field after ploughing or shepherding sheep, 'Come at once and sit down for a meal'? 8 Won't the master instead say to him, 'Get my dinner ready, and make yourself ready to serve me while I eat and drink. Then you may eat and drink'?"

Luke 22:24 A dispute also started among them over which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 So Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority over them are called 'benefactors.' 26 Not so with you; instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

This is really the disputed about discipleship in Mark 10 and Matthew 20, with a major different. Luke has relocated the anecdote to the Last Supper. John raises the parabolic teaching of Luke 22:17 into a full blown narrative. This is not the first time elements of Synoptic tradition have been made into something else, as we see here:

1. John and the Synoptic Tradition
 - a. Parable of the Vineyard
 - b. Parable of the Lost Sheep
 - c. Bridegroom and new wine
2. John has raised the Synoptic teaching into an action chreia or paradigm based on prophet gestures

The next step is to signal, in a cursory way, the resonance of the vocabulary used in this story here.

1. Rose 13 times, almost always in reference to the resurrection of Jesus.
2. Took off 18 times, usually in reference to Jesus' laying down his life.
3. Wrapped only 3 times, but the links are fascinating
4. Water 21 times, but the contexts are also illuminating
5. Washing 13 times.
6. Wipe 3 times only.
7. Feet an apparently "innocent" word 14 times
8. "Never" lit. "into eternity" 12 times, with a special meaning

Finally, the apparently simple word "example" is related *to the example of death* in the Bible. Greek has a number of words of example:

1. Tupos / hupotoposis
2. Hupogrammos
3. Hupodeigma
4. Eikōn
5. Charaktēr

No. 3 is the one selected here. From a dictionary definition it can mean:

hupodeigma

- An example of behaviour used for purposes of moral instruction, example, model, pattern
- An indication of something that appears at a subsequent time, outline, sketch, symbol

It occurs a few times in the Bible and in the books of the Maccabees in a special sense:

Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble **example** of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws. When he had said this, he went at once to the rack. (2 Macc 6:27-28)

So in this way he died, leaving in his death an **example** of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation. (2 Macc 6:31)

For the tyrant Antiochus, when he saw the courage of their virtue and their endurance under the tortures, proclaimed them to his soldiers as an **example** for their own endurance, and this made them brave and courageous for infantry battle and siege, and he ravaged and conquered all his enemies. (4 Macc 17:23-24)

In the view of this Gospel, Jesus' death was an act of loving service, by which God, in a deeply paradoxical way, came to the aid of wounded humanity.

1. Salvation was an act of loving service
2. Christian service participates in God's service of humanity in Christ

3. Interpretation

- a. John 13:1-3
- b. John 13:4-11
- c. John 13:12-17

With this tremendous background, it should be now possible to read through the washing of the feet in a completely new light.

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Finally, we come to our usual three points of reflection.

Jesus of history?

Without further elaboration, this *tableau* has powerful roots in the Synoptic tradition and the historical Jesus.

1. Healing (in many stories)
2. Love (= compassion, in many passages: Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Lk 7:31; 10:33; 15:20)
3. New creation (an early interpretation)
4. Service: Mark 10:35-45 = Matthew 20:20-28; Luke 12:37; 17:7-8; Luke 22:24-27

Synthesis

The message about salvation in the Fourth Gospel may be summarized as follows:

1. Healing
2. Love
3. New creation
4. Service

The creator God has healed humanity of death by sending his Son in an act of self-emptying and loving service. God's loving therapy is a new creation.

The Joy of the Gospel?

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis puts his finger on the heart of Christian proclamation using the core images salving love and healing.

The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ. God constantly renews his faithful ones, whatever their age: "They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint" (Is 40:31). (EG 11)

Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings. (EG 44)

There indeed we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us, is a mystical fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does. (EG 92)

And so...?

1. Jesus' gift was not up to God to offset his anger but down from God to reveal his love
2. Jesus' lifting up heals humanity of the "disease" of death
3. The core is God's breath-taking love, indicated by the washing of feet—so incredible is it hardy believable
4. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1John 5:10)
5. Death and resurrection are joined
6. Jesus' costly obedience, death and resurrection show God reaching out to humanity
7. Contemporary models: service, love, healing

The questions appended to the Paul study can simply be repeated here.

1. Do these teachings of John speak to us today?
2. What kind of disciple should I be?
3. What kind of church should we be?