

On-Line Retreat 2019

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Monday of Holy Week

Isaiah 42:1-7; Psalm 26(27):1-3, 13-15; **John 12:1-11**

The anointing at Bethany is received differently all four Gospels. Mark (14:3-9), Matthew (26:6-13) and John place it *before* the Last Supper while Luke tells a very similar story much earlier in his Gospel (7:36-50). In the Synoptic Gospels, both the woman and those who complain are nameless. John's Gospel, by contrast, creatively identifies the woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and names the complainer as Judas. John offers no account of the payment of Judas but perhaps the 300 denarii are a late, inflated echo of the 30 silver pieces.

By means of such deft editing, the writer creates a truly powerful scene, contrasting not only love and betrayal but also life and death. In his roundabout way, the evangelist takes us to the very heart of Holy Week. The cross is no mere miscarriage of justice or a tragic judicial murder. On the contrary, we are invited to behold nothing less than the struggle between good and evil, personified in Mary and Judas.

In all the darkness, there is a glint of hope signalled by the ointment. In our story of the first anointing, the *quality* matters: *the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*. At the end of the passion narrative in John there is an anointing *before* the burial by *men* (in flat contradiction of Mark 16:1). In the second anointing, the *quantity* is the key: *a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds* (19:39). The contrast between the two anointings, however, is only apparent. Mary anoints Jesus on account of her love for him. Joseph and Nicodemus use "myrrh and aloes", a pairing associated only with marriage symbolism in the Old Testament (Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17 and Song 4:14; significantly, nard is found only in the Song of Songs 1:12; 4:13-14). Thus the story of Jesus' last days is framed by eloquent, even sensual symbols of love – love which proves victorious over the forces of evil, appalling betrayal and even death itself.

Tuesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalm 70(71):1-6, 15, 17; **John 13:21-33; 36-38**

In the Fourth Gospel, Judas is vilified at each mention (John 6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 11, 26, 29; 18:2-3, 5). Lest we miss what is really happening, the evangelist adds two notes. The first is evident: *After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him*. The second oblique: *As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread he went out. Night had fallen*. This is not the night of clock time but the hour of darkness. In the words of the Paschal Sequence, *Death with life contended: combat strangely ended! Life's own Champion,*

slain, yet lives to reign. The Light of World (John 8:10 and 9:5) faces into the night of death on our behalf. But we know from the Prologue how this will end: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (John 1:5).

The vilification of Judas risks turning him into a scapegoat, allowing us to take the spotlight off ourselves. The writer knows that all of us are capable of betrayal and that even those who knew Jesus himself did indeed fail at the decisive moment: *All of them deserted him and fled* (Mark 14:50). In the present Gospel, the writer helps us with a triple contrast: Judas, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, combining realism with idealism. The beloved disciple (only in this Gospel and only from chapter 13 onwards) symbolises perfect discipleship: present at the Supper next to Jesus (13:25), a witness to the trial and the crucifixion (18:15 and 19:26-27), and the first to come to Easter faith (20:8, in lapidary fashion). In this way, the beloved disciple acts as foil to Peter: Peter who betrays Jesus (13:36-38; 18:15-27) and does not come immediately to Easter faith (20:3-7). Nevertheless, there is again a glint of hope: *Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward* (John 13:36), words fulfilled in Peter's three-fold rehabilitation around a charcoal fire in John 21:15-19.

Wednesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 68(69):8-10, 21-22, 21, 33-34; **Matthew 26:15-25**

We move to Matthew's Gospel for a second account of the betrayal of Judas. During the joyful feast Passover, the dreadful judgement of Judas is given. This is quite frightening and puzzling. It is frightening because of what is said of Judas: *It would have been better for that one not to have been born* (Matt 26:24). Later on, in the same Gospel, we hear of his suicide: *Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself* (Matt 27:5). However the historical Judas understood his actions, by the time the Gospels were written he was being held up as a grim example of what can happen even to someone who knew Jesus. It is also puzzling because somehow the dark deed of Judas made possible the events that gave us new life in Christ.

This betrayal is in sharp contrast with the context of Passover, a truly joyful celebration of freedom, identity and community. The spirit of the feast is captured in an early Jewish document called the Mishnah, where we read:

In every generation a person is duty-bound to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt, since it is said, And you shall tell your son in that day saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt (Ex. 13:8). Therefore we are duty-bound to thank, praise, glorify, honour, exalt, extol, and bless him who did for our forefathers and for us all these miracles. He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, anguish to joy, mourning to festival, darkness to great light, subjugation to redemption, so we should say before him, Hallelujah. (Pesah 10:5)

Not a bad reflection on the Christian passover celebrated in these days, as well as in every Eucharist.

Holy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116(115): 12-13, 15-18; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; **John 13:1-15**

As often in John, there is much more to this story than a simple example of mutual service. (1) This story is unique to John, although it echoes parable-like sayings in the other Gospels. (2) The washing of the feet belongs to the category of prophetic gesture – well-known in the Old and New Testaments – by which a prophet illustrates his meaning. (3) The washing *replaces* the action with the bread and the wine, but has the same function, that is, to disclose the inner meaning of Jesus' death. (4) The words used takes the story to another level. For example, the opening words in Greek read literally: he *rose* from the table and *laid down* his outer garment, using exactly the same words used elsewhere for the death and resurrection of Jesus. (5) The word "example" in v. 14 is used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) to point to the foreshadowing of a noble death. (6) The important introductory verses tell us that the action somehow spells out the "hour" and Jesus' "return to the Father".

So, there is a very great deal more to this scene than a mere moral example. John's Gospel teaches that Jesus' death was an act of loving service, by means of which God – the sustainer of the cosmos! – humbly served humanity to disclose the depth of his breath-taking love. This is a reversal of roles and would be, in any culture, shocking. Peter's reaction registers such shock – and we should be at least disconcerted as well as delighted. The washing illustrates, in story form, a verse from Mark (*Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* [Mark 10:45]) and fulfils a central affirmation from John himself (*God so loved the world: He gave his one and only Son* [John 3:16]). Can I "allow" myself to be so loved, so served by the great Creator and loving Father?

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 30(31):2, 6, 12-13, 15-17, 25; Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9; **John 18:1-19:42**

In the Triduum, we celebrate the great events that gave us new life in Christ and the Fourth Gospel is especially rich, offering six "lenses" through which look at the cross and the resurrection. These perspectives are established early in the Gospel and sustained throughout. The entire narrative is directed towards the events of salvation, so it is no surprise that all six perspectives are registered in John's passion narrative. Here are the lenses:

Healing: John 3:15 (the lifting up)

Love: John 3:16 (God so loved)

New creation: John 1:1 (in the beginning)

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Passover: John 1:35-36 (the Lamb of God)

Service: John 13:1-15. (the washing of the feet)

The Holy Spirit, the advocate: John 3:5-6 (born from above)

Sometimes discretely, sometime overtly, the Gospel writer takes up each perspective in the narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection. Let me illustrate this with reference to two of these perspectives.

Passover: Jesus is put to death at the times the passover lambs were slaughtered (John 19:14); that Friday was the start of Passover in John; the mention of the hyssop (John 19:29 = Exodus 12:22) and the not breaking of the legs (19:33 = Exodus 12:46).

New creation: In the beginning (John 1:1 = Genesis 1:1); it is finished (John 19:30 = Genesis 2:2); be breathed on them (John 20:20 = Genesis 2:7).

Both Passover and New Creation come to climactic expression, as do the other perspectives, in chapters 18-20. In this way, the Fourth Gospel offers a real alternative to the traditional understanding of Jesus' death as punishment and payment.

Briefly put: *The creator God has healed humanity of death by sending his Son in an act of self-emptying and loving service, setting us free from the power of death and sin. God's loving medicine is a new creation, brought to life in us by the Holy Spirit.*

Holy Saturday

Exodus 14:15-15:1; Exodus 15; Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 117(118) 1-2, 16-17, 22-23; **Luke 24:1-12**

The same basic story of the women at the tomb is recounted in all four gospels. However, the evangelists differ in sequence, in wording and in detail, according to the needs of the audience and the theology of the time of writing. Paying attention to such details can help us to hear deeply the teaching of each Gospel writer.

Luke limits his account both in time (one day, it seems) and place (Jerusalem only).

1. Empty tomb (1-12): Now on the first day of the week, at early dawn, (Luke 24:1)
2. Emmaus (13-35): Now that very day two of them were on their way (Luke 24:13)
3. Risen Lord (36-43): While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them (Luke 24:36)
4. Commission (44-49): Then he said to them (Luke 24:44)
5. Ascension (50-53): Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany (Luke 24:50)

At a surface level of story telling, Luke underscores the following: The link with the transfiguration / exodus (two *men*); the link with the passion predictions from the

ministry; that Jesus is alive – as will be proclaimed in the Acts – the common proclamation of the early church (see Mark 16:6 and Matthew 28:5-6). The two heavenly figures proclaim tremendous good news: he is not here, he is risen.

But the story as it stands seems to come to an impasse. The women, who evidently believe the messengers, are themselves not believed by the others (men?). Even after Peter makes his way to the empty tomb, it seems nothing has “happened” for him. What now? In a very helpful way, Luke has set the reader up to listen to the Emmaus story. That story is, at its heart, an account of *how* to come to resurrection faith. The key is desire. Faith comes alive only after the two on road *choose* to have the risen Lord in their lives: “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” (Luke 24:29)

Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34, 37-43; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; **John 20:1-9**

Traditionally, we have found it easy to think of the cross as the measure of God’s love for us. Because of the focus on the cross, we in the west find it more difficult to think of the resurrection as also the expression love of God, even “all the more so”! The Fourth Gospel teaches precisely that, in an oblique yet significant way. There are two hints in the short version gospel. Of the two male protagonists, it is the *Beloved* Disciple who comes to faith, precisely because he *loves* Jesus. The insistence on the cloth around the head may seem strange to us but it will remind the careful reading of two other passages:

Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:35-36)

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (John 11:44)

The head cloth (John 20:7), far more than an incidental detail, teaches two things. First of all, Jesus *loves* Lazarus and therefore raises him; likewise, God loves us and will raise us from the death. Secondly, the resurrection of Jesus is *different* (hence the special note about the cloth) because his resurrection is the cause of our resurrection.

To capture the full richness of John’s Gospel, it is necessary to read the rest of the story about Mary Magdalene in vv. 11-18. By calling her by name (like the good shepherd), Jesus re-establishes relationship with Mary Magdalene. The evangelist tells us that coming to Easter faith is a much a matter of loving and being loved as believing. In summary, Jesus died and rose again for love of us – a theme already present in John 3:16-17. Can I really allow myself to be lifted up by so joyful a love?