

Holy Ghost, Genova - Lent address 4 (4.4.2020)

From Mark's picture of Jesus as the helpless victim, buffeted and battered by external forces, through Matthew's picture of the object of the religious establishment's unremitting hostility and Luke's image of Jesus as the one who, even from the cross teaches God's way of forgiving, reconciling love, we come finally to John. For John Jesus is neither victim, nor hate-figure, nor teacher. Jesus is King. In his presence it is those who venture to judge him who are themselves judged. He remains, as we shall see, in control from start to finish. In fact, as someone said many years ago, in John's Gospel the resurrection hardly seems necessary. The glory is there already in the cross: and Jesus' words, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself", are proved true.

In John's Gospel the Passion story takes up even more space than it does in Mark. In Mark's version the last week of Jesus' life occupies five chapters out of sixteen, and the last forty-eight hours about half of that. In John the last week takes up eight chapters out of twenty-one, all but one of those eight devoted to the last forty-eight hours.

But the balance within that forty-eight hours is very different. Most of it (from chapter 13 to chapter 17) is given over to the last conversations of Jesus with his disciples, the "Farewell Discourses", as they are sometimes known, and to the long prayer (the "High-priestly prayer") in which Jesus intercedes for all who follow him. All of this takes place at the last supper - a supper which John mentions but does not describe. Most of the Eucharistic theology of John's Gospel is packaged with the feeding of the five thousand in chapter six. He does, however, give his readers the detail of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, thereby linking service and baptism, and he follows the other gospels in recording the prophecy of Judas' betrayal.

It is after Judas leaves the table and goes out into the night that Jesus begins to speak to his disciples about all that is to follow. And it is no accident that his first words are "Now the Son of Man has been glorified." Now Jesus is able to speak freely about what the future will bring - for him, for the disciples, for the world. He speaks of his relationship with the Father, of the promise of Holy Spirit, of the victory over the world that he is about to gain.

But running through the glory are the themes of suffering which we have heard in the other accounts of the passion. Peter's denial is predicted - so is the world's hatred of those who follow Christ. The disciples are warned that they will be "scattered each to his own home". And their understanding is no greater than it is in Mark. Thomas, Philip and Judas (the other one - not Iscariot), as well as Peter, reveal how limited is their grasp of Jesus' meaning.

John's technical skill in telling his story never ceases to amaze me. If Mark's style is that of the tabloid journalist, and Luke is the cultured historian, then John is the dramatist or, better perhaps, the writer of screenplays. From the wide-angle shot of the supper-table he zooms in to focus on Jesus, from time to time cutting away to one of the disciples, or perhaps a small group, asking Jesus a question or whispering among themselves. He pans across to follow Judas out into the darkness. He ends with the prayer (a long take if ever there was one), zooming into its climax in the petition that the disciples may see Jesus' glory and know the Father, "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them".

From this point John moves out of the upper room and into his account of the suffering and death of Jesus. Scholars are divided in their views whether John intended his Gospel to be read alongside other accounts, or whether he meant it to replace them. Most seem to think that he wrote his story to be read alongside at least one of the others, as either a commentary or a corrective, and we could spend hours this afternoon simply looking at the subtle links between John and the other Evangelists.

Take, for instance, the way in which he adds to our information about Gethsemane. Mark and Matthew tell us the name of the place. Luke adds that Jesus was accustomed to go there. John adds directions ("across the Kidron valley") and the detail that it was a garden. Here, in the garden, Judas arrives with a detachment of Roman soldiers and Jewish police - and here the contrast with Mark's account couldn't be greater. "Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them 'For whom are you looking?'" For John Jesus is every much not a helpless prisoner, a victim.

Jesus gives up his life, because his hour has come and because it is the Father's will, but he will not permit any of the disciples to be arrested. When Peter tries to use force in his defence, Jesus rebukes him. We note also the strange response of Judas' party when Jesus tells them that he is the one they are seeking. "When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they stepped back and fell to the ground." The divine glory of which Jesus had spoken in his prayer is made apparent in the garden - even to those who had come out to arrest him. The words translated as "I am he" are, in Greek "ego eimi" and hint, in the view of many scholars, at the name by which the Lord, the God of Israel, had revealed himself to Moses. Here Jesus, confronting the power of the world, reveals his unity with God - and the world backs off.

From this point John follows Mark's account in outline, but with subtle (and sometimes striking) variations and a number of gaps, which we can make sense only if we know other versions of the story. Jesus is led away to the house of Annas, a former high priest deposed by the Romans a decade before but still extremely influential - not only his son-in-law but five of his sons and one grandson followed him as high priest. John keeps the Jewish part of the process, although he isn't terribly interested in it, inter-cutting the scenes of Peter's denial, which he depicts, again, in a very dramatic way. There are two possible reasons for this.

First: a large part of John's Gospel, especially chapters seven to ten, is devoted to the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. In his book "Jesus on Trial" he late Anthony Harvey suggested that the shape of the whole gospel is based on that of a Jewish trial, with testimony (a key word all through this gospel) being given by Jesus and by his opponents and readers left to give their own verdict.

Second: the trial as it unfolds in Mark's Gospel - and to some extent in Luke's - makes reference to the coming end of the age, and one of John's chief concerns is with eternal life now (what is sometimes called "realised eschatology"), so that John isn't greatly interested in the topic of the end time. For John, as for St Paul, the Christian life is something to be lived in union with Christ now, not at some date in the future. We're back to those closing words of the high-priestly prayer again.

What John is interested in is the trial before Pilate' the Roman governor. John is interested in the nature of power and authority. There are great questions being asked here. What is true nature of Jesus' kingship? What is the source of Pilate's authority to free Jesus or to have him crucified? What, ultimately, is truth? The whole of Jesus' trial before Pilate is marked by people speaking more truly than they realise, and the story operates on several different levels. Some scholars have dismissed it as "unhistorical", but it remains true that John has "picked out the key of the passion narrative in the kingship of Jesus, and has made its meaning clearer, perhaps, than any other New Testament writer."

The kingdom of Jesus is not like the kingdoms of this world (and this is something that Pilate finds very hard to grasp, sympathetically though John portrays him). They are ruled by force and maintained by lies, defending themselves by violence against threats from without and within. The kingdom of Jesus is the kingdom of truth, the kingdom of ultimate reality, ruled by obedience to the will of God, liberating all who belong to the truth. Pilate finds it impossible to cope with this sort of language. He asks the question "What is truth?" and immediately goes out from the one who is truth to those who are trying to trap him by falsely interpreting his mission and his claims.

Now, because of Pilate's inability to grasp the nature of Jesus' kingship - and because of his increasing unease in the presence of this man who doesn't fit into the neat Roman pigeonholes: 'criminal', 'king' (even 'god') - because Pilate is out of his depth, and knows it, the Jewish authorities are able to manipulate him. They know what kingship means in this world. They know, as Pilate knows, what kingship means to the authorities in Rome. "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor." And therefore is dangerous, even though that claim is embodied in a bruised and bleeding mockery of kingship, with a crown of thorns and a purple robe. "Here is the man!" says Pilate to the crowd, and nothing could state more clearly than John does here the cost of the incarnation. As the great German scholar Rudolf Bultmann said, "the declaration that 'the word became flesh' has become visible in its most extreme consequence."

Pilate still tries to find a way of releasing this prisoner, whose silences are as disturbing as his words, and whose words suggest that his condemnation and crucifixion are within the purposes of God, so that Pilate's bind here has divine consent. Pilate at last sits down on the judge's bench and, speaking more truly than he knows, he tells the crowd "Here is your king!" The crowd reject him - and in doing so they reject God, who is in Jewish tradition the only true king of Israel. And Jesus is, at last, handed over to be crucified.

But again, Jesus remains in command. "They took Jesus", but it is "carrying his cross by himself, he went out". John does not mention Simon of Cyrene, possibly in order to distance himself from sectarian groups who held that Simon had been substituted for Jesus at the last moment. Some of the ancient Fathers of the Church saw the figure of Jesus bearing his cross foreshadowed in another "beloved son" intended for a sacrificial victim. Isaac (Genesis 22.6) also carried the materials for his own sacrifice up to the hill where his father Abraham planned to kill him. But John's message is more likely to be that Jesus needed no help in bringing about the redemption of the world.

John, like the other evangelists, mentions the charge sheet - but this time pinned up on the cross, and written in the three languages of Roman Palestine: the religious language, Hebrew; Latin, the language of government: and Greek, the language of trade and international culture. And here John shows Pilate having his revenge on those who had manoeuvred him into crucifying Jesus. This condemned criminal is publicly proclaimed as "the King of the Jews". No wonder the chief priests asked Pilate to change the text! But Pilate, again speaking more truly than he knows, insists that what he has written will stand. On one level it is Pilate's revenge, a studied insult. A crucified man is all they are worth. On another, the kingship of Jesus is recognised in his exaltation on the cross - and Pilate is speaking more truly than he knows.

John follows Mark in describing how the soldiers divided Jesus' clothes, but he makes more of it. The seamless robe is linked by some scholars to the robe of the Jewish high priest, which was also made without seams. Others have seen in it a symbol of the unity of the Church, the new people of God brought into being by the death of Christ.

This unity also lies behind the next scene, so often a subject of meditation in mediaeval poetry, most famously the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi's "Stabat mater". Jesus entrusts his mother (John, curiously, never mentions Mary by her name) to the care of the beloved disciple, overriding the claims of Jesus' natural family and creating a new family in words that carry faint echoes of those words in Mark's Gospel (3:31 ff): "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

We are near to the end now and Jesus remains, as he has been from the beginning, in control. Where in the other Gospels one of the crowd takes the initiative and offers him a mouthful of the soldiers' sour wine, here Jesus announces "I am thirsty", so that the scripture (from Psalm 69) may be fulfilled. The stalk of hyssop, incidentally, is strange. When I lived in Slough we used to grow hyssop as a herb in our garden, and it's a low-growing, rather scrubby plant. Its stalks are fairly short, thin and flexible.

The reed which Mark mentions at this point in the story would seem to be a better idea for hoisting the sponge to Jesus' lips. But again, John is operating on more than one level. Hyssop played an important part in the preparation of the Passover, and John links the death of Jesus very closely with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, even (unlike the other Gospels) to the hour and the day. As the slaughter of the lamb marked God's deliverance of his people Israel, so the sacrifice of Jesus, the "Lamb of God" marked out by John the Baptist in the very first chapter of this Gospel, marks the deliverance of his people the Church and the beginning of a new age of freedom.

Now all has been completed. Jesus has fulfilled the Father's purpose. The word which many versions of the Bible translate as "It is finished", or "It is accomplished", has both those meanings. It's the word that is translated elsewhere in the Gospels as "completed" and closely related to the word translated a few lines earlier as "fulfil". It doesn't just mean that an activity has stopped, as we might say that it has finished raining. It has overtones of completeness, fullness, perfection. Everything that God sent Jesus to do has now been fully accomplished. So Jesus, remaining in control until the last, bows his head and "gave up his spirit." Jesus positively ends his life as he completes the task for which he was sent.

We have come a long way, it would seem, from Mark's helpless victim, battered and bloody, as he is acted on by forces beyond his control. And for some it is difficult to see, in John's commanding presentation of Jesus, a humanity with which they can identify. But we come back in the end to the same paradox that guides both Mark and John in their telling of the story of Jesus' suffering: that in this human body, bruised and broken, God is at work for the salvation of the world. The obedience of the Son and his freely accepted suffering fulfil the will of the Father. The kingdom of God is inaugurated in the death of Jesus the King. The new age has begun.

Jesus said to the crowd "Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."