

The Passion of Jesus According to John



Each year on Good Friday the Passion of Jesus Christ according to John is read aloud in our churches. John's Gospel, as we know, was written later than the other Gospels, perhaps some seventy years after Jesus died, and those years gave John plenty of time to reflect upon Jesus' death and highlight a number of aspects that are not as evident in the other Gospels. What are those special aspects?

John's narrative of Jesus' death highlights his trial. The bulk of John's account focuses on Jesus' trial and the eventual judgment that he be put to death. But it is ingeniously written. John writes up the trial of Jesus in such a way that, while Jesus is the one being tried, everyone else is on trial except Jesus. Pilate is on trial, the Jewish authorities are on trial, Jesus apostles and disciples are on trial, the crowds watching are on trial, and we who are hearing the story are on trial. Jesus, alone, is not on trial, even as his trial is judging everyone else. Hence when Pilate asks Jesus: What is truth? Jesus' silence puts Pilate on trial by throwing Pilate back on his own silence, the truth of himself. It's the same for the rest of us.

Next, John emphasizes Jesus' divinity in his passion account. John's Gospel, as we know, emphasizes Jesus' pre-existence with God and his divinity rather than his humanity. This shines through in his narrative: The Jesus being crucified in John's Gospel is always in control. He is unafraid, shows no weaknesses, carries his own cross, dies in serenity, and is buried like a king (with a staggering amount of myrrh and aloes, wrapped in clothes saturated with aromatic oils). John's Jesus does not need any Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross, nor does he cry out in agony and abandonment. John writes up the Passion of Christ from the point of view of Jesus' divinity.

John then employs some powerful images to help score these points:

He has Judas and the soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus carrying "lanterns and torches". He intends strong irony here: Jesus is the light of the world and so the irony should not be missed in the fact that those opposing him come to him guiding themselves by artificial, flimsy lighting - lanterns and torches. This suggests, among other things, that they prefer darkness to light and that they know that what they are doing can only be done at night because it would be shamefully exposed in the full light of day. The powers that oppose God need the cover of darkness and artificial light.

Next, at the end of the trial, Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd and asks them whether or not they want to accept him as their king. They respond by saying: "We have no king, but Caesar!" Historically for a Jewish believer to say this at the time of Jesus would have been in effect a renunciation of his or her messianic hopes. That is true for us too: Every time we do not recognize the power of God in the one who is being crucified we are renouncing our own messianic hope and admitting that the powers of this world are, for us, the deepest reality.

Further, John's passion narrative emphasizes that Jesus was sentenced to death precisely at noon, the very hour on the eve of Passover when the temple priests would begin to slaughter the paschal lambs. The inference is clear: Jesus is the real lamb who dies for sin.

Finally, In John's account of the passion, after Jesus dies, soldiers come and pierce his side with a lance. Immediately blood and water flow out. This is a rich image: First of all, it symbolizes birth. When baby is born, blood and water accompany the delivery. For John, Jesus' death is the birth of something new in our lives. What?

Christians have sometimes been too quick to take this image to infer the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, with the outflow of blood symbolizing the Eucharist and the outflow of water symbolizing Baptism. That may indeed be valid but there is, first, something more primal in that image: Blood symbolizes the flow of life inside us. Water both quenches thirst and washes dirt from our bodies. What John wants to say with this image is that those who witnessed the death of Jesus immediately recognized too that the kind of love which Jesus manifested in dying in this way created a new energy and freedom in their own lives. They felt both an energy and a cleansing, blood and water, flowing from Jesus' death. In essence, they felt a power flowing out of his death into their lives that allowed them to live with less fear, with less guilt, with more joy, and with more meaning. That is still true for us today.

John's Passion account puts us all on trial and renders a verdict that frees us from our deepest bondage.

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