

“St John’s Passion”

John 19: 1-37

Good Friday, Boise, 2021

As I noted in a previous sermon, St John, in describing the Passion, has his own emphases among the Four Evangelists. He tells the same story, of course. There is the betrayal by Judas, the arrest in the garden, the trials before Caiaphas and Pilate, Peter’s denial, the scourging and mocking, the Crucifixion and death. Yet, in his description of what we might regard as the lesser details, St John seems more interested than the other three in the effects of the Passion — what it was leading to and what was accomplished by it. After the Resurrection, all followers of Jesus could see that His execution for rebellion against the Empire was the Sacrifice for mankind that He Himself intended. No mortal could be expected to have known that at the time, even though it was prophesied — because most prophecies are understood only after their fulfillment. After the Resurrection, the disciples could also see that the One they had been following was not just a good man. That revelation John puts in the events of the Passion itself. He draws attention to things that the other Evangelists omit from their accounts.

Let us begin with the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane at night. When the soldiers sent by the Sanhedrin arrived “with lanterns and torches and weapons,” “Jesus . . . came forward and said to them, ‘Whom do you seek?’ They answered Him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am He.’” When He said that, “they drew back and fell to the ground.” Only John reports that. What do we make of it?

You know what to make of it if you have read in Exodus the account of Moses at the Burning Bush. Moses wanted to know God’s Name to tell the Israelites, and God said to him, “Tell them that I AM sent you. I AM WHO I AM.” All

throughout the Fourth Gospel, the Evangelist uses “I am” statements of Jesus to signify His Divinity. Our Lord is the same Yahweh who spoke to Moses at the Burning Bush. At the beginning of the Passion, when the soldiers come with the traitor to arrest Jesus, and they want to know whether they have got the right man, He says merely, “I am He,” and the power displayed in those words throws them backward, and they fall down.

Yet Jesus, Divine though He is, allows Himself to be arrested to fulfill prophecy and achieve our salvation. He tells Peter to sheathe his sword, and restores the ear of Malchus. When the party reaches Jerusalem, Jesus takes a commanding position, first in the trial before Caiaphas, then in the one before Pilate. The way St John tells it, Christ put Pilate on trial. “Are You a king?” --“You say that I am a king,” Jesus answers. “My Kingdom is not of this world;” for if it were, then “My servants would have fought, that I might not be delivered over” to Caiaphas and his party. “But My Kingdom is not from the world.” Pilate, unnerved, then sought to release Jesus, and if it had been God’s will, He would have been released. All that St John makes clear in his report of the trial — though at the time, even the disciples regarded it and all the other events of the Passion as defeat.

Plenty of preachers have remarked on the pain Jesus must have felt when the soldiers set the Cross in the ground, the nails pulling at His hands and His feet. John says merely, “they crucified Him.” But much conversation takes place when Jesus is up there, with arms outstretched, drawing the whole world to Himself. Our Lord commands others like the Divine King that He was. To His own mother, “Woman, behold your son!” And John, understanding, complied: “from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”

Christ was man, not just the appearance of one, St John makes clear. The soldiers did for Him what was done for others in great pain. They gave Him sour wine on a sponge to dull the senses and draw the mind’s attention away from the pain. Yet His last words were, in this account, an authoritative pronouncement:

“It is finished.” My mission is now accomplished. John prepared his readers for that as well. Way back in chapter 10, he recorded Our Lord as saying,

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down on My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father.

Now Jesus is announcing, at the end of His Passion, when His captors are inflicting death upon Him, “It is finished.” I have finished. The Passion, even the death itself, is My work. I am laying down My life for you, and I will “take it up again,” as only a Divine Son, obeying His Divine Father’s will, can do. Isaac was not the man for the job. I AM.

St John’s view of the Passion is also our post-Resurrection view of it. We can enter the sorrow of the story, and through an exercise such as The Stations of the Cross experience to a degree the events with Our Lord. But we cannot do that without the knowledge that in dying He defeated death; so the grave would not hold Him. “Sing my tongue the glorious battle.” To stand with Christ in His Passion, as several then did, is to stand on the winning side. It is to look forward with confidence, not just to Easter, but also to our own resurrections. “It is finished,” and we shall finish — victorious.

Some of the OT Scriptures we have read this week said it would be thus. Isaiah 53 gives us the fullest description of the Passion before it occurred. Yet it concludes,

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the many,
and He shall divide the spoil with the strong [Isa 53: 12a].

Because God’s Suffering Servant-Messiah “poured out His soul to death,” bearing “the sin of many” [12b], the Devil has been forced to yield his ill-gotten gains. Even death itself has lost its sting.

And Psalm 22 has something similar. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?,” is a complaint that sums up all the laments in the OT, all those

uttered from Moses to David to Jeremiah. I am your chosen one. Why do You allow such things to happen to me? Why do my enemies now have the upper hand? Can't you see, God, that they are against You, and I am for You?

Yet half-way through the Psalm, the faithful One petitions, "Save Me from the lion's mouth, and . . . I will declare Your Name to My brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You." And He did, on the day of His Resurrection. And we do so today at Grace Anglican Church. We praise God for making His Son the victorious Victim, Our Saviour and Our hope of the life to come. We praise, and we call upon everyone around us to praise Him with us.

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