

John 19:16b-22

Christian tradition has long identified Jesus' willing acceptance of the mounting conspiracy against him as his "passion," and John's telling of these events spans two chapters - 18 and 19. Further, Jesus' suffering, even to the point of the sacrifice of his life, is foundational for understanding him as the Christ. And yet, in the Jewish tradition from which the Gospels arose, messiahs do not get crucified.

The expectations for a king like David who establishes a sovereign nation, or a prophet like Moses who brings about an eschatological in-breaking of God's reign, do not allow for the scandal of capital execution as a criminal. So, the earliest Christians had to struggle with this fact both to make sense of their experience of Jesus, as well as to form their identity as a community of believers. The preservation and telling of this story had its beginnings in the earliest development of the church. But if this is the story of a traditional messiah-king, it is the most stunning political failure in the history of the world. Something else must be going on.

Each evangelist gives his own theological perspective, but they present the same essential plotlines: an arrest, a Jewish trial process, a Roman trial, a crucifixion, and burial. Jesus is the promised heir of the Davidic covenant, but his messiahship is only fully realized in terms of the Sinai covenant. That covenant, put in place by God through Moses following the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, gave the Ten Commandments and the

ensuing Torah as a gift to guide the people in right relationship with God and with one another. For God, it's all about relationships.

In the Torah, sacrifice was the means for atonement and reconciliation with God. The Passion Narratives present Jesus as the Son of God and Son of Man who is the Christ, not by coming down from the cross and living as an earthly king in splendour, but by remaining on the cross to become the one ultimate redeeming sacrifice that atones for all sin for all time.

Biblical scholars have long observed the characteristics of ancient Greco-Roman drama in the Gospel of John. The evangelist employs these techniques for several reasons, including the reality that his good news would most often be shared by oral story-telling. He sets the stage for storytellers who act out these verbal cues to facilitate the full impact of the message.

So these two chapters of John - 18 (which we heard two weeks ago) and 19, develop across five geographical locations: the garden across the Kidron valley; the house of Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest; the Roman praetorium; Golgotha, the Place of the Skull; and the new garden of Jesus' burial. As Jesus moves to each new location, the narrator describes the place, as well as the characters and activity that will be involved there. So John presents his understanding of Jesus' passion as a five-act play.

Act Three confirms Jesus to be the gift of truth given by God to the world who must sacrifice himself to fulfill his mission. Act Four sends audiences directly to the cross with Jesus. This is a powerful component on the narrative level, with Jesus resolutely seeing his mission to its fulfillment.

Similarly several disciples remain with Jesus, and audiences learn more about what it means to abide with Jesus. So the fourth Act presents the completion of that mission through the revelation of truth and Pilate's inability to stand on its behalf.

The crucifixion itself is presented in seven scenes, framed by introductory verses of character and setting and concluding verses of reflection upon the consequences of the action. The scenes themselves narrate: the inscription, the seamless tunic, Jesus' interaction with his mother and the Beloved Disciple, Jesus' death and the gift of the Spirit, and piercing Jesus' side.

Today's passage, consisting of the introduction and first scene, proceeds directly from the conclusion of the Roman trial. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, where Simon of Cyrene carries the cross for the faltering Jesus, John carefully affirms that Jesus still has the wherewithal to carry the cross himself to Golgotha. Little is said about this journey as the new location and the crucifixion itself become the focus.

The first scene indicates that, like the Synoptics, Jesus is crucified between two other criminals. Jesus is in the middle of the three because Jesus is in the middle of history, opening the door to the kingdom of heaven. However, in John's version, he remains the focus and has no interaction with them. Nailing Jesus to the cross is not detailed. Actually, no details are provided in any of the Gospels concerning Jesus' hands and feet being nailed to the cross. It is only after the resurrection that he shows them the wounds caused by the nails. John's description is typically sparse, "There they crucified him."

His first readers did not need to hear the details of crucifixion. They had all witnessed multiple crucifixions in their lifetime. Pilate has the inscription, "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews" posted for all to see in the relevant languages for that part of the Empire. Each one of the Gospels mentions the titulus, a notice that was fastened to Jesus' cross. Matthew gives us, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Mark's Gospel reads simply, "The King of the Jews." Luke's version is "This is the King of the Jews." What they all share in common is the title "King of the Jews." This was Pilate's sick joke on the Jews.

In protest, the Jewish leadership asks that Pilate qualify the title to indicate that kingship was a claim and not a reality, to change the wording to read, "He said, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" But Pilate is finished and responds that he has written what he has written, and there

is nothing they can do about it. However ironic, this writing will be his final, proclaiming Jesus as King. It was a way for Pilate to further humiliate both Jesus and those Jews who wanted him dead.

In John's Gospel, the cross is presented as Jesus' most significant human experience (contrary to typical Christian understanding). God exalts Jesus in this "lifting up" on the cross. This same phenomenon of circumventing human expectation appears in the evangelist's use of the term "glory" across the Gospel. The glory of God, and the means by which Jesus is glorified (through his crucifixion), flow from the evangelist's understanding of revelation. Remember, John teaches that God so loved the world that he handed over his only Son. This handing over, in all its irony of apparent scandal, is an incredible act of love. Jesus is the promised Messiah whose kingdom is not of this earth, who is the gift of truth that fulfills the promises of God's prior covenants, and puts in place a new covenant open to all humankind by his very loss.

The torture of the cross will forever be preserved for us in the word *excruciating*, which has at its root *crux* or *cross*. Since a flogging always preceded crucifixion, there is a chance that Jesus might have been whipped for a second time by the Roman soldiers. He would have been led out with the other two criminals and taken to the place of crucifixion. The officials always chose the most public route to the place of crucifixion for maximum effect. The custom of forcing victims to carry their own cross beams is spoken in numerous ancient sources. The

location of Jesus' crucifixion was called the Place of the Skull. *Gulgolet* is the Hebrew word for skull, hence Golgotha. The Latin word for skull is *calvaria*, hence Calvary.

Then Jesus is stripped of his clothes; he is stripped of his exterior robe and of his tunic, which was made entirely from one piece of cloth. He is naked, but in his nakedness he exposes who he is: "I AM." He is God. We can deduce that four soldiers were assigned to the detachment that crucified Jesus, because his clothes were divided into four shares. Only John mentions the division of the clothes, referring specifically to the seamless tunic, which was a special prize. The soldiers not wanting to tear it into four pieces, do what soldiers have done throughout the ages – cast dice to decide who would get it. John, who makes only one other reference to Old Testament fulfillment during crucifixion, makes his first reference here. He quotes Psalm 22: "They divide my garments among themselves and throw dice for my clothing." It was customary for mothers to make a seamless tunic to be presented as a gift to their sons when they left home.

Jesus is humiliated, abandoned, excluded. When he has been crucified, Matthew's Gospel tells us the high priests and scribes shout: "You have saved others, now save yourself!" and they laugh at him. Jesus has been abandoned by his friends. This was only a few days after the people had been acclaiming him with shouts of "Hosanna, Hosanna, Son of David!" On the day of his crucifixion, the chief priests cry out, "Crucify him!"

Crucify him!” He has disappointed them. Jesus is humiliated and excluded by the leaders of his own people – as well as, of course, the Roman occupiers, who alone had the power to crucify him.

Just think about the terrible ending of Jesus, a Jew, excluded by the Jewish leaders. His deepest identity is as a Jew. He is Jewish in his whole being; his human heart was formed in the beautiful Jewish tradition. Jesus the Jew is condemned and cast off by the leaders of his own people. It is as if he has lost his deepest identity. He’s a radical and utter failure, rejected, mocked, and completely vulnerable. In addition to his atrocious physical suffering – his naked body covered in blood from the Roman flogging administered with a flagellum - a collection of heavy leather straps into which bone, glass and lead balls were embedded. Jesus stands before us, humiliated, naked, and bleeding.

Now if there is any shred of actual history to this detail of John’s story, and most scholars do not believe there is, it was designed to be an act of mockery. This king was powerless. A cross is hardly a throne, and no crown is ever made of thorns. Yet in John’s mind something far deeper was being revealed in that title and crown. Here was a human life living out a new human destiny. As such he would be shown to be exemplifying the inverted order of values that will prevail when the kingdom of God dawns. Here was a life designed to reveal what it means to be born of the spirit. Here was a life in which strength could be found in weakness and life could be entered through death.

The portrait this gospel writer was painting was filled with symbols of this new kind of “kingdom” power. John presented Jesus’ critics as having abdicated their last claim to being a messianic people. No matter how distorted Pilate’s vision of Jesus was, he was left in John’s story to be the only one who would proclaim Jesus’ kingship. “Behold your king,” Pilate said to the crowd, as he presented Jesus beaten, bleeding and on his way to the cross.

It was important for John that the representative of the power of Rome recognize, even inadequately, the profound truth that he was seeking to convey: Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world, but it is real. It is transformative. The death of Jesus is one of the most dramatic events in the history of humanity. The innocent one, the one who came to announce universal love and peace, the one who came to give us life, the fullness of life, is pushed down into a pit of hatred and rejection, is condemned to death on a cross. The one who was admired for his miracles becomes an object of ridicule. His life appears to be a horrible failure. Hate seems to have conquered love. But we will see that the conquered one, the one who apparently failed, opens up a source of new life, a new vision for humanity, a new road to peace and unity.

The history of humanity is one of oppression of the weak. Continually crushed by the strong, the victims so often are children abused and neglected, women abused and raped, minorities crushed, controlled,

cynically ignored, their cultures left broken, while many are forced into one form of slavery or another. The Nazi regime sought to exterminate the Jews. In Rwanda, in the Balkans, in Myanmar, there were different forms of genocide. The Palestinian people were forced out of their land. We have in recent years witnessed the introduction of a new and horrific phrase: “ethnic cleansing.” And elsewhere, many people with disabilities, seen as useless, are still kept closed up in institutions.

On one side, the cruel misuse of power; on the other, a broken humanity, its dignity lost: oppressor and victim. After being unjustly condemned to death by a frightened and perverse Pilate, condemned also by the frightened religious and authorities of the time, Jesus walks alone, carrying on his shoulders the huge log of the cross. He walks to his death serenely, with dignity and in freedom. He is fulfilling the mission given to him by the Father: to break down the barriers that separate people from each other, from God, from what is deepest within each one of us. He is witnessing to the truth: the truth of love, the truth of the Love of God and the God of love, the truth of the importance of each person.

Evil screams and roars. Truth is a light that shines in the darkness. Silent, it draws forth what is deepest within us. In his final hour Jesus lays down his life for those he loves, and for the unity of humanity. He goes freely to his death, free to give his life, free to give us life.

Hosanna in the highest!

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of honour and celebration, together we cry, “Hosanna!” to your son, who rode willingly and bravely into Jerusalem. Hear us as we celebrate your anointed one, Jesus Christ.

Amen.