

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XI

### JESUS AS THE MERCIFUL JUDGE AND SOURCE OF LIFE, LIGHT, AND DIVINE SONSHIP

I. On the day after the feast, another which would have been a day of winding things down in preparation for the resumption of regular life, the controversy about the adulterous woman arises.

A. This event, which deals with how to treat an adulterous woman, is not in most of the earliest Greek texts, but is in the earliest Latin texts, including the Vulgate, which was the standard text in the West throughout the Middle Ages.

1. St. Augustine thought that many writers left it out because it could imply moral laxity by easy forgiveness.

2. It is also possible that it was a later addition after the initial Gospel had been written. The somewhat different syntax and style is evidence of this possibility.

3. A few texts place the account in Luke 21, which describes the end of Jesus' discourse in Jerusalem, just before the Last Supper because of Luke's reference to Jesus teaching in the Temple area and being near the Mount of Olives. However, the greater number of texts place it here.

4. In any case, the Council of Trent defined that this passage, as with the entire Bible as translated in the Vulgate, is the inspired word of God.

B. It appears that the scribes and Pharisees, aware that Jesus may well leave Jerusalem soon and go to Galilee, where He is more popular, make one more effort to ensnare Him with this dilemma.

1. Under the old Mosaic law, adulterers (both man and woman) were to be put to death. Lev. 20:10; Duet. 22:22. Other sections of the law implied that stoning was to be the method used. See Duet. 22:21. (The Mishnah, the codification of Jewish law, however, said that the man was to be strangled and the woman stoned.) However, as a practical matter, this punishment was not carried out, both because Roman law forbade it and because standards had changed somewhat.

2. The penalty seems very harsh. However, among the Jews, the family structure, and the allegiance to tribes and clans

held society together. To violate this order, especially with a culture surrounded by enemies, was to put the whole society at risk. In addition, there was an equality between men and women insofar as the punishment for adultery was the same.

3. It is very odd that the scribes and Pharisees brought only the woman and not the man, given the fact that she was caught in the very act of adultery. It is possible that the man escaped, but also possible that the authorities did not really care so much about the crime as about trapping Jesus. In addition, it could be that the man was one of their own ranks, or a spy sent as a trap. Or it is possible that their evidence was not as strong as they claimed

4. In any case, the authorities are trying to force Jesus to contradict one law or another. They believe He must either contradict Mosaic law by saying that she should be spared or contradict Roman law and His own teachings regarding forgiveness by saying that she should be stoned.

C. There is a puzzling reference to Jesus writing on the ground, with no attempt in the text to explain it. There are several theories for this time.

1. First, He may have been considering the situation. With His ability to tap into divine knowledge, He would not have to ponder the issue. However, out of His respect for human nature, He may be taking this the time to make a careful decision, contradicting the tendency to rush to judgment. The Mosaic law had stressed that there must be a careful inquiry, especially before carrying out capital punishment. See Duet. 17:14; 19:15-19. But here, the officials simply want Him to give a judgment immediately without even giving Him so much as her name.

2. Or He may have been forcing the authorities to repeat the accusation, presumably with increasing anger, showing their hatred. But the time also gave someone else the chance to propose a solution.

3. Some people propose that He was writing words or signs that would tell those surrounding Him that He knew of their sins. There is a reference in Jeremiah to those who turn against God themselves being written in the grounds, i.e. disgraced. Jer. 17:13.

D. Jesus then splits the horns of the dilemma by recognizing the justice of God's law, but implying that God alone can carry it out.

1. The Jewish law had said that the witnesses to idolatry should be the first ones to throw a stone. Duet. 17:7. Idolatry

was often compared to adultery against God, who took the Chosen People as His spouse. See, e.g., Is. 57:3; Jer. 3:8; Ezek. 16:1; Hos. 2:4-7. Jesus picks up on this theme and says that those who are without sin should be the first to cast the stone.

2. At the most basic level, the point is that death may be a fitting punishment for the crime, but that no sinful human has the right to carry it out.

3. The principle also reminded the Jews that they had been forgiven of sins many times over. For example, when the Chosen People worshipped the golden calf while Moses was on Mount Sinai, God threatened to destroy them, but Moses intervened and God revoked His decree because of the importance of His promises and guidance. See Ex. 32:11-14. The implication may be that it is likewise incumbent upon those who lead the people to appeal to divine mercy.

E. All of them go away at this response, recognizing the inability to respond, leaving Jesus alone with her.

1. It is interesting that even Jesus' disciples seem to have left. Possibly they knew He wanted to say something to her alone.

2. Jesus allows her, who was accused by the crowd, now to pronounce the sentence that they were unable to be in Jesus' presence. Likewise, Jesus says elsewhere that the repentant citizens of Nineveh would condemn this generation. See Matt. 12:41. She, however, stays, knowing that He has something to say to her. He seems to take her continued presence as contrition and, therefore, says He does not condemn her. However, dispelling any notion of laxity, He does warn her not to sin again, the implication being especially that she is not to commit adultery again.

F. This account builds upon the account of young Daniel saving the innocent Susanna, who was falsely accused by two decadent elders, and about to be executed by a crowd that rushed to judgment. See Daniel 13. However, here Jesus, by His power and wisdom as the final judge, frees even the guilty.

II. Jesus then begins a discourse in three parts while still in the Temple area. It goes from His authority as judge and source of light to His ability to make His disciples true children of God.

A. It is not clear whether this discourse occurred right after the Feast of Tabernacles and the forgiveness of the adulterous

woman, but this Gospel certainly associates them.

B. Jesus begins by describing Himself as the light of the world.

1. This symbolism is fitting for the Feast of tabernacles, for it began with joyous feast of lights.

2. Isaiah and Malachi had spoken of a new era of light that the Messiah. See Is. 8:23-9:1; 60:1-3, 19; Mal 3:20-21. Light is associated with God's saving power. See, e.g., Ps. 36:10, 56:14, 97:12; Micah 7:9.

3. The notion of light has numerous meanings., including.

- The notion of the light of joy and life. See Ps. 4:7.

- The notion of the light of knowledge of self and of God. See wis. 18:4. Jesus, as the light, reveals both the truth of human nature and the truth of God, who would otherwise be too far above human understanding and thus surrounded by darkness. See Ps. 97:1-2.

- The notion of having light to guide one's path on earth, avoiding dangers and advancing towards God. See Ps. 27:11, 119:105.

- The light of splendor that puts enemies to flight. See Ps. 27:1-3, 87:4.

4. The following discourses develop these themes.

C. At first the crowds question Jesus' authority on the grounds that there is not external proof.

1. At this point Jesus says He needs no authority because He "knows where He comes from and where [He] is going." The idea is that Jesus is from heaven and will return there. The prophets had visions and/or words from heaven or the angels, and the power of these visions and words could be sensed. All the more, Jesus' own witness should be clear to them.

- Jesus also says that the Father testifies to Him. Part of the idea is that, if they are really in union with the Father, they will comprehend the truth of Jesus' message.

- Jesus refers back to the rule that two or three witnesses were required for a guilty verdict in a criminal matter. See Duet 17:6, 19:5. And a false claim to be a prophet was a capital offense. See Duet. 18:20. Thus, it is those who accuse Jesus of being a false prophet who really need the two or more witnesses.

2. Not picking up on the reference to the Father, they ask Jesus who His father is, possibly referring back to questions about His unexpected birth. Jesus retorts that they have no comprehension of what they are talking about, presumably because they do not walk in the light of God.

3. This controversy arises in the financial district, hinting at the real financial motives that are behind much of the dealings in the Temple.

D. Jesus then begins to spell out the consequences of not believing in Him, i.e. that one will die in one's sin and not go where He is going, i.e. heaven itself.

- There is a continual lack of understanding, even to the point of some people thinking the opposite of what Jesus means. Jesus points out to them, as to Nicodemus that they are not seeking the value of the kingdom of heaven, and so reiterates His last point, but now beginning to describe Himself as "I am," reflecting the name God gave Himself to Moses at the burning bush.

- Again, not quite getting the point, the crowds ask Jesus to complete the sentence "I am."

- Jesus then combines His nature as God and His role as the Son of Man, the one who brings God's truth into the world. He says that they will not comprehend until they "lift Him up" which could either mean the crucifixion or the glorification of Jesus in worship. Thus, there is both an implication that the people will not understand Him until His crucifixion, and (on an individual basis) until they decide to worship Him. Part of the idea is that one must worship Christ in order fully to understand Him.

III. Jesus then builds on the notion that the Chosen People are "sons of Abraham" and, as a nation, an adopted son of God and makes

it clear that He can make each one an adopted son by His own perfect Sonship.

A. This part of the discourse is directed more specifically to those who "believed in Him" (or more literally "into Him.") However, the rest of the discourse indicates that this faith is preliminary the still struggle with Jesus' words and why he still says they are not really sons of God.

B. Jesus challenges them to continue advancing into His presence and makes it clear that it is the truth, which He reveal that sets them free.

C. They rightfully understand that He is speaking about a freedom of will, not a political freedom, for they say they have never been slaves of anyone. At the time, they were not politically free, as had often been the case in the past. But the point they are making is that they resisted the political oppression and, therefore, were not willing slaves.

D. But Jesus points out that anyone who sins chooses slavery to sin. St. Paul will later pick up on this point, saying that we either must willingly serve God, who gives us life or be slaves of sin. See, e.g., Romans 6:15-23; Gal.4:8-11. For freedom is not simply the ability to do what one wants, but rather the ability to participate in God's creative goodness. What Jesus is promising is the ability to bring about goodness that does not have to be.

- And the freedom is at the divine level through adopted sonship, which overcomes all things even the curses of sin. See also Romans 8:14-30; Gal. 4:1-7, 21-31..

- Part of the idea is that both a son in a family and a slave may work for the family, but the son does so out of mutual love, the slave out of compulsion.

- Adoption of adults into a new family was not unusual in the ancient world, for it was a way of conferring status as a citizen or noble on a person.

E. The people then argue from lineal descent that they are children of Abraham and therefore, by adoption children of God. For God had referred to Israel as His child in the context of showing His providence for them. See, e.g., Ex. 4:22-23; Deut. 32:6; Is. 63:15-16; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 2:10. But Jesus retorts that true sonship must come from being open to the will of God as Abraham was. The implication is that they are instead closed to God and open to temptation and, therefore, have taken the devil as their

father.

- There is a reference back to the Garden of Eden, when the first error of Adam and Eve was listening to the serpent, who as a murderer and father of lies brought dishonesty and death, and failing to listen to God.
- Jesus again says that one who "belongs to God" will recognize His voice. The idea is that, if one really wants to know the truth that God gives to set us free, He will eventually be able to hear and understand it.

F. Responding to the statement that they belonged to the devil, the people then accuse Jesus of being possessed and from Samaria, a land that had many magicians (e.g., the Simon Magnus mentioned in Acts 8:9-25) in it. This is ironic because the Samaritans were beginning to accept Jesus.

F. Jesus then refers judgment back to the Father (or the Spirit) and says that He (Jesus) speaks the words that will keep one from "seeing" death.

- The people misunderstand Him to mean that one who hears Him will never experience physical death, symbolized by "tasting" death, which is the way they describe it. But Jesus means "seeing" death in the sense of taking it into oneself, into one's very soul. By contrast, His followers will, through Jesus, see eternal life and therefore take it into themselves. For the power of God is in Jesus' words and the glory of God shines in Jesus. Therefore, His words open one to the vision of God, which allows the divine life to flow into oneself. St. John says elsewhere "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." 1 John 3:2; see also 1 Cor. 13:12-13.

- Jesus describes as an example Abraham who heard the voice of God and, therefore, saw Jesus' day. He also describes himself as knowing God. The Greek word here (oida) implies perfect knowledge, as opposed to the word for "know" as applied to the crowd (ginosko) which implies more beginning knowledge. Part of the idea is that Jesus, with His perfect knowledge of God as His Son will fill His followers with that knowledge as adopted sons if they will hear Him and become able to see Him. This ability to see God in heaven is now called the beatific vision, see Catechism 2548-50, although that language was not used in Biblical times.

G. In response to the crowds' skepticism and lack of understanding Jesus then raises the claim even higher by saying "Before Abraham came to be, I Am." The verb tense both indicates Jesus' eternity and, for the third time, His adoption of the divine name

from Exodus.

H. Understanding perfectly His claims to divinity, the crowds try to stone Him as they wished to stone the adulterous woman.