

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XV

THE FINAL DAYS IN JERUSALEM

I. John describes the tension building as the final Passover approaches.

A. Earlier, there had been conspiracies against Jesus and the leaders in Jerusalem had ordered the guards to arrest Jesus and forbidden anyone to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. Now there is a general order that anyone must turn Him over.

- So that His death would occur at the right time, Jesus therefore leaves to a time to Ephraim, a town to the north of Jerusalem. It was not far away, about 12 miles, but the mountainous region made it difficult for the leaders to know where Jesus was. One gets the impression that the rulers in Jerusalem had only a tenuous hold over the rest of the Promised Land.

- There is a subtle irony here that the Jews come to Jerusalem early to purify themselves for the Passover, while the source of all purification and the final Passover sacrifice in a town on the border of the wilderness hidden from them. See Is. 52:11.

- Estimates were that as many as two and a half or three million people would gather around Jerusalem for the Passover.

B. Jesus first comes to Bethany, a town very near Jerusalem, six days before Passover. In John, the Passover is clearly described as occurring on Friday night to Saturday. Thus, Jesus would be in Bethany on Saturday or Sunday. Thus, Jesus is described as arriving in Bethany on Saturday night.

- Matthew and Mark describe what appears to be an anointing by a sinful woman at the house of Simon the leper (whom Jesus presumably cured), apparently on Tuesday night or Wednesday. This event could have been a different anointing, as is indicated by the absence of Mary or Martha's name in the other Gospels and the reference to anointing the head, rather than the feet. However, the very close similarities in the reaction of the disciples and Jesus indicates that they were probably the same event.

- One possibility is that Matthew and Mark place the event during Holy Week, rather than just before it, not because it

occurred then, but rather to draw a dramatic contrast between this woman and the unfaithful crowds. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were of this view. Another possibility is that Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover, but the anointing did not occur until three days later. Although it is the most logical inference, John does not explicitly say the anointing was on the day Jesus arrives there. In any case, John seems to emphasize the idea of six days to focus on the death of Christ as the completion of the first creation with a final week and thus the Resurrection as the beginning of a new creation.

C. John says that Mary, the more contemplative of the sisters, anointed Jesus feet with very costly perfumed oil.

- At a basic level this action demonstrated great generosity and humility. As Judas Iscariot would point out, the oil was worth about 300 days wages of a typical worker. Especially for a wealthy Jewish woman, drying His feet with her hair was an enormous act of humility. Jesus will show a similar humility in washing the Apostle's feet at the Last Supper.

- John emphasizes the fact that the perfume was from nard and that it gave forth a rich fragrance. In so doing, he uses language very similar to that near the beginning of the Song of Songs, a wedding song that is also an allegory for the love between God and His People. See Song of Songs 1:12. There is thus an implication of a deep personal devotion, an early image of consecrated religious life.

- Kings were also anointed when they were soon to reign, although they were anointed on the head, not the feet. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 10:1, 16:12, Ps. 89:21. The Ark of the Covenant, which was God's dwelling place among men, and the priests were also anointed. See Ex. 30:22-38. The anointing of the feet may reflect the prophecies of Isaiah, which said among other things, says "Blessed are the feet of him who brings glad tidings." That proclamation begins the prophecies about the restoration of the kingship and the suffering servant who will redeem the many. See Is. 52:7 ff.

D. Contrasting with the generosity and humility of Mary is the crassness and dishonesty of Judas Iscariot, who uses a false contrast between devotion and care for the poor to object to the anointing, disappointed that he was not able to enrich himself.

- Matthew and Mark present the disciples generally as angry about the "waste," apparently out of honest foolishness See Matt. 26:8-9; Mark 14:4-5. John, by contrast, focuses specifically on the greed of Judas Iscariot, describing him as not caring about the poor, as Jesus has earlier said a hireling cares not about the sheep. See John 10:13. In addition to the

general tendency in John to emphasize Judas' betrayal, there is a notion that, among the leaders of Christ's flock, a contented middle level is not an option.

E. Avoiding for the moment the issue of Judas' dishonesty, Jesus points out that the anointing is for His burial, and that they can always care for the poor with other money. The phrase, "the poor you will always have with you" is likely based upon Dueteronomy's comment on generosity with the poor and on the command that every seventh year should be a year of freedom from debt payments. See Duet. 15:11. Part of the idea is that Jesus is fulfilling in His own life both the worship of God and the moral commandments set down through Moses.

F. At this point, the crowds begin to gather, but the Pharisees do not want a direct confrontation with the crowds, instead plotting an arrest in secret.

II. John and all the other Gospels describe Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In John, it could logically be either Sunday or Monday, but the other gospels make it clear that it was on Sunday.

A. By saying that it occurred on "the next day" John is referring back to the new creation theme that he emphasized at the beginning of the Gospel.

B. John very much presents the crowds intuitive desire to have Christ in Jerusalem.

C. The palm branches and the proclamation, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" reflect Psalm 118, the end of a series of Psalms, 113-118, called the Great Hallel, which Jews recite on festive occasions. They reflect thanksgiving and praise at God's providence and deliverance of His people. The mule and the quoted prophesy come from Isaiah and Zechariah. Isaiah's prophesy had spoken of God coming as both a great king and as a shepherd guiding His flock. In the midst of that prophesy, God tells Isaiah "fear no more to speak out." See Is. 40:9 Zechariah had prophesied of the king returning again seated on a mule, the sign of a peaceful, benevolent reign. See Zech. 9:9-17. The latter prophesy has elements that foretell the Eucharist, including the idea of a covenant in blood that the people would drink and grain and new wine that makes the youths and maidens flourish. See Zech. 9:11, 15, 17.

D. The raising of Lazarus, an undeniable miracle, seems to be what is particularly appealing to the crowd. Part of the idea may be that, if He could raise the dead, he could do anything. The disciples are presented as well-intentioned but puzzled. The Pharisees

are increasingly worried and angry. There is another irony that their complaint about the whole world following Jesus is beginning to come true.

III. Jesus then shifts His preaching to describing in various images the conflict to come that will lead to his death and resurrection.

A. At first the Greeks join the Jews in wanting to come to Jesus. They were likely "God-fearers," people who believed in God as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but who did not join in all of the Jewish practices.

1. People from the outside naturally seem to turn to Andrew and Philip, who bring them to Christ. Andrew and Philip seem to cooperate in the work of evangelization as they did in the first week and again at the multiplication of the loaves. See John 6:5-9.

2. Jesus recognizes that the "hour" which He had spoken of as early as the first miracle at Cana was now coming to fulfillment. The fact that the peoples of the world are coming to Him indicates even more clearly that the crisis is approaching.

3. Jesus then draws an image that the Greeks would understand, comparing life to grain. Jesus indicates that the His followers would have to take the same path. The other Gospels record similar themes with regard to following Jesus on the way to the Cross. See Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 22:42.

4. At another level, however, Jesus is drawing an analogy between Jewish feasts and His own life and the spread of the Gospel. The Passover, the occasion of Jesus' death, was celebrated at the beginning of the harvest season. Pentecost would be at the end of the initial harvest, before all the gain begins to be gathered in. See Lev. 23:1-22. Likewise, here Jesus is beginning to enjoy the harvest of the Gospel now; but at Pentecost, when the Gospel is sent out to the world, the initial spread of the Gospel would be more complete. The third high Jewish feast, the Feast of Booths, celebrates the final ingathering. We now celebrate the Feast of Christ the King as the closest parallel.

B. Jesus presents the paradox of the Cross as both troubling Him and yet also as the source of His triumph over the "ruler of this world," i.e. the devil.

- After expressing a troubled spirit similar to that He will express (as recorded in the other Gospels) in the garden of

Gethsemene, Jesus calls upon God to glorify His name.

- The Father says that He has glorified it already (through creation, the Incarnation and/or Jesus' signs) and will glorify it again (through the Cross and Resurrection.) - The crowd hears the voice of God as either thunder or the voice of an angel. Ever since the people were terrified of the voice of God at Mount Sinai, God had always spoken through prophets. See Duet 5:22-33, 18:15-22. Now fulfilling the prophecies that God will teach them directly, see, e.g., Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:31-34; Joel 3:1-2, God speaks to them more directly. Some hear God's voice, but assume it must be an angel, for God would not, in their view, speak to them directly. Most of the people do not hear the words at all for they are not yet ready to understand.

C. Jesus then, declaring publically what He said to Nicodemus privately, says that He will be lifted up and draw all people to Himself. The idea is that belief in Christ crucified and raised will draw people towards God through Him. See 1Cor. 2:2.

- However the people seem to think that He means He will ascend into heaven. Ironically, they are right about Him ascending, but they still do not comprehend that He will triumph through His crucifixion and death. The people knew the prophecies that the Messiah would reign forever, see, e.g., Is. 9:7; Ezek. 37:25; Dan. 7:14; Ps. 89:4, and could not understand how Jesus would in fact reign forever, if He ascended into heaven.

- Rather than explaining the matter, Jesus again tells them to focus on the light, that is, the truth of God wherever it leads. He will make things clear if they are willing.

D. Then John comments on the fact that, despite the many signs, the people still do not believe. There is an image of the people's constant lack of faith in the desert despite the many wonders God did for them. See, e.g., Psalms 78, 106.

- John cites the prophecy of Isaiah as an explanation of the people's unbelief. The prophecy cited describes, not miracle, but the glorification for the suffering servant. The idea is, if the people are unwilling to believe in the suffering and then glorification of the servant of God, they cannot understand the messages. Thus, when Isaiah says, as quoted by John, that God makes them blind and deaf, the idea is that, if they are unwilling to join with Christ in His suffering and death, as He commands, they cannot understand the rest of His message. Jesus, by His suffering deliberately throws off all lukewarm believers.

- Jesus expressly says that Isaiah saw the glory of Christ, which includes His suffering, and spoke of that in saying that one cannot understand the message of God without the accepting the whole

E. John then refines his earlier statement about general unbelief to say that some believed, but not enough to take on the world. In speaking about how Moses prophesied of Himself, Jesus had earlier said that one cannot really believe and accept Christ if one is concerned with human praise. John 5:44.

F. Jesus concludes by saying that, because the Father sent Him as the final light and Savior, to reject Him is to reject God.

- Jesus here refines His role as judge by saying that the very offer of light and salvation through Christ is itself the judgment. To reject that is to prefer darkness and the subsequent condemnation.

- Once again, Jesus forces the choice, even more than the law of old did, for or against God, light and life. See Duet. 11:26-29; 30:14-20; Matt. 7:24-27.