

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XVI

THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST SUPPER

I. The scene is just before the Passover, with the Apostles gathered around Jesus.

A. Instead of emphasizing the events of the final week, as the other Gospels do, St. John focuses on the Last Supper discourses. The overall themes of the discourse are:

1. The glory of God about to be shown forth, precisely by the sacrifice of Jesus Himself.
2. Jesus telling His disciples that His hour has come, and that He will be taken away, but that the sacrifice result in the sanctification and joy of His disciples
3. Jesus giving thee Apostles His life as an example and a new commandment for the disciples to follow and live in Him.
4. The sending of the Spirit, which will lead the followers of Christ, especially in the truth.
5. The opposition of the devil and the world, but also call to bring the world back to God.

B. The Passover sacrifice of Christ contrasts with: (1) the good will, but confusion of eleven of the Apostles, who will be purified, receive the Spirit and therefore be transformed; and (2) the betrayal of Judas, who stands for all the opposition for Christ, human and demonic.

1. The Synoptic Gospels describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal, although it may not have been celebrated of the day of Passover. St. John does not describe the Last Supper as a Passover meal, but rather focuses on the preparations for the Passover.

- In both cases, Jesus is described as the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb. On the final day before the first Passover, when the Chosen People were freed from slavery in Egypt, a Passover lamb was slaughtered for each family. During the night, the family would eat the Passover Lamb and put its blood on the doorposts. The eating of

the Passover Lamb would mark the Chosen People as such, and the blood would cause the angel of death, which killed the firstborn of the Egyptians, to pass over the family. See Ex. 12:1-13.

- Thus, the blood of Christ frees us from sin; and receiving Him into ourselves marks us as His new Chosen People. See 1 Cor. 5:7, 1 Peter 1:19.

2. The betrayal of Judas bears a remarkable similarity to the betrayal of Ahithopel, an advisor of King David, when David's son Absalom rebelled against him.

- Ahithopel was a close advisor, possibly the leading advisor, of King David, and received divine assistance. But he turned against King David when his son Absalom seemed on the ascent. King David was driven from the throne temporarily, and went up first weeping to the Mount of Olives. However, when his advice was later rejected and he realized that the rebellion would fail, Ahithopel hanged himself, as Judas would do later. See 2 Sam. 15:12-17:23. Psalm 41, especially verse 10, could describe them both.

- It would appear from the events of the Last Supper, and especially from the fact that Christ probably gave Judas a morsel of food without the other Apostles noticing, that Judas was seated just to the left of Jesus, in a place of honor. It appears that Jesus several times tries to appeal to Judas to abandon his plot without revealing it to the others.

- John emphasizes Judas' betrayal and rejection of Jesus over and over again, especially in chapter 13, as well as the demonic influence over him.

C. When Moses, Joshua, and King David were about to die, they also gave lengthy speeches. But in their cases, it was more a reminder of God's promises and commands of the past, rather than a promise of something in the future. The point of those speeches was that those figures would no longer be with their people. Jesus, by contrast, is promising to be with them in love and in the Spirit.

II. The Gospel according to John begins the description of the Last Supper with an account of the washing of the Apostles' feet.

A. At one level, this action is an astonishing act of humility.

1. With the dry, dusty environment, people's feet got very dirty, and it was customary for the host to provide water for washing one's feet. See Gen. 18:4. However, only a foreign slave might be told to perform this service; a Jew, even a servant, would never be told to do so. The one exception is the wise Abigail, who calms David's wrath against her husband Nabal and, when her husband dies, becomes David's wife. See 2 Sam. 25:41. See also 1 Tim. 5:1. Their son Chileab is obscure but seems to be the only faithful among David's first several sons.
2. Jesus is giving an example to His disciples of the humility that is necessary at the core of ministry. This form of self-sacrifice will be, as a practical matter, more often called for than more dramatic heroism.
3. St. John presents this act as a part of Jesus loving His disciples "to the end," which could mean completely, to Jesus' death, and/or to the end of all things on earth. He also presents the action, not despite the fact that Jesus knew He is from the Father and returning to Him, but rather almost because of it.

B. The action may also be a sign of the cleansing from sin.

1. Jesus says that the disciples have already "bathed," a term that New testament writers sometimes use in referring to baptism and/or the call to Christ. See Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22; Titus 3:5. The Apostles have already either been baptized by Christ or received the equivalent through their calling. They have certainly already been sent to baptize in Jesus' name. See John 4:2.
2. There is also a reflection of the fact that the Levitical priests had to wash their hands and feet before approaching the altar, on penalty of death. See Ex. 30:20-21. In addition, Isaiah had spoken about the blessed feet of those who bear the glad tidings of salvation and of the cleansing of the ministers before the great restoration that the suffering servant would bring. See Is. 52:7, 11.
3. In response to Peter's understandable objection, Jesus tells the Apostles that they must be washed, but only their feet because they have already bathed.

- St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, among others, take this reference as an image of the forgiveness of sins committed and the purification from sinful influences after baptism. The idea is that the feet become unclean from

contact with the dust of the world, and therefore, must be cleansed, as even a person of good will must be cleansed by Christ.

- The humility of Christ in taking on humanity, and the form of a slave, in order to cleanse us, see Phil 2:7, is therefore symbolized by the humility of this event.

- However, one must be of good will for this cleansing to work. Thus, Jesus also says that not all of them are clean, even though He has presumably cleansed all of their feet. Jesus is giving a warning to Judas, but also to all who would approach the sacraments in bad faith.

4. Jesus then presents His action as a model for believers, especially those in authority, whether by reason of governance (master) or teaching.

III. Jesus then proceeds without a break to the next theme, that of Judas' betrayal, although He will not identify him by name.

A. Part of the implication is that the humility of Christ is shown in part by enduring the betrayal, but still trying to reach out to the betrayer. He warns that such will also be the lot of the servants of Christ. See also Matt. 10:24.

B. Jesus Himself quotes Psalm 41, which describes one whom God delivers from mortal illness and betrayal from false friends. The Psalm does not directly refer to death from persecution, but does indicate that Jesus is joining in the fullness of the human condition and is with all who are suffering physically or emotionally.

- But Jesus also makes it clear He is predicting His own passion and death, indicating that He is also in control of the situation. To emphasize the point, He says they will believe "I AM," again reflecting the name God gave Himself to Moses.

- The prediction does not necessarily mean that Judas' betrayal is final. Negative prophecies can be reversed with prayer. See, e.g., Num. 14:12; Is. 38:4-6.

C. Then, as the Synoptic Gospels do, this Gospel records Jesus telling the disciples directly that one of them will betray Him.

- St. Peter signals to St. John, who is apparently to the right of Jesus to ask who it is.

- Jesus' reply would seem to make it obvious who the betrayer was, but the Apostles apparently do not get the hint. The most likely reason is that Jesus does not give the morsel to Judas until some time later, and then does so subtly. It is also possible that Jesus made this reply only to John, and he did not tell the others. However, Matthew records a similar statement made to all the Apostles; and it appears from the text that Judas knew the message.

D. Once Judas takes the morsel, Satan enters his heart, and it appears that the decision is final, although the road to repentance is presumably still open.

- The actual morsel may not itself have been the Eucharist, for all of the Apostles received the Eucharist. However, taking the morsel (which in ancient times was considered a symbol of honor and friendship) has often been compared to receiving communion in a state of mortal sin.

- The refusal to take the morsel would have been a sign of repentance, as refraining from communion would be today, but Judas refuses it.

- Once Judas accepts the morsel, Jesus stops trying to get him to repent, and it seems that He does not wish for Judas to be present any more.

- John's statement "It was night" emphasizes the darkness of Judas' soul and the darkness coming over all the world. See John 9:4, 11:10.

IV. Jesus then introduces the rest of the Last Supper discourse with the greatest commandment and a subtle indication of the Apostles need for the Spirit and for joining in Christ's sacrifice.

A. Jesus gives in quick order four of the themes of the Last Supper discourse.

1. Jesus begins by describing the glory God the Father will show forth through Him as the Son of Man, the glory that will also shine in Jesus Himself. The prophecies of Daniel regarding the overthrow of the kingdom of darkness by one like a son on Man are about to be fulfilled. See Dan. 7:13-14.

2. Jesus then tells the disciples that He will soon be taken from them. He gives them this prediction so that they will know it

was intended. Jesus means both His death and then, after His resurrection, His ascension into heaven.

- Jesus refers to them as "my little children" (teknia.) One gets the impression of an elder brother who has cared for the family now leaving, at least physically, but still providing for the family. In 1 John, the letter uses this term for Christians repeatedly. See 1 John 3:7, 18, 4:4, 5:21. Earlier, the Gospel has used a term meaning more fully grown children (tekna) to refer to those who are more fully in God. See John 1:12. Part of the idea may be that, when they receive the Eucharist and later the Holy Spirit, they will be more mature children of God, although even that status is only an image of what they will be. See 1 John 3:2.

3. However, as if to say that it will help satisfy their longing for Him, Jesus gives them the "new commandment," that is, to love one another as He has loved them. For, because God is love, we must have love to experience God. See 1 John 4:7-21. The commandment to love one's brethren is itself not new. It was in the Levitical law, and extended by Jesus to all of humanity. See Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27. Here, He adds to the commandment, "as I have loved you." This addition indicates both that it is in Christ that we are able really to love one another, and also that His ministry, leading up to His sacrifice on the Cross, is the model for Christian love. See 1 John 4:10.

4. Jesus indicates that the love of the Christian community will be most persuasive to the world.

B. In this portion of the Last Supper discourse, Jesus does not speak of the sending of the Holy Spirit. However, there is an indication of the need for the Spirit. For Peter, probably saying what all the faithful Apostles wanted to say, declares his willingness to lay down his life for Jesus. But Jesus makes it clear that he is not yet strong enough to do so. However, as Jesus will indicate later in the Last Supper discourse, when the Spirit does come to them, they will be able to give this witness (martyria.) John 15:27; see also Acts 2.