

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART VII

THE CURE ON THE SABBATH AND THE WORK OF GOD

I. The cure of the royal official's son in Galilee again brings out the theme of the people's coming to believe gradually, in contrast with the lack of faith among the people in Jerusalem.

A. The introduction to this verse is somewhat puzzling, for it indicates that a prophet is not honored in his native place, and yet the passage is about to describe Jesus being honored in Galilee, His home area.

- One meaning could be that the native population of Galilee welcomed Him, but did not really honor Him as the Messiah, and so He performed a miracle instead for the royal official, an outsider. This meaning seems to be implied by a similar passage in Mark 6:4.

- The passage could also mean that Jesus left Samaria quickly because, if He stayed there too long performing miracles, He would become something of a native wonder worker, and they would begin to take them for granted.

- Another solution is that, while Jesus grew up in Galilee, Jerusalem is really His native land, for it the place of the Temple and the feasts that He will fulfill. At a later time, He will say that it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem. See Luke 13:33.

B. Once Jesus is there, the royal official takes some risks in coming to Jesus, who would have been seen by the powerful people and by the Roman government as an oddity. He demonstrates one level of faith by coming to Jesus and persistently asking for the miracle. Because he is willing to believe, he not only obtains a cure for his son, but also comes to a greater belief along with his whole household, which is more important than the cure. In similar passages in Matthew and Luke, Jesus praises the great faith of a centurion who asks for the cure of his son or servant. See Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10. These could be the same events. It was not unusual in the Roman world to refer to a son as a servant, or a beloved servant as a son. And John may be presenting the event from a different angle, emphasizing the gradual growth in faith, as he does with the Samaritan woman.

II. The faith of the centurion contrasts with the lack of faith in Jerusalem, despite similar miracles.

A. The scene shifts to Jerusalem for a feast, which is apparently Pentecost, as indicated by the references to the words of Moses in the discourse that follows. See John 5:45-46. Among the Jewish feasts, Pentecost especially celebrates the giving of the law and the words of God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

B. Some are puzzled by the placement of this miracle here in Jerusalem in between two events in Galilee. See, e.g., New Jerome Biblical Commentary 958; Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol. 1 205-206. It may have been that this event occurred after the miraculous feeding in chapter 6. However, given John's theology, the placement here makes sense, for John is concluding a section on cleansing through the symbol of water and moving onto the notion of the bread of life. This passage connects the two, beginning with the water and proceeding onto a discourse on the work of God, which brings life.

- The transition is from the first call to faith, given to Nicodemus to the idea of the cleansing of God, reflected in baptism, to the notion of confession of sins, symbolized by the Samaritan woman to the idea of starting a new active life with God and away from sin, reflected in this cure of a paralyzed man and warning to avoid sin. Sacramentally, this cure would reflect both baptism and Confirmation, which gives strength for an active life of faith in the world and greater graces to avoid sin; this connection is especially powerful if the feast is the Pentecost, which seems likely. Chapter 6 would then go onto the sacrament of the Eucharist.

C. The emphasis here is on the notion of an active life of faith, for Jesus follows up on the miracle (which allowed the man to be active again) with a discourse on the work of God.

D. The miracle begins with the paralyzed man lying near a pool at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. What by all appearance is this pool was recently excavated; the Qumran scrolls identify it as "The Pool of Flowing." It appears that the pool on occasion bubbled up, and this event was associated with healings, as for example, the grotto at Lourdes is today.

- Some texts have an additional passage expressly stating that an angel would stir up the water and it would then have curing powers. This passage is not in the most ancient texts, and is likely an explanatory note that found its way into some texts. Nevertheless, it probably does give the general understanding of the time.

E. The man there had been crippled for thirty-eight years. At one level, this passage indicates the long suffering of one who was presumably at least in his forties and possibly older. At another level, there is possibly a symbolic value, for the Chosen People

traveled in the desert for thirty-eight years after they initially refused to enter out of fear of the inhabitants. See Num. 14; Duet. 2:14.

F. Jesus asks the man whether he wants to be healed. The answer may seem obvious, but the question is appropriate on at least two levels.

1. The man was probably used to being a beggar, and not having any work to do. To be healed, especially this late in life would bring him into a new and challenging role. The man seems to respond to this possibility by saying that he wants to be healed, but no one will bring him to the water for healing when the water is stirred up.
2. On a deeper level, Jesus is asking whether He wants to be healed of sin and begin a new life with God, a point Jesus will get back to later.

G. In response to the man's affirmation, Jesus tells him to pick up his mat and walk. In implied contrast to the occasional cure at the hands of an angel, Jesus is willing to cure at any time.

- In early Christian art, there are images of the newly baptized (who would also have been confirmed at the same time or shortly thereafter) carrying a mat, or stretcher. This art indicates a connection between this passage and the sacrament of baptism.
- The emphasis is more on the bold witness to the faith. For, by carrying the mat on a Sabbath, which would be forbidden by the ritual laws in force at the time, the man is witnessing to his cure and to the new law that he is living under.

H. Unfortunately, the man does not seem to understand the cause for his cure, or the witness value of his actions. When questioned he simply says that an unknown healer told him to carry the mat. Jesus then comes to him to reveal His identity He warns him against further sin.

- Here, Jesus emphasizes the paralysis as an image of sin, saying that sin causes an even worse effect.
- The man's response, i.e. telling the Jerusalem officials about Jesus, could be either: (1) a sinful act trying to ingratiate himself with those authorities, whom he knew wanted the information; or (2) an attempt at evangelization. There is perhaps

a deliberate ambiguity, reflecting the different possible motives behind the same action.

I. The officials in Jerusalem ignore the dramatic miracle, instead focusing on the seemingly trivial event of the man carrying a mat on the Sabbath. It is an indication of the blindness due to their emphasis on customs above the promises of God.

III. Jesus then explains His actions in terms of the work of God.

A. In response to the accusation that He was encouraging work on the Sabbath, Jesus indicates that "His Father" is always at work. The idea is in part that, when Genesis says that God "rested" on the Sabbath, it does not mean that He did nothing, but rather that there was nothing new created. However, according to many Jewish theologians, God still worked on the Sabbath insofar as He sanctified what He had already made.

- At one level Jesus is endorsing this view, indicating that God does work at sanctifying and restoring on the Sabbath.

- However, He takes the lesson much further by calling God "My Father" and by taking a point about God and applying it to Himself. In the Old Testament, the angels, the kings, and the People of God were sometimes called sons of God in a general sense, but no one had referred to God as "My Father." See, e.g., Ps 29; Job 1:6 (the angels); 2 Sam 7:14, Ps 2, 89:21-28 (the king); Ex 4:22; Hosea 11:1 (the Chosen People). The authorities pick up on the implication immediately ready to condemn Him for making Himself equal to the Father. Cf. Mark 2:1-12.

B. As with the later Bread of Life discourse, Jesus does nothing to correct their impression, for the impression was correct. Instead, He develops the implication of His being the Son of God. He first says that the Father gives the Son all abilities including judgement and the ability to give life. And then, in verse 24, He identifies His words with that power given by God, and so identifies Himself as that Son.

- This passage draws heavily from the prophecies of Daniel, which both gave the image of one like a son of man coming to receive all power and judgement from God (the Ancient One.) See Dan. 7. Chapter 12 of Daniel, which ends the main part of the book, also speaks of a time when, after a great deal of suffering and distress, those who are asleep in the earth will arise either to everlasting glory or to disgrace. See also Wis. 2:22-3:12 (contrasting the everlasting life after a time of suffering promised to the just with the death that is the destiny of the wicked.)

- There is also an emphasis on the words of the Son and the voice of the Son. Jesus is emphasizing the power of the word of God, see, e.g., Isaiah 55:10-11; Wis. 18:14-15, and now indicating that the Son (previously identifies as the Word of God) exercises this power in full. For, unlike the prophets, who received the words of God, see, e.g., Is. 6:1-10; Jer. 1:4-19; Ez. 2:1-3:9, Jesus is that Word made flesh, and can give life itself.

- Even while identifying Himself with God the Father, Jesus draws a certain distinction, saying that He is not doing His will, but that of the Father. Part of the idea is that, Jesus has a human will through which He does the will of God. Cf. Luke 22:42.

C. Jesus then concludes by identifying four witnesses that should indicate that He is the Son of God, exercising power as God.

1. The first witness is John the Baptist, whom Jesus refers to as a "burning and shining lamp," whom even the officials in Jerusalem sent emissaries to. The description of John as a "bright and shining lamp" may refer to Psalm 132:17, which spoke of a lamp before the Anointed One of God's kingdom, or to the prophesy of Zechariah about two who would be anointed to be beside the Lord on the earth. See Zech. 4:1.

2. Jesus says that the works that He does from the Father should testify on His behalf.

3. The Father testifies for Jesus, and His word should tell them. But they do not hear either the words thundering from heaven, see, e.g., Matt 3:17; John 12:22, or in prayer, for they will not believe the word given to them. Part of the idea seems to be that the voice of God can be heard in prayer by those who believe.

4. The Scriptures and especially the words of Moses (presumably the Torah, the first five books of Scriptures) also testify that Jesus fulfills them.