

Taking a closer look at St John's Gospel

Lent 2024



Booklet 3



Welcome

A short course on John's Gospel for the Tring Team Parish

Background reading before we start.

We saw in session 1 of the Lent course that John starts with a different kind of last supper. Mark is very clear that it was a Passover meal. We read in Mark 14.12 "On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' We will see that as we read John's passion his meal can't have been a Passover supper because the crucifixion is before the Passover in John's Gospel, so we read in John 19.14 and 19.31 that the crucifixion was on the day before (the Day of Preparation) before the Passover. There are a few other textual differences between John and the Synoptics. In John:

1. **There is No agony at Gethsemane** - Jesus is serene / in control. In synoptics Jesus is on trial in John his captors are on trial.
2. **It is Roman soldiers at the arrest.** He is the only Gospel to mention Romans, at this point.
3. **There is no Simon of Cyrene.** In John, Jesus carries his own cross
4. **The time of the crucifixion.** It is noon in John but 9 am in Mark.
5. **Titular.** The words on the cross are different. These are the only known written words about Jesus in his lifetime, and they differ.
6. **Mary and the Beloved disciple at the foot of the cross.** At least one (male) disciple does not flee

Some scholars spend an inordinate amount of time trying to explain away these differences. Others argue that the Synoptics are more historical. I think I am persuaded by the argument that they are different but we cannot claim that one version is more accurate than the other. Instead we will focus on the differing character of Jesus shown in John's passion. In particular the portrayal of king who is full control of the events rather than a victim.

Opening conversations? (*Maybe think about these before you meet*)

John's Passion narrative is traditionally read in full on Good Friday. How familiar are you with his version either from reading it or music such as Bach's St John's Passion

Reading and listening to God's Word



Read John 18.28-39 (from your usual Bible). Pause, allow to seep in. Read it again preferably from a different translation (below is the Message)

They led Jesus then from Caiaphas to the Roman governor's palace. It was early morning. They themselves didn't enter the palace because they didn't want to be disqualified from eating the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and spoke. "What charge do you bring against this man?"

They said, "If he hadn't been doing something evil, do you think we'd be here bothering you?"

Pilate said, "You take him. Judge him by *your* law."

The Jews said, "We're not allowed to kill anyone." (This would confirm Jesus' word indicating the way he would die.)

Pilate went back into the palace and called for Jesus. He said, "Are you the 'King of the Jews'?"

Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own, or did others tell you this about me?"

Pilate said, "Do I look like a Jew? Your people and your high priests turned you over to me. What did you do?"

"My kingdom," said Jesus, "doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king." Then Pilate said, "So, are you a king or not?"

Jesus answered, "You tell me. Because I am King, I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice."

Pilate said, "What is truth?"



Teaching

Some introductory thoughts

The Arrest

The location is in a garden across the Kidron valley. Matthew and Mark say it is a place called Gethsemane. Luke says it is Mount of Olives. In John with his earlier references to the Genesis creation story are we to think that "the garden" serves as reverse Garden of Eden. Judas is well aware of the Garden as Jesus visited it frequently. What we have translated as a detachment is most likely a Cohort of Roman soldiers. A cohort was 600 men! Some think it might have been smaller subdivision a maniple (handful) 120 - 200 soldiers but the reference to their commander in 18.12 makes a cohort most likely. This is shock and awe stuff. 600 hobnailed soldiers marching down the street would be an awful noise. But Jesus knows what is to happen, he has a supernatural knowledge. He takes charge, he steps forwards and asks them what they want, and when they say they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth he responds "I am he" again using the I am formula to link himself to God. Their response is extraordinary. It is of course the correct response to anyone in the presence of God but quite astonishing to be told that the 600 Roman soldiers stepped back and fell to the floor.

Pause for reflection.

With the images we see on the news of warfare in Ukraine and Israel / Palestine we can imagine something of the shock and terror of confronting an occupying army. It is easy to miss the shock and awe inherent in this story. Pause and imagine a still night time garden and then the sound of marching feet approaching. [Sound clip](#) There is something about the way in which it takes over your own heart beat.

Discussion

What do you make of this Jesus? Does he feel fully human or superhuman? Is he more like a character in a Marvel film throwing tanks and cars out of the way? Presumably this Jesus could have stopped them if he wanted to. Is this what loving to the end means? Choosing not to.

The trial(s)

We know there must have been a Roman trial as non Gospel historians testify that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. There is greater confusion on the Jewish trial. It is a feature of all four Gospels but it isn't always clear if it is a formal trial / meeting of the Sanhedrin or an informal questioning. It is unlikely they would have met in the night, and John's account is more of an informal questioning. More significantly there is no mention that the charge is blasphemy. The greater focus comes with Jesus' dialogue with Pilate. Jesus is taken to Pilate's headquarters. Normally Pilate resided in Ceasarea but when visited Jerusalem he would be in the fortress. The major theme of the dialogue is kingship. There is an aloofness to Jesus. He is clear Pilate has no authority of him. Pilate asks what is truth, but he is both ignorant of the fact he is standing in front of truth itself, and he is perfectly happy to ignore truth. He thinks he has power so why should he care about truth. Likewise he is convinced that Jesus is innocent but he his innocence or guilt mean nothing to him. Three times he ignores the innocence.

Do you like this image of Jesus speaking power to truth?

The crucifixion

No two accounts of the crucifixion are quite the same. To continue with the theme of Jesus being in control he does not need Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross for him, he can manage by himself. We have in John's account a subtly different name plate for Jesus from which we get the initials INRI **Jesus** Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. Then there is one surprising detail. He is naked when he is crucified. It emphasises the shame of the manner of death.

Have you ever seen a painting of the crucifixion where Jesus is not wearing a loin cloth. Why do we suddenly feel the need to sanitise this one part of the story?

Mary and the beloved disciple

In Advent we looked at the way in which Jesus spoke to Mary at the wedding in Cana in Galilee. The same phrasing is used here. A common interpretation is that it is an instruction for Judaism to be taken into the house of the church. I find its power in the unspoken grief of a mother.

Waiting

The Lent films this year are on the theme of waiting. As I am writing this course I am looking forward to reflecting on this and what insights we might get. It has always struck me that the agony in the garden is a vital aspect of waiting and I don't like that it is missing from John's portrayal of Jesus. There is much I like in his Gospel but it isn't this.

In the church we often make a virtue of waiting patiently. Advent is a season of waiting. We are called to be alert, but to wait. There is a sense here of claiming control. We know that the future promise is good so wait patiently for its fulfilment.

A fundamental part of our human experience is not being in control. Many of us are used to exercising power and control, we are very privileged here. However there are times in life when that control is taken away from us. Here waiting can be a fearful experience. When we do not know we fear the worst, however strong our faith may be.

Maybe we should be like the Johannine Jesus, serene and in control. However the fear of the unknown future as exemplified by the agony in the garden, the fear of being judged, mocked and condemned by others, and especially the fear of death are all fundamental aspects of humanity. Rather than the superman Jesus of John I prefer the image of Jesus who "did not consider equality with God something to use to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing" Philippians 2.6 It is this Jesus who waits with us in our fear, rather than us waiting for him to reveal his Glory.

It is finished

Gone is the anguished eli, eli, lama sabacthani and it's place is a much more controlled it is finished. Everything that Jesus had to do has been done. Jesus bows his head. He acknowledges the end. Jesus gives up his Spirit. It is not taken away from him. He gives it up. To the very end Jesus is control.

If we were to try and retell John's version of the passion in an entirely 21st Century setting who would the characters be?

Is the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus entirely timeless, can you imagine it today.

Where do you see yourself fitting into the story?

'What is truth?' (18.38)

One of the most striking features of John's account of Jesus' trial is the lengthy exchange between Pilate and Jesus. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' trial is much more cursory. In John's Gospel, however, the exchange is more lengthy and made so by Pilate's need to go in and out to the Jews.

This to-ing and fro-ing draws attention to the two lengthier exchanges that went on between Pilate and Jesus. In the first exchange (18.33-38) the discussion focused around the nature of truth and in the second (19.9-11) around power. In these two passages John demonstrated both his love of contrasts and his love of irony: Pilate – whose job it was to discern and adjudicate the truth of the claims about Jesus – was forced to ask what truth is, while later on Pilate – who was the fount of all Roman power – was revealed to have very little true power in the face of the hatred of the Jewish leaders for Jesus, the source of all power.

John's account of the crucifixion challenges us to think again about the truth and power we so easily take for granted in our world. It is easy to assume that what is presented to us as truth is indeed true, and that what looks like unassailable world power is deeply powerful. Here John asks us to think again and, in the light of Jesus the source of all truth and power, to find the courage to name reality as it really is.

Reflection by Paula Gooder is a British theologian and Anglican lay reader, who specialises in the New Testament. She is Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral.



WORSHIP

O God, make speed to save us.

O Lord, make haste to help us.

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give
ear to my cry;

Hold not your peace at my tears

Psalm 39.13

We adore you, O Christ,
and we bless you,
because by your holy cross
you have redeemed the world.

**Holy God, holy and strong,
holy and immortal,
have mercy upon us.**

We glory in your cross, O Lord,
and praise and glorify your holy
resurrection:

for by virtue of the cross
joy has come to the whole world.

from the Liturgy of Good Friday

Bible Reading

*Either a little bit from today's
session or another reading*

Song

1. Mary, blessed grieving mother,
waiting by the cross of shame,
through your patient, prayerful vigil,
kindle hope's eternal flame;
crying in the pains of earth,
singing of redemption's birth.

2. Where the crosses of the nations
darken still the noonday skies,
see the sad madonna weeping
through a million mothers' eyes.
Holy Mary, full of grace,
all our tears with yours embrace.

3. Standing with the suffering
Saviour,
still oppressed by hate and fear,
where the gentle still are murdered
and protesters disappear:
mother of the crucified,
call his people to your side!

4. Holy mother, watching, waiting,
for the saving of the earth;
in the loneliness of dying,
speak of hope and human worth,
there for all the world to see,
lifted up at Calvary!

Intercessions & Collect

Holy God, our lives are laid open
before you: rescue us from the
chaos of sin and, through the death
of your Son, bring us healing and
make us whole in Jesus Christ our
Lord. **Amen**

May God bless us and show us
compassion and mercy. **Amen.**

**Watch
+ Pray**