

Good Friday, 2013  
Isaiah 52:13-53:12  
Psalm 22  
Hebrews 10:16-25  
JOHN 18:1-19:42

## THE KING IS GLORIFIED

John's portrayal of Jesus' last 24 hours is quite different from the pictures painted by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

At the Last Supper, John has no institution of the Eucharist; rather, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, followed by a four chapter long discourse by Jesus on theology and on the life to which his followers are called. John records no agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: no anguished prayers by Jesus to the Father, no angel coming to strengthen him, no sleeping disciples. In John, Jesus and his disciples go to an unnamed garden across the Kidron Valley and, with no interlude, Judas, accompanied by Roman soldiers as well as Temple police, meets them there.

The Stations of the Cross would be very short if they were based only on John's Gospel. Jesus is condemned by Pilate, *carries his cross by himself* (in contrast to Matthew, Mark and Luke) to the Place of the Skull and is crucified. There is no Simon of Cyrene strong-armed by the soldiers to carry the cross for him and therefore no falling on the part of Jesus. Jesus does not speak en route to the "daughters of Jerusalem" as in Luke. No mention is made of two others being led away to be crucified who also would have been in the procession. In John there is no room for the legendary encounters along the way of Jesus with his mother and with Veronica. There is only room for Jesus.

Jesus is serene, regal and *in control* throughout the day in John. Even at his arrest, Jesus is in control. He initiates the conversation which those who have come to arrest him, and when the soldiers reply that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus replies with the Divine Name ("I AM"), whereupon all who have come to arrest him fall to the ground.

Jesus refuses to let those who are taking him away touch his disciples -- even Peter who with his sword cuts off the right ear of Malchus, slave of the High Priest, certainly a punishable offense. The focus is exclusively on Jesus. Jesus

is *in charge* and goes along with the soldiers and police because it is the Father's will that he "drink the cup that the Father has given him."

The drama in John is not physical -- no Jesus on his knees in prayer asking his Father if there is another way forward, no kiss by Judas, no Judas throwing away his 30 pieces of silver -- the drama in John is intellectual: verbal confrontations between Jesus and Caiaphas, Jesus and Annas, and especially Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

In the narrative we just read together, Pilate has far more lines of dialogue than in St. Luke's account of Jesus' trial which was read on Palm Sunday. In John most clearly, Jesus is the universal Savior who positions himself to challenge and contradict the claims of the Roman Empire to be the universal ruler and to provide whatever safety, justice and abundant life anyone is going to get. In this challenge, *Jesus also challenges and contradicts similar pretensions of all governments, political systems and economic systems since that Empire's time: only Jesus is King, only Jesus offers ultimate safety, ultimate justice, and true abundant life.*

The religious establishment in John is acutely aware of its inability to do an official legal execution of anyone, even someone so threatening to its own pretensions, as the country is under Roman hegemony. The chief priests *embrace* their status as Roman puppets and not independent servants of the sovereign Lord of the Universe by declaring, "We have no king but the emperor."

Pontius Pilate may have felt that this whole drama was a huge plus for him because of that declaration of allegiance to the emperor by the chief priests. Surely he would have put that line in any report by him to his boss in Rome as proof of what an effective lackey Pilate was.

The universal nature of Christ's claim to kingship is highlighted in bold in John's Gospel, which alone specifies that the inscription over Jesus' head -- "The King of the Jews" -- was written in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek, languages which between them touched the whole of the Roman world, as well as being widely readable by those in Jerusalem who could read.

Roman responsibility for Jesus' death is emphasized in John. There are *soldiers* (not just Temple police) who arrest Jesus. Pilate personally makes sure that the inscription of the crime for which he ordered Jesus to be executed (being

a pretender to the throne of Israel and therefore a threat to Roman rule) is not only written for the condemned man to carry to his place of execution (the usual practice) but also hung over his head on the cross. Pilate acts because of his loyalty to the emperor (pushed by the chief priests) even though he saw no case against Jesus. Therefore, Jesus' execution is not a mistake, not the result of one over-zealous local Roman flunky but inevitable because Jesus really did challenge the Empire's pretensions. In John too, we are given the details of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' tunic, and after Jesus's death there is no Roman centurion attesting to Jesus' innocence (as in Luke) or proclaiming him to be God's Son (as in Matthew and Mark) -- rather, a Roman soldier sticks a spear in the side of the dead Jesus for no particular reason. The responsibility of the Romans -- and their attitude -- is clear.

Ultimately, the royal dignity of Jesus and the cosmic drama of the confrontation between "I AM" and the political and religious establishment are both humanized by the only words John records Jesus uttering from the cross, all short enough to be plausible coming from a man who was being asphyxiated by crucifixion.

First, as many people may want to do in their last days or hours, Jesus takes care of his family. He assigns the Beloved Disciple to take care of Mary, his mother, because Jesus' blood brothers and sisters are nowhere in sight as their mother suffers as her oldest child dies a gruesome death. As elsewhere in John, discipleship -- not birth place or biological relationship -- is what matters.

Only in John does Jesus declare his thirst, a human touch which the Evangelist feels compelled to explain away as a fulfillment of scripture instead of as a normal human experience of the still-incarnate Word of God. Jesus of Nazareth was fully human as well as fully divine. He was thirsty.

Jesus' final words in John are not an anguished cry of desolation which affirms his solidarity with anyone who has ever felt utterly abandoned spiritually, as in Mark and Matthew, and not a tender prayer of faith as he falls asleep in his Father's arms, as in Luke, but a note of **triumph: "It is finished."** *Not* "I am finished", but *it*, my mission on earth, is finished. *All has gone according to plan.* Unlike in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is never tempted, never in doubt, never in anguish. Yet this same regal figure will, on Easter morning, affirm the mind-boggling reality of the resurrection not with angels and earthquakes, but by gently speaking her first name to one of his most devoted disciples, Mary Magdalene.

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All we can do is join with John the Baptist in awe and wonder and declare,  
“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

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