

April 22, 2011 – Good Friday (A, B, C)

Readings for Good Friday

1. Isaiah 52.13 – 53.12

Psalm 31.2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25 Response: "Father, into your hands I commend
my spirit."

2. Hebrews 4.14-16; 5.7-9

3. John 18.1-19.42

Reflections on the Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

Copyright © 2011 by William Coughlin Hunt

These materials may be shared as long as proper attribution is given.

On Good Friday we read the passion according to John – a remarkable theological reflection on the meaning and consequences of Jesus' suffering and death. John's account contains historical elements. However, like the other gospel writers, John brings his theological perspective to bear on the interpretation of the events that lie at the basis of his narrative. John's passion should be read less as history and more as ironic drama. (See Moloney 1998, 500.)

There are many barriers to such a reading of John's passion. Chief among them is our fondness for devotions and practices that conflate the four Gospels into a single narrative that treats every word or action as historical and smoothes over the differing theological perspectives of the various authors. (I am referring, of course, to the Stations of the Cross, sermons on the seven last words, passion plays, and movies like Mel Gibson's 2004 production of "The Passion of the Christ.") As a result, for many Christians the reading of the passion is reduced to an occasion for empathizing with the sufferings of Jesus to the neglect of the distinctive theology of each gospel writer. Even worse, by suppressing these distinct theological perspectives, there is a tendency to use the theology of only one of the gospel writers to interpret the unified narrative or to use a theological perspective from another part of the New Testament to serve that purpose.

Characteristic features of John's Passion Narrative

Even a casual reading of John's passion reveals marked differences from the passion narratives of the Synoptic¹[\[1\]](#) Gospels. Two in particular stand out. First, in the Synoptics Jesus suffers and dies on the feast of Passover, but in John Jesus suffers and dies on the day *before* Passover. As a consequence, for John the Last Supper is not a Passover meal.

Second, in John's Gospel Jesus is in complete control of events. For example, there is no agony in the garden. Instead, the cohort of some 400 soldiers fall to the ground when Jesus identifies himself, and Jesus commands them to let his disciples go free. (18.3-8) After scourging and abuse Jesus comes out under his own power (19.5); is seated on the judgment seat (according to one reading of 19.13); wears his royal robe to the cross (no mention of removal of the robe as in Mark 15.20 & Matthew 27.31); carries his own cross (19.17 no Simon of Cyrene); gives orders from the cross (19.25-27); and determines the timing of his death (19.28-30).

Also, in contrast to the Synoptists, Judas does not identify Jesus (Jesus identifies himself.) and does not express remorse or commit suicide. Moreover, the Judean trial is before the High Priest alone (Annas instead of Caiphas) with no mention of the Council or Sanhedrin²[\[2\]](#); the trial before the High Priest is very brief and the trial before Pilate extensive; Peter does not weep after cockcrow; Jesus is crucified at the sixth hour (19.14) as opposed to the third hour in Mark's Gospel (15.25); there are disciples at the foot of the cross; Jesus does not cry out in abandonment; instead of expiring, Jesus hands over his spirit; only John mentions the breaking of the legs of the two others crucified with Jesus and the piercing of Jesus' side; and Nicodemus is added to Joseph of Arimathea as having a part in Jesus' burial.

All this shows that John's passion narrative is very different from those of the Synoptic writers. How, then, does the Evangelist shape his narrative and what is his message for his readers?

Guidance from the literary structure of the narrative

John the Evangelist makes ample use of literary devices such as irony, inclusion, and double meaning. For example, the inscription on the cross is ironic. In the context of John's narrative Pilate intends it as an insult to the Judean authorities by declaring someone from Nazareth in Galilee to be king of the

¹[\[1\]](#) The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels. Because of the similarity of their order and even their texts, they can be lined up so that their many similarities can be seen together (*syn* = together; *opsis* = a seeing). John's Gospel has a much different pattern.

²[\[2\]](#) Note, however the convening of the Council after the raising of Lazarus and the determination of the chief priests and the Pharisees to find a way to put Jesus to death. (John 11.45-53)

Judeans. (See Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998, 46.) The reader, however, knows that it can't be changed, not because Pilate is stubborn, but because it expresses the truth. (See Moloney 1998, 503.)

Similarly, John brackets the entire passion narrative with a grand inclusion: "There was a garden." First this refers to a garden across the Kidron valley (18.1) and then to a garden near Golgatha where there was a new tomb. (19.41) John also encloses Jesus' response to Annas' questions within Peter's denials, as well as the punishment of Jesus between Pilate's declarations of his innocence.

As an example of double meaning, the Greek text of John 19.13 can be read in two ways: 1) "Pilate sat himself down on the judgment seat." or 2) "Pilate sat Jesus down on the judgment seat." Perhaps, John is saying that in the eyes of those seeking Jesus' death Pilate was passing judgment, but in the eyes of believers, especially John's community, Jesus, "the man" of 19.5, was sitting in judgment over the whole world.

Perhaps most instructive, though, is John's use of chiasmus³[\[3\]](#) where episodes in a passage are carefully arranged so that the first episode corresponds to the last; the second episode to the second last; and so on. The central episode, which often includes a saying, is the key to the interpretation of the whole passage.

Using these literary tools and with the help of the listening guide on the last page, let us examine the four main sections of John's passion narrative.

The arrest of Jesus (18.1-11)

The betrayal of Judas and the violent response of Peter bracket Jesus' saying: "So, if you are looking for me, let these men go." The Evangelist or an editor immediately adds: "This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.'" (See John 6.39; 10.28; and 17.12)

³[\[3\]](#) Strictly speaking "chiasmus" is a rhetorical term that involves the "inversion of the second of two parallel phrases, clauses, etc. (Ex.: she went to Paris; to New York went he)" (Webster 202, s.v., p. 253) Placing the A:B phrase above the B:A phrase and connecting the two As with a line and the two Bs with a line results in an "X," Greek: *chi*, hence the name "chiasmus."

Like the seamless inner garment that was not torn, the inner circle of Jesus' disciples remains intact. Even Judas is not lost. The prayer of Jesus saves both Judas, who for the moment "stands with" the captors, and Peter who violently resists the Father's will for Jesus by lashing out against the high priest's servant.

Francis J. Moloney puts it well:

Jesus prayed for his disciples (cf. 17:9-19) and for those who have heard the word through their ministry (vv. 20-26), that they might be drawn into the oneness of love that existed from all time between the Father and the Son, "so that the world might know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). As Jesus initiates the process that will lead to his being lifted up (cf. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32) he demands that the disciples go their way to perform their missionary task . . . (Moloney 1998, 484)

The interrogation of Jesus and Peter's denials (18.12-27)

In this section of John's passion narrative the denials of Peter frame the encounter between Jesus and the high priest Annas. In contrast to the Synoptic accounts, no other religious officials are present – no Pharisees, no elders, no members of the Council. The questioning is quite different as well. There are no questions about being the Messiah or about the destruction of the Temple. Annas simply questions Jesus "about his disciples and about his teaching." (18.19)

Jesus replies in reverse order, first about his teaching and then about his disciples. He says that he has always spoken plainly and in public and concludes: "Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." (18.21)

This reply is more than a clever evasion. It directs John's readers from the late first century to the early twenty-first century to the only reliable source of Jesus' teaching – the apostolic witness. Jesus wrote nothing; so we have no choice but to rely on the oral and written expressions of his teaching that ultimately come from those who actually heard him speak. In spite of their weakness and evident failures (Peter is a case in point.) those who heard Jesus carry his message forward in time and space.

Once again, Moloney puts it well: “Jesus is no longer present, but in his absence the disciples who know what he said are to be approached. The high priest’s question concerning Jesus’ disciples has been answered, as the *dicaché* and the *mathetái* belong together. The “teaching” of Jesus is to be found among his “disciples.” (1998, 488)

The trial of Jesus before Pilate (18.28-19.16)

In this passage the chiasmic structure leaps out at the reader as the scenes alternate between outside and inside of the praetorium. The central scene (19.1-3) is the abuse and mocking of Jesus robed in imperial purple and wearing a crown of thorns. The central saying is the imperial salute: “Hail, King of the Judeans!”⁴[\[4\]](#)

The passage is replete with irony and double meaning. In mocking Jesus, the soldiers inadvertently proclaim the truth that Jesus is king (though not of this world) who bears witness to the truth (See episode 2: 18.33-38), and whose power is “from above.” (See episode 6 [19.9-11] and Jesus’ words to Nicodemus about being born “from above” [3.3]).

The whole trial of Jesus is an ironic meditation on the nature of his kingship as opposed to imperial power. Even the conclusive charge against Jesus contains an implicit reference to Caesar. In episode 5 (19.7) the Judean authorities tell Pilate: “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.” The title “Son of God,” (Latin: *Divi Filius*) could be seen on every Roman coin along with the emperor’s image.

In the world of John’s narrative “Son of God” appears to refer to Jesus’ kingship and serves as the clinching argument for the execution of Jesus. “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king⁵[\[5\]](#) sets himself against the emperor.” (Episode 7: 19.12)

Jesus’ execution and burial (19.17-42)

⁴[\[4\]](#) Greek *kaire* = Latin *ave* = German *heil* = English “hail.” Recall, for example, the gladiators’ salute: *Ave, Caesar! Morituri te salutamus*. “Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die greet you.”

⁵[\[5\]](#) Because the Roman Empire maintained the fiction of a republic, from Julius Caesar onward no one claimed the title of *rex* or king. Instead, the rulers adopted other titles such as *imperator* = emperor (originally a military title) or *princeps* = first citizen. There were vassal kings at the time of Jesus, e.g. King Herod, but they served at the pleasure of Rome. Assuming the title of king, then, was a challenge to the emperor only if one were claiming to be king *of the Romans*, that is, of the known world. This appears to be what John is implying in his passion narrative.

The theme of kingship continues in the final section of John's passion narrative, although it moves from the center to the periphery (episodes 2 & 7). All the canonical Gospels agree on the wording of the inscription on the cross, but only John tells us that it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. (19.20) These were the main languages of Roman Empire and possibly beyond, especially if John's "Hebrew" refers to Aramaic as well.⁶^[6]

"The kingship of Jesus is proclaimed universally and can be read by all who pass by (v. 20a). The multilingual proclamation of the crucified Jesus as King is another indication that Jesus is drawing everyone to himself (cf. 10:16; 11:49-52; 12:32)." (Moloney 1998, 502)

The other reference to kingship comes in the final episode when Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred Roman pounds or seventy-five of our pounds. (19.39) This extravagant amount was suitable for the burial of a king.

However, the central section (19.25-27) returns to the theme of Jesus' disciples and the consequences of Jesus' glorification on the cross. The central sayings are: "Woman, here is your son." and "Here is your mother."

Jesus addresses his mother as "woman," indicating that she is the new Eve, the mother of all the living. He entrusts her to the care of the beloved disciple who becomes her adopted son and "took her into his own home (Greek: *ta idia*). In John's view, Jesus' death (in fidelity to the Father's will and as a consequence of his proclamation of the truth) constitutes the Church as his family.

This scene echoes the prologue of John's Gospel: "He came to his own home (Greek: *ta idia*), and his own people (*hoi idioi*) did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (1.11-12) By receiving the mother of Jesus into his own home the beloved disciple symbolically constituted the nucleus of Jesus' new family, the Church.

The audacity of faith

⁶^[6] At the time of Jesus Aramaic was spoken in its various dialects from Palestine and Syria throughout the Fertile Crescent as far as Persia (modern Iran), well beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_language#Post-Achaemenid_Aramaic

Familiarity with the general outlines of the passion story can blind us to the extravagant claims that John and his community make for Jesus. Some fifty years or more after the event they view the execution of Jesus from a radically different perspective from that of a casual bystander. Instead of an aspiring prophet crushed by the wheel of history, they see a majestic figure glorified on the cross, rivaling and surpassing the Roman emperor and claiming for himself the emperor's titles, including one that the emperor himself would not claim, king.

Jesus is the true Paschal lamb who by his suffering and death handed over his spirit to his followers, constituted them as a unified community of love, and nourished them by the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist flowing from his pierced side.

The lone liturgical action of the Good Friday liturgy confirms this view. There is no Eucharistic prayer at the Good Friday service. Instead, the unveiling and veneration of the cross come after the readings and the general intercessions.

In its origins this ritual made use of a jeweled cross that was covered with a veil during Lent. The symbolism of the unveiling corresponds to the basic message of John's passion. It is the revelation of a glorious cross, of Jesus' triumph, and of our hope. The appropriate response to this ritual is praise and thanksgiving. Along with John and his community we are called to recognize with quiet joy the triumphant king, raised on the cross, and drawing all people to himself.

A note on the liturgical context of John's passion

It is important to see the Good Friday service with its reading of St. John's passion as the beginning of the three-day celebration of the Christian Passover.

Before the middle of the second century the Roman church had no special annual observance of the passion, death, and resurrection that corresponded with the Jewish Passover. Each and every Sunday liturgy performed that function.

During the second century a group of Jewish Christians in the eastern part of the Mediterranean called Quartodecimans (fourteenters) had a characteristic way of observing Passover. They based their practice on two gospel traditions: 1) John's chronology, which places the crucifixion at noon on the day *before* Passover (the fourteenth day of Nisan) at the time the Passover lambs were being slaughtered; and 2) the Synoptic tradition of Jesus' declaration at the Last Supper: "Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." (Mark 14.25 and parallels)

These observant Jews who were baptized followers of Jesus began their observance of Passover with a commemoration of Jesus' crucifixion at noon on the day before Passover. Then they fasted while their Jewish counterparts were eating the Passover meal. This was a peculiar type of fast. It was not a penitential fast. Rather, it was a fast that anticipated the eschatological banquet when Jesus would drink wine new in the kingdom of God. The Quartodecimans broke their fast at first cockcrow (about 3:00 AM) with the celebration of the Eucharist.

This practice differed from that of almost all of the other Christian churches in the Roman Empire that held to the tradition of celebrating the Eucharist only on Sunday. Around 170 CE Victor, the Bishop of Rome, tried to suppress the Quartodeciman practice and excommunicate their leader, and the Council of Nicea (325 CE) appears to have had the same intent.

However, the Quartodeciman practice continued on in various places, even as late as the seventh century in England and Ireland. It seems to have influenced the other churches to develop some sort of special celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday close to the time of the Jewish Passover. The observance was preceded by a fast that began on the previous Friday when there was a commemoration of the crucifixion and death of the Lord.

The result was a three-day feast (*triduum*)^{7[7]} of the Christian Passover or Pascha beginning on Good Friday and extending through the Easter Vigil into the early hours of Easter Sunday morning. There was only one Eucharistic prayer for the three-day celebration.

It is important that we see the reading of John's passion as part of the three-day celebration of the Christian Passover. It is also important to see the Good Friday fast as anticipatory or eschatological rather than penitential.

^{7[7]} Note that the term *triduum* initially referred to "a three-day feast." Today, however, in the Roman Missal *triduum* refers to three feasts: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. The result is that most Christians celebrate Good Friday as a distinct feast and do not see The Good Friday service and the Easter Vigil as two foci of the one single celebration of the Christian Passover.

For these reflections I consulted the following works in addition to the biblical texts:

Brown 1970 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel according to John (xiii-xxi)*, Volume 29A of the Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970)

Brown 1994 – Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 Volumes, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994)

Metzger 1994 – Bruce M. Metzger, *A textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994)

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998)

Moloney 1998 – Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina Series Volume 4, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press 1998)

Webster 2002 - *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, fourth edition, Michael Agnes, Editor in Chief (David B. Guralnik, Editor in Chief 1951-1985) (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2002)

LISTENING GUIDE TO THE PASSION ACCORDING TO JOHN

(Note about “the Jews:” Translation of the Greek *‘oi Ioudaioi* as “the Jews” is anachronistic and tends to identify modern Jews with “the Judeans” mentioned throughout John’s Gospel. In the period when John’s Gospel was written “Judean meant a person belonging to a group called Judeans, situated geographically and forming a territory taking its name from its inhabitants, Judea.” (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998, 44) In my reflections I use the term “Judeans” or “Judean authorities” instead of “the Jews.”)

A. The arrest of Jesus and his interrogation by the High Priest Annas (18.1-27)

1. The arrest of Jesus (18.1-11)

- a. Jesus meets the arresting party and shows his power. (“I am.”)
- b. Jesus orders the release of his disciples.
- c. Peter reacts to the arrest by striking at the high priest’s servant.

2. The interrogation of Jesus and Peter’s Denial (18.12-27)

- a. Peter denies Jesus for the first time. (“I am not.”)
- b. Annas questions Jesus about “his disciples and his teaching,” and Jesus replies: “Ask those who have heard me . . . they know what I said.
- c. Annas sends Jesus to Caiphas.
- c. Peter denies Jesus two more times. (“I am not.”)

B. The trial of Jesus before Pilate (18.28-19.16)

(Note the chiasmic arrangement: 1 with 7; 2 with 6; 3 with 5; and 4 as the central episode.)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Outside: The Judean authorities demand Jesus’ death. (18.28-18.32) | 7. Outside: The Judean authorities obtain Jesus’ death. (19.12-16) |
| 2. Inside: Pilate questions Jesus about kingship. (18.32-38a) | 6. Inside: Pilate talks with Jesus about power. (19.9-11) |
| 3. Outside: Pilate finds Jesus not guilty and releases Barabbas. (18.38b-40) | 5. Outside: Pilate twice declares Jesus not guilty; Judean authorities press for Jesus execution causing Pilate to fear. (19.4-8) |
| 4. (Inside) Pilate has Jesus scourged; soldiers mock Jesus as King of the Judeans with purple | |

robe and crown of thorns. (19.1-3)

C. Jesus' execution and burial (19.17-42) (Once again a chiastic arrangement.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Jesus is crucified between two others. | 7. Joseph of Arimathea gets permission to (19.17-18)
take the body of Jesus and with Nicodemus
gives Jesus a royal burial. (19.38-42) |
| 2. Inscription proclaims Jesus as King.
Pilate <i>refuses</i> chief priests' request to
change the wording. (19.19-22) | 6. Pilate <i>grants</i> the Judean authorities'
request to break legs. Blood and water
flow from wound in Jesus' side. (19.31-37) |
| 3. Soldiers tear up Jesus' outer garments
but do not tear his seamless inner garment.
(19.23-24) | 5. Jesus thirsts; drinks vinegar from sponge
on a hyssop stick; says: "It is finished.";
and hands over his spirit. (19.28-30) |
| 4. Four female witnesses and the beloved
disciple stand at the foot of the cross. Jesus
entrusts his mother to the beloved disciple.
(19.25-27) | |
-