

# THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: DISCOVERING ITS RICHES

A Parish Introduction to Study of the Bible  
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## VI REFLECTIONS ON THE PASSION ACCOUNT OF ST. JOHN

The narrative of the passion of Jesus takes on a great depth with this evangelist, the Beloved Disciple. The profound spirituality of John is evident for all to see in these words coming from his love and understanding of the mind and heart of Jesus, enriched by many years of prayer and contemplation of the Word made flesh. (Jn 1, 14) His experience of the divine presence in the person of the Lord is particularly noticeable throughout this, the fourth gospel given to us.

The gifts John was given are special features we can appreciate when we read these texts carefully and closely. His poetic and artistic gifts reveal to us the story of our salvation in all its beauty and power. John often presents the coming of the Lord among us in forms that we encounter in poetry, in a portrait or in a dramatic production. John reveals the epic proportions of what has taken place from the coming of Christ, through till his suffering, death and rising. The mighty scope of the confrontation of the divine with the power of evil is described here in his gospel, just as it is expressed later on in the prophetic Book of Revelation wherein John tells us of ultimate victory of Christ. In that book he uses the more forceful imagery of the apocalyptic language employed by the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel to describe that final cosmic battle.

We shall examine the two ways in which John shares the wondrous revelation manifested in the coming of Jesus. He invites us to behold the Light shining in the darkness. He likewise points out to us the heavenly glory of God appearing among us. These are reoccurring themes given prominence from the beginning chapter of the gospel, and continuing throughout the account of his death and resurrection.

The opening of the gospel: "Through him all things came into being....All that came to be in him found life, life for the light of men. The light shines on in darkness, darkness that did not overcome it.... John...came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all men might believe., but only to testify to the light.... The real light which gives light to every man was coming into the world." (Jn 1,3-9).

We are reminded throughout the gospel of this contentious battle between light and darkness. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, a member of the leadership council of the Jews, coming to Jesus "at night", eager for new knowledge and truth. Jesus offers himself as a new source of heavenly light and salvation. But his coming results in creating a time of crisis for people. The ominous words of Jesus speak of what belief in him will entail: "The judgment of condemnation is this: the light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light. Everyone who practices evil hates the light: he does not come near it.... He who acts in truth comes into the light to make clear that his deeds are done in God". (Jn 3, 19-21) People must acknowledge the Light itself in him, or in rejecting him, fall into darkness. Christ presents the invitation to believe: "The light is among you.... While you have the light, keep faith in the light; thus you will become children of the light". (Jn 12, 35-36)

This theme is dramatically presented in the miracle of the healing of the man born blind. Chapter 9 in its entirety expresses the issue of blindness and sight in their deepest meaning: faith in the person of Jesus bringing us to see Truth itself. Jesus pronounces judgment on the Pharisees for their adamant rejection of him even after strong testimony is given to them that this is truly the work of God.

At the final hours at Jesus, John tersely describes the departure of Judas from the gathering at the Last Supper: "It was night". (Jn 13,20) This is the ultimate engagement between cosmic forces: Light has come to conquer all that is of the darkness.

Some studies of John's gospel point to these passages as expressing certain element in this gospel-- John's concern over a religious movement beginning to make an appearance in the Mediterranean world. The Gnostic religion preached salvation through enlightenment, gained by initiation into secret knowledge, but having nothing to do with the morality of one's life. John points out the true source of spiritual enlightenment: Christ the true heavenly light, granting us a share in God's holiness. John's teaching in his first letter seems to be addressed more directly to this danger that could be an influence to Christians.

The theme of "glory" in the appearance of Christ among us is given a very extensive treatment in this gospel. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of an only begotten son, who came from the Father". (Jn 1, 14) The works of Jesus began to manifest this phenomenon. The first "sign" of Jesus performing a miracle Cana "revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2, 11)

As we move to the final stage of Christ's work among us, he speaks of the glory that this will mean for him. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified....What should I say,

‘Father, save me from this hour?’, but it is for this that I came to this hour”. (Jn 23 & 27) During the Last Supper, at the departure of Judas, Jesus proclaims, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him...and will glorify him soon.” (Jn 13,31) He prays: “Father, the hour has come! Give glory to your Son....Do now Father give me glory at your side, a glory I had with you before the world began.” (Jn 17, 1 & 5-6) A close reading reveals to us that this glory is shown in the cross and as well as at the Lord’s resurrection.

John addresses himself to the great paradox that is in Christianity: the death of the Son of God. Paul speaks of this challenge for preachers of salvation in the cross of Jesus: “We preach Christ crucified...a scandal to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Christ is the power of God”. (1Cor 1, 21,24) Execution on the cross, used for slaves and those of the lower classes, meant physical pain drawn out for hours, with utter humiliation and degradation. Rome wanted this done in public for all to see the consequences of crime, especially of rebellion against their imperial power and glory. In the gospel, the supreme power of God is now to be shown to the world. God’s power is the love of Christ in sacrificing himself to all of this. In the gospel of John the prophecies and teachings of Jesus referring to his death differ from the other evangelists. He speaks of the Good Shepherd giving his life for the sheep; he speaks of “no greater love than this: to lay down a life for a friend....I call you my friends”.(Jn 15,13-14) He washes the feet of his disciples to show the extent to what humble service can go—prophetically fulfilled in his going to the punishment of the cross willingly.

Jesus makes repeated reference to being “lifted up” in order that all may be drawn to him. (Jn 3,14 & 12,32) He refers to a strange occurrence as the Jewish people were trekking through the desert: after a fierce attack on the people by poisonous snakes, Moses is asked by God to hold up a bronze image of one such snake fixed to a pole. Those who would look upon it would be cured from the effects of the poison.(Num. 21,9) The crucifixion is the first stage of the lifting up of Jesus, culminating in his glorious resurrection and ascension. To believe in the glory and power of God is to believe in the redeeming love exposed in this terrible suffering and death. This is our healing from the poison of sin. The specter of a creature associated with death in the desert becomes a prefiguring of God’s invitation for us to look upon this figure of his beloved Son hanging in death: a sacrifice of love. And so we come to believe in this glorious offering, leading to the glorious transformation of the risen body of Jesus.

We are included in this heavenly blessing: “[I pray also for those who will believe in me....] I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one as we are one....All those you gave me I

would have in my company where I am, to see this glory of mine...so that your love for me may live in them, and I may live in them." (Jn 17 20-26) This is the joy of our belief.