



# IF I BE LIFTED UP . . .

## *A Commentary on the Passion according to St. John*

Early Christian writers called the evangelist of the fourth gospel "John the Theologian." The reason was his profound and luminous penetration of the mystery of the life, acts and words of Jesus. To John the events of Christ's life are manifestations, "signs" of the divine wisdom and love which was the wellspring of the redemptive Incarnation. They are also symbols of the outpouring of grace through the Word Made Flesh. Because of this his gospel is permeated by the sacraments and cult of the Church, the signs and channels of that effusion of grace. In almost every incident related in the gospel we can detect a reference upward to the divine mysteries and outward to the sacramental and liturgical life.

John's distinctive literary devices, techniques such as recurring themes, symbolism, Old Testament allusions, are the vehicles of these references. Intelligent reading of the fourth gospel demands an awareness and explanation of these techniques. This article, a commentary on the text of the Passion account, will attempt to point out and develop some of the theological and spiritual doctrines it contains.

### **Liturgical Setting**

The Last Discourse (ch. 13-17), which begins the account of Jesus' glorification, is strongly reminiscent of Moses' farewell to the Israelites in *Deuteronomy* (ch. 27ff.). Moses had repeated to the twelve tribes the commandments of God, exhorted them to keep the law and trust in God, and promised a new prophet would come. Saying farewell to his friends, Jesus gives them his new commandment of love, urges them to keep it and to have confidence in him, and promises that he will send a new Paraclete.

John does not relate the institution of the Eucharist. Instead he constructs a liturgical setting for the true sacrifice from which the Eucharist draws its power. The priestly prayer (ch. 17) contains much of the theology of the Eucharist and might very well bear a close similarity to the prayers which the primitive Church used preliminary to the Eucharistic consecration. Jesus begins by raising his eyes to heaven, a gesture which found its way into the rubrics of the Mass from very early times. Address-

ing the Father he recapitulates his mission and dedicates himself to the glory of the Father, as the Church now does in the preface. Now that he is about to leave the world he prays his Father to sanctify his disciples and to keep them from evil, which is the role of the priesthood and the Eucharist in the Church. Then, instead of consecrating the Eucharist, he consecrates himself as a sacrifice for their sanctification (v. 19), and not for theirs alone, but for the whole Church (v. 20). Thus is affirmed the oneness and continuity of the mission of salvation from the will of the Father through Jesus and the Apostles to the Church down through the ages. The Prayer closes with a plea for three blessings which are the proper effects of the Eucharist: the divine unity of the Church, the vision of the glory of the Son of God, and the charity of God in the hearts of the faithful.

### **The Sacrifice**

The dedicatory prayer is finished, and events move on to the sacrifice proper. John omits most of the more pathetic details of the Passion, leaving an impression of serenity and majesty. There is no Agony in the Garden, though elements have appeared previously (12:27) and will appear again (18:11). When the cohort comes to take him, Jesus utters, as he has done several times in John's gospel (ch. 8, vv. 24, 28, 58) the I AM (Yahweh—I am who am). At the force of the divine name the powers of darkness fall back stunned (v. 6). Now and throughout the Passion Jesus is in complete control. He offers himself as victim to the minions of the Evil One for the release of his disciples (v. 8).

John tells very little of the trial before the Sanhedrin, since a major theme of his gospel has been Jesus' trial and condemnation by the Jews. The decision to kill him has already been made however (11:49-53). He points out that the remanding of Jesus to Pilate is another indication that the course of events is completely governed by God, working out His predetermined decrees (v. 31-32). The Jews would have stoned him to death, the punishment prescribed for blasphemy, as they have threatened to do twice (8:59; 10:31). But Jesus has said that he must be "lifted up" (12:32-33), and crucifixion was a Roman punishment.

Before Pilate Jesus shows the same majesty and control. The trial centers around the title "King of Israel." Jesus has already received this acclamation from his disciples (1:49; 12:13-15). Then it was a messianic title, proper to the scion of the Davidic line whom God had promised to raise up. But for Pilate this kingship connotes no more than a claim to political power and possibly a rivalry to the imperial authority.

Jesus asks Pilate if he is seeking the truth from an inner hope and longing for salvation, or if he is merely a magistrate asking the prisoner how he pleads to the charge against him (v. 34). Pilate scornfully rejects any suggestion of personal concern (v. 35). Jesus carefully explains his spiritual kingship and concludes with an open and general invitation, which is at the same time a principle of selectivity (v. 36-37). All are summoned to receive truth and life from Jesus, but only those who already love the truth are able to respond. Pilate with a skeptical shrug shows that he is not of the truth.

The trial moves toward its destined conclusion. Symbolically Jesus is made the substitute victim, and the real criminal is released. The mocking homage of the soldiers ironically foreshadows the earnest homage soon to come from the pagan world (19:1-3). Pilate, however, can find neither guilt in Jesus nor the courage to release him.

The frenzy of the crowd grows, until it is forced to the terrible admission, "We have no king but Caesar" (v. 15). This cry signifies their renunciation of the Old Covenant. The proclamation that God is king of Israel, that Yahweh rules in Sion fills the Old Testament. The kings of the Davidic line are only his viceroys. In the messianic era his rule would be complete and its glory would be visible to the whole world. All the nations of the earth would flow together to Jerusalem to acknowledge him. Now, instead of Yahweh, the crowd in rejecting Jesus acknowledges Caesar, the gentile, the pagan, the usurper, who claimed divine honors, the symbol of all idolatry and uncleanness and the embodiment of the self-divinized secular state.

Looking back from the end of the first century John sees the fearful effectiveness of the outcry. After the siege of A.D. 70 Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was destroyed, ritual worship ceased, the people were scattered and the Jewish nation existed no longer.

This interpretation is emphasized by John's note that it was about the sixth hour (noon) of the Day of Preparation (v. 14). At this very hour the Jewish households are casting out the old leaven from last year and preparing the new unleavened bread for the Passover feast, and the priests in the temple are beginning to slaughter the lambs to be consumed at the Paschal meal. This feast was the principal celebration of the Covenant of Sinai and the ritual commemoration of the wonderful works of God—the miraculous deliverance from the Egyptian bondage and the entry into the land of promise. Now the figure gives way to the reality. The true Paschal Lamb is entering into his sacrifice, an effusion of blood which will save

from the wrath to come all those who have been marked with it. He is going before his flock in a passage from the bondage of sin through death into the heavenly kingdom.

The Paschal feast was also a banquet of unity and communion in the covenant of Sinai with fellow Israelites around the table. By reason of the sacrificial consecration of the Lamb to him, Yahweh was also present and partaking.

By this allusion John brings in the liturgical and sacramental significance of the Crucifixion, replacing and fulfilling the rites of the Old Law. The miracle at Cana had symbolized the end of exterior purifications (2:1-11), and the cleansing of the temple the end of animal sacrifice (2:13-25). Jesus told the Samaritan woman that temple worship would soon give way to worship in spirit and in truth (4:21-24). In the crucifixion these symbols find their reality.

The presence of the two thieves fulfills another prophecy:

. . . because he surrendered himself to death  
 And was counted among the wicked;  
 And he shall take away the sins of many,  
 And win pardon for their offenses.

from the fourth "Song of the Servant of Yahweh" (Isaiah 53:1-12). The note of expiation is in accordance with Caiaphas' "prophecy":

' . . . it is expedient for us that one man die for the people, instead of the whole nation perishing.' This he said not of himself; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was to die for the nation; and not only for the nation, but that he might gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad (11:50-52).

The "disciple whom Jesus loved" is John without doubt. But we should probably understand this phrase as a symbol rather than a disguise. The disciple whom Jesus loves rests his head on Jesus' breast (13:23), rejoices that Jesus returns to the Father (14:28), and keeps his commandments (15:14). Jesus lays down his life for him (15:12-13) and will manifest himself to him (14:21). The disciple sees only the empty tomb and believes that Jesus has risen (20:8). At the foot of the cross he is

given Mary to be his Mother (19:25-27). The title "woman" denotes that she is the new Eve, the Mother of the new creation. John stands for all the disciples of Christ.

It is achieved, then, (v. 28) the work which his Father gave him, to lay down his life in order that he may take it up again (10:17-18). This is the work decreed by the Father's eternal love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son,  
that those who believe in him may not perish,  
but may have life everlasting.

For God did not send his Son into the world,  
in order to judge the world,  
but that the world might be saved through him (3:16-17).

John sees in Jesus' dying sigh a symbol of the outpouring of the Spirit, a gift of the messianic era foretold by the prophets (Joel 3:1-2; Ezech. 36:27, etc.) and by John the Baptist (1:33) and promised by Jesus:

If anyone thirst, let him come to me;  
and let him drink who believes in me;  
as the scripture says, 'From within him  
there shall flow rivers of living water.'  
He said this, however, of the Spirit  
whom they who believed in him were to receive;  
for the Spirit had not yet been given,  
since Jesus had not yet been glorified (7:38-39).

Glorified now, he can give the Spirit.

This symbol of the Spirit appears again in the water flowing from the wound in Jesus' side (v. 34), a fountain of living water which springs up to life everlasting (4:14). It connotes also that rebirth in water and the Holy Spirit which was disclosed to Nicodemus (3:5), the sacrament of Baptism. Similarly, the blood symbolizes both the blood of the Paschal Lamb which marks those who are to be spared (Exod. 12:21-23), and the blood which is true drink, giving life everlasting (6:54-57). In these sacramental symbols flowing from the wound the fathers have seen also the Church, born like a new Eve from the side of the new Adam.

The sacramental symbolism is reinforced by the citation of the instruc-

tion for consuming the Paschal Lamb, "Not a bone of him shall you break." (Exod. 12:46). The lamb was both a sacrifice and a communion meal. Jesus, promising the Eucharist, said:

I am the living bread that has come down from heaven.  
 If anyone eat of this bread he shall live forever;  
 and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life  
 of the world (6:51-52).

The Eucharist contains not simply the flesh and blood of Jesus, but the flesh and blood of Jesus given, sacrificed for the world. Christ in his Passion, Christ crucified in our communion meal, consumed in the sacramental species. Not a bone of him shall you break!

The messianic text quoted from Zacharias (v. 37; cf. Zach. 12:10) indicates the adherence to the faith by the pagans, represented here by the Roman soldiers. In John to "see" Jesus means to believe in him (9:35-41; 12:40 and 44-45). To look upon Jesus crucified with the eyes of faith gives salvation:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,  
 even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
 that those who believe in him may not perish,  
 but may have life everlasting (3:14-15).

When a group of Gentiles had asked to see him in the temple he replied:

And I if I be lifted up, will draw all things to myself (12:32).  
 For when he is lifted up, his divine origin will be manifested:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man,  
 then you will know that I AM,  
 and that of myself I do nothing:  
 but that I preach only what the Father has taught me (8:28).

The body of Jesus is placed in a tomb carved in the rock (v. 41-42), just as, according to legend, the ark of the Covenant was hidden in a cave after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. (2 Mac. 2); and like the ark it will not be found when it is sought for again. John has suggested a comparison between the Ark and the body of Jesus in the prologue:

And the Word was made flesh  
and dwelt among us.  
And we saw his glory—  
glory as of the only begotten of the Father—  
full of grace and truth (1:14).

The Greek word translated as "dwelt" means literally "pitched his tent." During their desert wanderings, the Israelites had sheltered the Ark in a tent. "They shall make a Sanctuary for me, that I may dwell in their midst," Yahweh had commanded Moses. When they had made it and placed the Ark within it, the glory of Yahweh descended upon it as a cloud (Exod. 40:34). The same glory came down upon Solomon's temple when the ark was carried into the holy of holies (3 Kgs. 8:10-11). Isaiah saw it there in a terrifying vision (Is. 6). The Ark and its sanctuary, the tent in the desert and later the temple of Jerusalem, was the place where Yahweh was present in the midst of his people. They were the center of divine cult and the symbol of God's special love and protection. As an image of the grace which poured out from them upon the nation, the prophet Ezechiel saw a vision of a miraculous, life-giving stream of water flowing out from the side of the rebuilt temple (Ezech. 47:1-2; cf. Joel 4:18; Zach. 13:1).

The body of Jesus is both the new Ark of the Covenant and the new temple (2:19-21). His flesh is the new sanctuary of God among us, the center of worship in spirit and in truth (4:21), from which flows a miraculous stream of life-giving water (7:37-39; 19:34). Like the Ark, his glorified body was taken away to be seen no more. But he has left his sacramental body to be seen with the eyes of faith.

"Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed" (20:29).

—Urban Sharkey, O.P.