

The Gospel of John

Session 10

John 18:33-21:25

I. John 18:33-38a (Trial, Scene 2)

1. Pilate now returns to the praetorium to question Jesus. This scene is centered on the fact that Pilate and Jesus have two very different understandings of what a king is. In a literal sense, they are from different worlds. While no charge has been made against Jesus (18:30), Pilate's question in 18:33 reflects the fact that he has either heard something (note 12:13) or an implicit charge has been made. If Jesus has presented himself as a king, then he is guilty of sedition.
2. Jesus then questions Pilate: is this a charge Pilate is making or has it been suggested to him? Jesus does not deny being a king, but he also suggests that Pilate's understanding of kingship is very different from his own. In 18:35 Pilate puts some distance between himself and "the Jews". He has no interest in settling Jewish disputes (and probably holds them in contempt).
3. In 18:36-37 Jesus does not answer Pilate's question. Instead, he explains the nature of his own kingship. Two statements capture its essence: "My kingdom is not of this world" and "my kingdom is not from this world" (18:36). Jesus is not saying that his kingdom is merely "spiritual" and has no relationship to the world. He is simply saying that his kingship and kingdom are of a different order than what either Pilate or "the Jews" hold them to be. Jesus' kingdom is not based upon human political power or military force; it does not come from the world, but it certainly involves a reordering of the world.
4. The unspoken question here is this: What is the purpose of a king? For Pilate, kings subjugate and rule while for Jesus a king bears witness to the Truth and orders the world around this Truth. As Pilate's question makes clear, he finds this incomprehensible. Like "the Jews," Pilate has simply closed himself off from the Truth.

II. John 18:38b-40 (Trial, Scene 3)

1. Pilate now goes back into the praetorium to speak with "the Jews" (18:38b). He reports that he has found Jesus to be innocent.
2. In 18:39 Pilate seems to mock the Jewish leaders (an action which coheres with what we know about him). Surely, he asks, they would like for the "King of the Jews" to be released in a Passover amnesty.
3. "The Jews" demand the Barabbas be released. Significantly, his name means "Son of the Father". 18:40 reports that he is a "robber". This was the term used to designate those who rebelled against Roman rule. "The Jews" may be getting back at Pilate, attempting to force him to release someone who is actually guilty of rebellion.

III. John 19:1-3 (Trial, Scene 4)

1. Pilate now attempts to release Jesus. He has Jesus flogged, a punishment which will allow him to release Jesus despite the demands of "the Jews".
2. This scene is ironic for Jesus is now mocked by being "crowned" and clothed in a purple robe (19:2) but this only calls attention to the fact that Jesus has arrived at the moment of his "coronation" which is the

Cross. For John, Jesus' crucifixion is his "enthronement" and "glorification". By humiliating Jesus, the Roman soldiers actually call attention to what is taking place.

IV. John 19:4-7 (Trial, Scene 5)

1. The irony continues. Pilate now presents "the Jews" with their king. Jesus is presented beaten and bloody with Pilate's acclamation "Behold the man!". In other words, Pilate is sending two messages simultaneously. First, he is saying something like "Does this man really look like threat to you?". Second, he is saying "Now here is the appropriate king for a conquered people!".
2. In response to this, "the Jews" now explicitly demand that Jesus be executed. This has been suggested already (18:31) but now it is demanded.
3. Pilate tells "the Jews" for the third time that he has found Jesus innocent and he mocks them by telling them to take Jesus and crucify him—something he know that cannot do.
4. "The Jews" now make a charge against Jesus: by making himself the Son of God (by claiming divine honors), Jesus has committed blasphemy, and this is a capital crime (Leviticus 24:16). Pilate's mockery has only moved "the Jews" to be intransigent in their demands.

V. John 19:8-12 (Trial, Scene, 6)

1. In a sense, this scene is the climax of the trial. Pilate now takes Jesus back into the praetorium and questions him again. The key question is posed in 19:9 and it is the question that has dominated this Gospel: "Where are you from?" Jesus is from the Father and knowing this is the key to understanding who he is.
2. When Jesus refuses to answer his question (because he knows that Pilate cannot receive the answer), Pilate emphasizes his authority. What Jesus says in 19:10 is key to understanding all this now unfolding: "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given to you from above." On the surface, Jesus is on trial but in truth it is "the world" that is on trial.
3. While Pilate seeks to release Jesus, "the Jews" determination to have him crucified only increases. They now make a threat. If Pilate releases Jesus, they will make sure that the emperor finds out that he let a dangerous revolutionary go free. In short, they threaten to sabotage his career.

VI. John 19:13-16a (Trial, Scene 7)

1. John tells us that Jesus is sentenced to death at 12:00 on the Day of Preparation, the time at which the Passover lambs would begin to be slaughtered in the Temple (19:14)
2. Pilate engages in some final mockery by presenting Jesus to "the Jews" and saying, "Behold your king!". His message is clear: this is the kind of king you deserve. Similarly, he asks "Shall I crucify your king?" (19:15). But Pilate is ultimately forced to choose between releasing an innocent man or damaging his career. Making this choice presents him with no struggle and "he delivered him over to them to be crucified" (19:16).
3. In 19:15 "the Jews" make a startling confession. They have rejected the Son of God as the King of Israel and state a very different allegiance: "We have no king but Caesar." They have opted for the rule of Caesar over the rule of God.

VII. John 19:16b-22 (The Crucifixion, Part 1)

1. Crucifixions were carried out in very public places so that those crucified could serve as a warning to those who contemplated resistance against Rome. Jesus is taken to Golgotha which at one time was a rock quarry. Today, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands on the spot where Jesus' crucifixion took place.
2. There is an irony with regard to the inscription that Pilate has affixed to Jesus' cross. The *titulus* proclaimed the crime for which a criminal was being crucified. Jesus' "crime" is that "the King of the Jews" (19:19). While Pilate intends this to be an insult to "the Jews," it ironically proclaims the truth about Jesus.
3. The chief priests protest this proclamation. They perceive the insult and also want to make it clear that Jesus was not their king. For them, it is essential that Jesus be known to be a false messiah who was justly crucified.

VIII. John 19:23-24 (The Crucifixion, Part 2)

1. John certainly understands Jesus' death to be the fulfillment of Scripture. The larger framework for interpreting Jesus' death is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In 19:24 John cites Psalm 22:17. Psalm 22 is about the suffering of a righteous person and so sketches an outline of Jesus' death. This citation from Psalm 22 indicates that Jesus is to be seen as a righteous figure undergoing suffering.

IX. John 19:25-27 (The Crucifixion, Part 3)

1. John's account of the crucifixion differs from that of the other three gospels in that some of Jesus' followers are present at the foot of the cross (19:25). Also unique to John is the report that Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple are among this group.
2. While brief, this scene has great significance. Jesus' last act is to entrust his mother to the care of the beloved disciple. In both 2:4 and 19:26 Jesus addresses Mary as Woman and this suggests that she has a symbolic role to play. In 2:4 Mary seems to represent the Church in her trusting response to Jesus: "Do whatever he tells you" (2:4). Now in 19:26 she appears as the Mother of the Church. Jesus seems to be saying that now the beloved disciple is her "son" and that Mary is the beloved disciple's "mother". In Isaiah 60:1-4 and 66:7-9 Zion is portrayed as a mother, the mother of Israel. Now Mary is portrayed as the Mother of the Church.

X. John 19:28-30 (The Crucifixion, Part 4)

1. Jesus is aware that his mission is now "finished" (19:28). Here, finished means brought to completion. His thirst is not simply physical. In 18:11 Jesus spoke of drinking the cup that the Father had given him. What Jesus thirsts for is the fulfillment of the Father's will.
2. The Roman soldiers interpret what Jesus says in a physical sense and so offer Jesus some common wine. John connects this with Psalm 69:22. John has already cited Psalm 69 in connection with Jesus' Passion in 15:25. We are invited to see the suffering of the psalmist as a prefiguration of Jesus' suffering.
3. The mention of hyssop (19:29) is significant. In Exodus 12:22 hyssop is used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the doorposts of Israelite houses. This is another link which connects Jesus' death to the Passover.
4. Significantly, Jesus' final words indicate triumph and completion: "It is finished" (19:30). Jesus has accomplished the work of the Father and this work cannot be reversed.

XI. John 19:31-37 (The Crucifixion, Part 5)

1. Since it is the Day of Preparation and Passover begins at sundown, it is necessary for the bodies of three crucified men to be removed (19:31; cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Corpses were considered to be unclean and could not be exposed at Passover.
2. To speed up the deaths of the three men, Pilate sends soldiers to break their legs (unable to support their torsos, the men would die more quickly being unable to breathe). The soldiers find Jesus already dead and so do not break his legs. John understands this to be the fulfillment of Exodus 12:10 (19:36) which commands that none of the Passover lamb's bones are to be broken. For John, Jesus is the Passover sacrifice for in him the great and final Exodus takes place.
3. To make sure that Jesus is dead, one of the soldiers pierces his side with a spear and blood and water flow out (19:34). John provides a hint about what this means in 19:37 when he cites Zechariah 12:10. This text is part of a series of oracles in which God promises to purify his people. Zechariah 13:1 speaks of a fountain being opened which will purify Jerusalem from sin. John wants us to see that this fountain proceeds from Jesus' side.
4. The water and blood which flow from Jesus' pierced side also have a sacramental significance. The water is the purifying water of Baptism (note 1 John 5:6) and the blood is a reference to the Eucharist (note 6:51-58). Behind this may be Ezekiel 47 in which a purifying stream flows from the Temple. Of course, Jesus has already made it clear that he is the Temple (2:13-22). Jesus is the true Temple, the true Passover and the true Purification. The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist provide us with access to the Purification.

XII. John 19:38-42 (Burial)

1. Jesus' burial is accomplished by two Jews. Joseph of Arimathea, who is a disciple (19:38) and Nicodemus, who had come to Jesus at night (19:39).
2. These two men see to it that Jesus receive a royal burial. The mention of myrrh and aloes (19:39) recalls Psalm 45:9 which describes David's royal robes as scented with myrrh and aloes.
3. Significantly, Jesus' tomb is located in a garden (19:41). This takes us back to the beginning of the biblical narrative (Genesis 2-3) and suggests that Jesus' death has restored creation.

XIII. John 20:1-10

1. It is now the morning of "the first day of the week" (20:1), the day we now know as Sunday. It is essential to note that Mary Magdalene comes to Jesus' tomb with the intention of preparing a corpse for burial. When she discovers that the tomb is empty, she does not conclude that Jesus has been raised from the dead but that his body has been stolen (20:2).
2. When Peter and John are informed of this, they go to the tomb. While the beloved disciple arrives first, he waits for Peter (probably out of deference to Peter's authority). The fact that the burial cloths are still in the tomb indicates that the body has not been stolen. We should remember that when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he came out of the tomb still wrapped in burial linen (11:44). Jesus is not bound by burial linen for he is not bound by death.
3. What is the nature of the beloved disciple's faith in 20:8? It is probably best to think that at this point he has the beginnings of faith but not faith in its fullest sense (for the Spirit has not yet come). 20:9 makes it clear that the disciples do not yet have resurrection faith since they do not yet understand Scripture. For this reason, they return to their homes (20:10)

XIX. John 20:11-18

1. After Peter and the beloved disciple have left, Mary remains at the tomb. When she looks inside it, she sees two angels, one sitting where Jesus' head was located and the other seated where his feet were located. This certainly suggests the Mercy Seat which sat upon the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 37:7-9) and was central to the Day of Atonement. Jesus is the true Mercy Seat (note Romans 3:25). Angels are signs of the Presence of God and their presence here indicates that God has done something.
2. The central dynamic of this narrative is the gradual turning of Mary away from the tomb (20:14) and toward Jesus (20:16). Only as she turns fully away from the tomb, is she in a position to come to resurrection faith.
3. Mary needs to learn not to "cling" to the Jesus she has known (20:17). As long as she is turned to the tomb and as long as she simply wants her former relationship with Jesus to be restored, she cannot come to resurrection faith. The Ascension must follow and only with this will the Truth about Jesus be available. In an important sense Mary and all disciples must "let go" so that they can receive the ascended and glorified Christ.
4. Note that Mary is given an important role—she is an apostle to the apostles (20:17-18).

XX. John 20:19-25

1. Significantly, the first Easter finds the disciples not filled with faith and hope but locked in a house together and filled with fear (20:19). Jesus enters this house and brings peace to them (note 14:27). Here, peace is situation in which things are properly ordered. This sort of peace can only come from God. This is precisely the gift which the disciples need.
2. Jesus shows the disciples the marks of crucifixion (20:20) and this makes it clear that the crucified Jesus and the glorified Jesus are one and the same person. It is only at this point that they come to resurrection faith.
3. Note that resurrection faith is organically connected to mission. Just as the Father has sent the Son into the world on a mission, so the glorified Son now sends the disciples into the world on a mission. Faith is not a private and personal matter; it sends one into the world on a mission and this mission is essentially public.
4. For John, Resurrection and Pentecost coincide (20:22). The disciples receive the Spirit not simply for their own personal edification but for the sake of their vocation. Without the Spirit they would have no vocation and would not possess the power to carry it out. This seems to be the point of 20:23. The disciples are not simply preachers; they have been given a share in Jesus' mission of cleansing the world. They are consecrated by the Spirit (17:17) to act on behalf of Christ.

XXI. John 20:26—31

1. We have to be careful here because of ingrained prejudices about “doubting Thomas”. With this narrative, we are moving away from a focus on the disciples and to a focus on future disciples.
2. Note that Jesus knows what is troubling Thomas and that he offers to address this trouble (20:27). Jesus has not been raised simply back into his former bodily life nor has he been raised into a completely spiritual form of existence. As he returns to the Father, he presents his glorified humanity to the disciples and this glorified humanity involves a resurrection body which still bears the marks of crucifixion (note Revelation 5:6). We also want to remember that even those Jews who anticipated a resurrection (and not all Jews had such an anticipation), only thought of it coming at the end of history. We do not want to forget how overwhelming this experience must have been.
3. John does not tell us whether Thomas actually touched Jesus’ wounds (20:28). He only tells us about Thomas’ response to Jesus appearance: “My Lord and my God!” This is the strongest confession regarding Jesus in this gospel.
4. 20:29 could be read as either a statement or a question (because Greek has no question marks). If this verse is not a question, Jesus is not rebuking Thomas but simply making the statement that future believers will not have this experience. Future believers will not have Thomas’ experience, but this will not make their faith any less genuine.
5. 20:30-31 addresses this issue. While Thomas could encounter the glorified humanity of Jesus, future generations will encounter Jesus through the witness of this gospel.

XXII. John 21:1-14

1. This narrative is about the mission of the disciples and needs to read symbolically. A group of disciples, led by Peter, is fishing in Galilee at night (the normal time for fishing). As we have seen, night tends to symbolize spiritual darkness and blindness. We see the disciples here on a mission without Jesus and, thus, failing (21:3).
2. Jesus appears at daybreak because, spiritually speaking, this is the daybreak (21:4). The situation rapidly changes from failure to dramatic success and reason for the change is the presence of the risen Jesus. The huge number of fish (21:6) looks forward to the fruit of the apostolic mission.
3. The breakfast of fish and bread (21:9) recalls the multiplication of the loaves and fish (6:11) and certainly has a Eucharistic significance. As they embark on their mission in the world, the disciples will experience communion with the risen Christ through the Eucharist and will come to know him as a personal presence.

XXIII. John 21:15-19

1. At this point, there is a lingering question of Peter’s vocation. After 18:27, the question arises of whether Peter is a disciple of Jesus or not.
2. Significantly, this question is not answered by Peter but by Jesus. It is not Peter who restores himself to Jesus but Jesus who restores Peter to himself.
3. Peter’s three denials of Jesus are effectively erased by Jesus’ threefold question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (21:15). In place of Peter’s denials, Jesus offers a vocation: “Feed my sheep” (21:17).
4. This vocation will lead Peter to share in the suffering of Jesus (21:18-19). This should not be understood as a punishment but as an honor (note 1 Peter 4:19).

XXIV. John 21:20-25

1. Peter's question in 20:21 is our question too: "Lord, what about this man?". What about the mysterious beloved disciple? He has followed a different path than Peter. We saw him at the foot of the cross and he immediately recognized the risen Jesus when he stood on the shore (21:7). Peter has been given the task of feeding Jesus' sheep. What about the beloved disciple?
2. Jesus provides the answer: "Peter, that is not your concern. Your concern is to follow me" (21:22). Peter has a vocation and has received the mercy of Jesus. What happens to the beloved disciple is not his concern. He must entrust this to Jesus.
3. The beloved disciple gives us part of an answer to this question. His role, his vocation, is to write the gospel we are now reading (21:24) which tells about, among other things, the miracle of Peter's restoration. Can sinners be involved in the mission of Jesus? Peter bears witness that they can.