

John 12:20-33 The Cross and the Glory
March 17, 2024

Have you ever wondered what was going on in other places around the world in the time of Jesus? Or perhaps that is just me. Other things *were* happening; there was a Dacian revolt against a Sarmatian tribe that had conquered them (the Dacians and Sarmatians are among the ancestors of the Ukrainian and Romanian people of today).

There was a Parthian king named Artabanus the 1st, who fought a war with Rome over Armenia, not too far away. There was an epidemic in China and the Han dynasty saw the outbreak of the rebellion of a man named Gongsun Shu.

Philo of Alexandria wrote an allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. Phaedrus translated into Latin some of Aesop's fables, along with a few of his own compositions. The most famous of Aesop's fables is the Tortoise and the Hare.

Around that time there was a financial crisis in Rome. Land values plummeted, credit increased, there was a money shortage and many aristocratic families were ruined. Sounds like a depression, or a great recession. Tiberius was the Emperor in Rome.

Much of the world's history isn't known, but archeology reveals there were certainly civilizations of one scale or another in India, Africa, Northern Europe, and the Americas, less in known about them. Even the

population of the world at the time is very hard to establish, but one estimate is around 250 million or so. In other words, the population of the whole world was about two-thirds of what the population of The United States of America is now.

The vast majority of the people in the world at that time, even the majority of the people in the Roman Empire, including most of the leaders, from Tiberias on down, were as unaware of the happenings in Jerusalem and of the significance of the life of Jesus, and his death that he predicted to his followers, and that happened on that fateful spring day, as we are of the other histories that were happening at the same time in other places.

We have seen in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, how Jesus, after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, began to teach his followers about his soon to come suffering and death. This morning we have read a similar account from the Gospel of John.

As you know, the Fourth Gospel is unique. Though it tells the same story about Jesus, it tells it in its own way. It describes events and encounters that do not appear in the other gospels, such as the Wedding at Cana, or the encounter with the Woman at the Well in Samaria, the Raising of Lazarus. It has a slightly different timeline, and there are no parables.

Jesus speaks in unique ways. For instance, in all four of the gospels, Jesus often refers to himself as the, "Son of Man." In John, however, other images take

center stage. Jesus is the Bread of Life and the Light of the World; the Good Shepherd and the Sheep gate, and the True Vine. He presents himself as the Resurrection and the Life, as the Way, the Truth and the Life. John tells the same story, but differently.

In today's reading we find Jesus explaining to his disciples about his coming death, and we can see the uniqueness of John there as well;

In the other accounts, "He then began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, of the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." That is the way Mark tells it, and Luke and Matthew follow after him.

But in John, we find something different, "The time has come that the Son of Man should be *glorified*," is the way he puts it, and explains that, "except a kernel of wheat fall to the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

And even the prayer in the Garden, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus prays, "Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." In Luke we are told that in this moment he sweated blood.

Once again John is similar but different. Though it is not in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prays a similar prayer, "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I

say? Father, save me from this *hour*: but for this cause *came I* unto this hour. 28 Father, glorify thy name."

In any translation of any of the gospels these are majestic words and I have given them in the King James Version because the Elizabethan English has a kind of regal quality to it.

In all four gospels we find a painful execution of a person who though innocent was condemned as a criminal, and at the same time a claim of God's highest magnificence and glory.

It is good for us to sit in silence before *this* telling of the story during Lent, about what was happening on the eastern frontier of the Roman empire, while in Egypt Philo was at work on his book about the Old Testament, and Phaedras translated Aesop. The most dangerous and fearful threat to humanity, which is its annihilation, is presented as the moment of God's greatest glory.

What makes John's presentation of this part of the story so powerful *is* the association of the cross of Jesus and the glory of God. There are other places in the biblical story that *could* be emphasized, such as Creation or the Exodus or the coronation of David, or in the life of Jesus, the feeding of the 5,000 or when Lazarus was raised, or the resurrection itself. But more than the other three gospels, which present this part of the story with a profound sense of tragedy, John presents it as the pinnacle, the highest point. The Son of Man lifted up in glory.

No matter what else was going on in the world at the time or who knew about it, and no matter what is going on in our world now; we can clearly see, if we understand the Incarnation, that Jesus is God revealing God's true nature, and no more so than from the cross, that though our lives are bounded by historical forces beyond our control, and encompassed by time, by the limitations of humanity, and the universal and inescapable presence of sin, that we no longer stand under judgment, but under grace. That is what the death of Jesus means.

Thus, everything associated with mortality, not only the brevity of life and inevitable death, and the givenness of our lives over which we have so little control, and the stridency of the moral demand to which we can not live up, and the drive for fulfillment that persistently eludes us, and quite frankly, the demands of daily life which are enough; are all stripped of their power over us.

In some ways the world hasn't changed much in the last 2,000 years; there are still wars and epidemics books being written and financial crises and contention about many things.

Yet by this grace, we can breathe, and we can live, strive for high character and purposeful action without the burden of life as tragedy weighing us down. It means for us that we no longer live our lives in the grip of death, but in the liberation and the reconciliation, and the redeeming love revealed on the cross, which is the glory of God.

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