

Jesus' Farewell Discourses

The conclusion of Jesus' public ministry is recorded in the Gospel of John from 11:55 through chapter 17. As with the seven signs that we have discussed in previous chapters, this seems to be another transition in the life of Jesus and his disciples. It is a time of deep and stirring emotions, especially for those close to Jesus and in the mind and heart of Jesus himself. The author of this Gospel, while probably not the "beloved disciple" John who is pictured resting on Jesus' breast in Leonardo da Vinci's renowned vision of the Last Supper, it was surely someone, who like him, was a devout believer. John is the last of the New Testament Gospels, not only in their order in the Christian Scriptures, but it is also the last in the dating assigned to them by most Biblical Scholars. Perhaps this is why this ending summary of the adult life of Jesus on earth is focused, not on accurate details to be scrutinized, but on the demeanor and the responses around Jesus and his disciples. It is a closing glimpse to some of the events toward the end Jesus' ministry and the various responses of those who were present in these intimate times.

As I read this section I was reminded of a familiar Hymn in the 1982 Episcopal Hymnal, # 644. The words were written by John Newton (1725-1807) and the music by Alexander R. Reinagle (1799-1877). To me this hymn may summarize the thoughts and feelings of Jesus and his disciples during this moving transition from an active ministry to the final passion.

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear.
It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary, rest.
O Jesus! Shepherd, Guardian, Friend, O Prophet, Priest and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.
Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.

Here is a basic outline of these stories taken from several versions of translation sources. These basic title headings, I hope, will help us share the content in these chapters leading up to the Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus that begins in chapter 18.

- A. The third Passover in Jesus' public ministry in Jerusalem
 1. Jesus is Anointed at Bethany 12:1-8
 2. The plot to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus 12:9-11
 3. The Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem 12:12-19
 4. Some Gentiles seek to see Jesus 12:20-26
 5. Jesus speaks about his death and glorification 12:27-36
 6. The unbelief of the people 12:37-43
 7. Judgement by Jesus' words 12:44-50
- B. The Last Supper
 1. Jesus washes his disciples' feet 13:1-20
 2. Jesus predicts his betrayal 13:21-30
 3. A New Commandment 13:31-35
 4. Jesus predicts Peter's denial 13:36-38
- C. Discourses:
 1. Jesus the Way to the Father 14:1-14
 2. The promise of the Holy Spirit 14:15-31
 3. Jesus the Real Vine 15:1-17
 4. The World's Hatred 15:18-16:4
 5. The Work of the Holy Spirit 16:5-15
 6. Sadness and Gladness 16:16-24

7. Victory over the World 16:25-33
8. Jesus prays for his disciples 17:1-26

A. An Introduction:

The first thing we notice, as the disciples and friends of Jesus enter this period of transition, is an attempt to prepare themselves for the approaching joyful celebration of Passover. This annual remembrance of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt when Moses was empowered by God to lead his people to a life of freedom in a land of promised security. How they hoped that Jesus might be another redeemer like Moses to end the oppression of the Roman Empire that was now closing in to destroy them. As they gathered at the home of Lazarus with Martha and Mary only six days before the festival, now even Lazarus became a target in ending the ministry of Jesus. In their distraught of grief, Mary took a jar of expensive oil to anoint Jesus' feet that only caused more division among them with the financial concerns of Judas. As Jesus tries to regain some calm, the Jews who had heard of the location of both Lazarus and Jesus, came in larger numbers to express their faith in Jesus.

The next day even larger crowds were gathering in Jerusalem because they heard that Jesus was on his way there for the festival of Passover. The tension was building with enthusiasm among the large crowds shouting praises of Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel! This Gospel tells us that *"At the time his disciples did not understand this, but after Jesus had been glorified they remembered that this had been written about him, and that it happened to him"*. The sign of raising Lazarus seemed to be very effective and, along with the festival that reminded them of their freedom from slavery in Egypt under a leader like Moses, the Pharisees said to one another, *"You can see we are getting nowhere; all the world has gone after him!"*

While the crowds were on an emotional high along with Gentile visitors who asked Philip if they could meet Jesus, The disciples were in a quandary. In the midst of all this anxiety, Jesus begins to explain, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. In very truth I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest."* Jesus tells them that he is in turmoil beyond words and so were those who were his disciples and had faith in him. Many said the Law taught that the Messiah remains forever, so what do you mean that the Son of Man must be lifted up? A lot more would have to happen, along with the death of Jesus, before those closest to Jesus would begin to understand and marvel at the resurrection that was the amazing result of what all this meant.

At the end of chapter 12, *"Jesus proclaimed: 'To believe in me, is not to believe in me but in the one who sent me; to see me, is to see God who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that no one who has faith in me should remain in darkness.'" I believe that these words are the essence of the message Jesus was trying to help them understand throughout the rest of his discourse in chapters 13 through 17. Before John tells us more about his farewell discourses, this same point is made again; "I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself commanded me what to say and how to speak. I know that his commands are eternal life. What the Father has said to me, therefore - that is what I speak"*.

Clearly then, accepting Jesus as one's saviour is not the key to eternal life, but rather listening carefully to what Jesus said and observing what Jesus did. Jesus was all about the Realm of God in his words and manner of life. Jesus then is the "word" as John proclaimed in the first chapter. In the "signs" that Jesus performed we saw the activity of God's Realm on earth. The disciples were learning how they could be like Jesus and also bring in the Realm of God to this earth by faithfully following Jesus in word and deed. Everyone then who hears these words and acts in like manner are today's bearers of God's Realm among us. We need to consider the value of the discourses in chapters 13 through 17 along with the disciples.

B. The Last Supper: (a way of sharing and living together)

Chapter 13 begins by telling us that Jesus knew that his end was near and of his love for his followers, especially his disciples. It was not only real and genuine but even beyond his earthly life. In the midst of betrayal from those close to him along with the distance of the authorities he gets up from the table to wash their

feet and wipe them with a towel. This seems to have created extreme confusion, especially for Peter. Because of Peter's great respect for Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, Peter refused Jesus washing his feet. When Jesus tries to explain why through this menial job of the lowest of household servants it was necessary to be closely connected, Peter goes to the opposite extreme desiring a thorough washing of his whole being.

After washing their feet Jesus put his garment back on and sits down. Asking if they fully understood what he has just done, Jesus elaborates on the importance of their imitating his primary role as servant. Jesus tried to demonstrate that a true master who is connected to God, which they are to be when he is gone, must always keep this Godly principle in their thoughts and actions. Jesus expressed his joy in serving and tells them, *"If you know this, happy are you if you act upon it". "In very truth I tell you, whoever receives any messenger of mine receives me; and receiving me, he receives the One who sent me."*

The author of this Gospel then tells about the betrayal of Judas on the night of this last Supper. Many recent Biblical scholars have a lot of questions about the story of Judas and the Synoptic Gospels have somewhat conflicting details in just how they tell this story. In his Essay, "Exploring the Story of the Cross, Part VI: The Enigma Called Judas", Bishop Spong begins with the writing of the Apostle Paul as the earliest of Christian writers. He points out several interesting observations; Paul says nothing about Judas at all. Regarding the Lord's Supper in Corinthians Paul only says, *"On the night that Jesus was handed over, he took bread"*, and does not identify it as a Passover meal. Bishop Spong goes on to say, *"The clinching argument for me is that Paul, just four chapters later in the same epistle, describes the resurrection appearances by saying: "He (Jesus) first appeared to Cephas (Peter) and then to the twelve." Note "the twelve!" Judas is still present. Could the traitor still be part of the intimate band of disciples if he had brought about the death of their leader? That is to me inconceivable! So, I conclude that in the writings of Paul there is no hint that one of the twelve was the traitor, which means that the Judas story has to be a story that developed after Paul's time and is thus not an original part of the tradition."* For further and more detailed observations you may wish to look into the following: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judas_Iscariot

I bring these details to light here, not because I claim to be a Biblical Scholar, but because I wish to speak to the feelings of Jesus as presented in these chapters. As soon as John tells us that Judas departed from the meal that night, Jesus begins telling them about the glorification of God and of himself in what will follow. Jesus laments that he will be with them for only a little while longer and that where he is going they cannot follow. He finishes with, *"I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples"*. After Jesus expressed his deepest emotions about this transitional time, glory and sadness, Peter comes forth with their response by asking, *"where are you going and why can't we follow you now?"* Jesus explains that just as he is laying down his life for them so will they be asked to lay down their lives as well later. Death, which seems to so many to be the ultimate end, will become known as a triumphal transition to new life.

C. Closing words continue:

Chapter 14 reminds me of words spoken in Hebrews, (12:2) *"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* or in the words of Psalm (19:1) *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."* The whole of chapter 14 is about Jesus' parting gift, *"Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears"*. As a retired priest I have had the privilege to witness many at their time of death to sense that somehow they were prepared for their moment of transition. I sense here that Jesus is demonstrating God's preparation in himself for these climatic moments and, at the same time, Jesus is sharing that peace from God that passes human comprehension to those who loved him. In my own experience I see the wonders of God in our universe that brings a similar sense of preparation in prayer and meditation toward a peaceful readiness for what the future brings. We can trust in God always that there is a place for us, now and forever. The key to this peace is God's love for us and our willingness to fully share that love with each other.

In chapter 14 and 15, Jesus again uses a familiar key concept "I AM" that is repeated earlier throughout this Gospel. I opened our discussion of the Gospel of John with a special recognition of this key in an opening paper called "I Am - You Are". <http://janddhealth.com/GJIAM-YouAre.pdf> If you have not already read this paper you might wish to do so now. I believe this key phrase, "I Am - You Are", is especially valuable here as Jesus speaks very personally to his disciples about his future and theirs as his followers. In 14:10 Jesus told Philip, "*I am in the Father, and the Father is in me*" after Jesus said to him, "*If you knew me you would know my Father too. From now on you do know him; you have seen him*". This key concept that is expressed by Jesus here is amplified in this intimate time he has with his disciples to not only apply to him but also to all who will become his followers in the future. This is confirmed later in chapter 17 which is a long prayer to God closing out this portion of discourse. (17:20-21) "*It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me. May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.*" Jesus is reminding his disciples that he was sent by God to announce and establish the Realm of God here on earth so that the fullness of life will continue to be operative in this world. It is the followers of Jesus and the people of God who are all called to this task.

To further this divine connection, Jesus uses the example of the Vine in chapter 15. (15:5) "*I am the vine; you are the branches. Anyone who dwells in me, as I dwell in you, bears much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*" Jesus makes it clear that everything he does and says is from God who dwells in him so that, as Christ, we also are empowered to continue that function as we faithfully remain in this interdependent relationship. This, I believe, is why Jesus is spending this special time of discourse with his disciples and why this Gospel shares stories. It is to establish and encourage the continuity of the Realm of God, in word and verb, as Jesus has done. Those who understand and wish to continue this Realm are to become living "sentences" in word and deed. The Gospel of John, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, is a divine metaphor (a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity) for our world and all who live in it to enable all that was meant to be by its Creator. To interpret this Gospel in a literal way is to destroy the immense advantage of its witness to the intention of God and the richness that are conveyed in the life of Jesus Christ.

The persecution and hatred that abounds in this world is not to be a detriment to the sons and daughters of God. As we move toward the resurrection of Jesus we will come to the climax of this positive story. So Jesus continues to assure his disciples that, beside his leadership and example, there is more to the support system that God has intended for us to survive toward the victory of a full and complete life, now and forever. (15:26) "*When the advocate has come, whom I shall send you from the Father - the Spirit of truth that issues from the Father - he will bear witness to me. And you also are my witnesses, because you have been with me from the first.*"

In Chapter 16 Jesus talks about sadness and gladness (16:16-24) and victory over the world (16:25-33). In the first part of this Gospel the author has demonstrated, in the stories and signs of Jesus, sadness, gladness, and victory. Now Jesus, as it were, is summarizing and sharing because he knows they have a lot of questions and concerns on their minds as well. Jesus wishes he could say more about his future and theirs, but he asks them to have patience. Jesus assures them that God "*will take what is mine and make it known to you*". Even when they feel he is speaking more plainly to them Jesus warns them to not become over confident. Things will be getting a lot worse before they get better in a completely new way - resurrection! This forthright honesty of Jesus is one of the main reasons that I remain a Christian. Yes, life is hard and often not easy, but there are obvious rewards along the way and the assurance of transformation into eternity.

Now Jesus, who was a person of prayer all his life, continues toward his end with a long prayer - all of chapter 17. Jesus begins by asking, "*Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you.*" Jesus understands that eternal life comes from knowing God's name (a person's reputation) and that he, through his words and deeds, has expressed and demonstrated that reputation (the state of being held in high esteem and honor). The Realm, or Kingdom of God, is the reputed way of life. It is what this whole world should be like and the actuality Jesus came to announce and demonstrate. Jesus believes he has done this and that his disciples, now and in the future, will continue this work.

Jesus says to God, *"Now I am coming to you"*, knowing that he is soon to be transformed in death to resurrection, while continuing to pray for all to whom he has *"delivered your word"*. He asks that all may be kept safe in the world as they continue the Realm of God until they are brought to eternal life. Jesus continues in prayer to include all those who are not yet born but who will be included in this same oneness with God and one another. *"I in them and you in me, may they be perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me."*

In closing allow me to say something about Jesus as a person of prayer. There have been volumes written about prayer by many more capable than I, but to me, the example of his praying speaks volumes. Perhaps one of the most remarkable attributes of our humanity is the development of language to facilitate knowledge and understanding. Jesus was able to draw crowds to hear what he had to say and was excellent in communicating with small groups and individuals. He used a variety of literary forms to articulate his knowledge and understanding of the Realm of God in order to bring the restoration and renewal of God's way on earth. It is said in this Gospel (7:46) *"No one ever spoke the way this man does,"* when the Temple guards returned without arresting Jesus. In addition to his intelligence and studious nature, I believe that his communication with God was his greatest resource. The prayer life of Jesus was, what some call, informed prayer. He came to God as a listener, with gratitude and confidence, to learn and speak with divine wisdom.

My shorthand for prayer is: (Perusing Reasonable Alternatives Yet Expecting Resolve). As Romans (8:16-17) says, *"The Spirit of God affirms to our spirit that we are God's children; and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ; but we must share his sufferings if we are also to share his glory"*. It is what I call "inaudible language of the soul" that goes much deeper than vocal conversation. This may be the reason that the voice of God is often referred to as "the still small voice". It is an inward perusing - reading carefully with intent to remember - reasonable - marked by sound judgment - to understand the alternatives and realities of living, with gratitude and confidence, having the expectation of resolve. The prophets shared this inward grace when they "heard" the words of God, probably not audible words, to sing their "new song" as portrayed in Isaiah 42:9-10, *"The earlier prophecies have come to pass, and now I declare new things; before they unfold, I announce them to you."*

With this inner strength and dignity, Jesus shares his closing thoughts with those who were his disciples. We have noted in Hebrews 12, *"For the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, ignoring its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."* It was in these moments of discourse that Jesus shared his inner hope and strength to enable the disciples then and even now to be one with God.

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.