

Jesus' Farewell Discourses - Part I

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.

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. 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 by 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. 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.

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 annual celebration of Passover. This remembrance is of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt when Moses led 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 his disciples who 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 savior 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.

The value of these discourses in these middle chapters of the Gospel of John are indeed amplified when we realize that this Gospel was written around the turn of the first century CE - after the Common Era. According to a paper written by Anne Amos called "The Parting Of The Ways" she says, *"The split between Judaism and Christianity was gradual and happened at different rates in different places. There is remarkably little agreement among scholars as to what precisely caused the rift and estimates vary about the date, from the middle of the first century CE to the middle of the fourth CE."*

<http://www.jcrelations.net/The+Parting+of+the+Ways.2237.0.html?L=3>

In 70 CE the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed along with much of the city. Many various groups of people, secular and religious, were displaced and disrupted by these events. Some Christian people today are completely

unaware of how the dating of the Gospel of John effects our understanding of these political and social events. The dating also helps us to see how the life and teaching of Jesus influenced society even many years after his death. David C. Sim of Australian Catholic University in Pretoria tells us, *"There is no denying that the Christian movement began as a completely Jewish phenomenon and developed over the centuries into the Gentile religion of Christianity. This "parting of the ways" is a fascinating chapter in the history of religions, and scholars still debate when the separation occurred as well as the historical, religious and social conditions that contributed to it."*

<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/download/430/329>

David Sim goes on to say, *"In determining the numbers of Jews who became Christians, it is important to differentiate between the various groups and missions within the primitive Christian tradition. These Christian Jews in Jerusalem continued to observe the Torah and they expected all other Christians, both Jew and Gentile, to do so as well. The latter Christian tradition is associated initially with the Hellenists and later with Paul. These Jews no longer followed the Torah in the light of their understanding of the Christ event, and they accepted Gentiles as Christians without demanding a prior conversion to Judaism and observance of the Mosaic Law."*

It is probably becoming clear that the importance of these middle chapters cannot be covered in one homily, so let me end this homily with some concluding observations. I believe that these middle chapters we call Jesus' Farewell Discourses give us a summary of history of how his disciples, and the many others who followed after them, adapted to their changing world and moved toward a new understanding of the Realm of God.

There are five things that happen in chapter 13 when the disciples were gathered with Jesus at a supper to prepare for the Passover:

- 1. This supper became known as the Last Supper and continues even today as the Eucharist in most Christian churches even though the regularity and the form differs.
- 2. Jesus washes his disciples' feet (13:1-20), which also continues in many Christian churches today. 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."

- 3. Jesus predicts his betrayal (13:21-30). While the text in John seems to concentrate on a man named Judas, we need to remember that the basic content of John is metaphorical and not history par se. Since Judas is nothing more than the Greek spelling of the name for the entire Jewish nation of Judah, might it be an allegorical representation of how many of his own people would betray him?
- 4. Peter's denial 13:36-38. As this chapter closes Jesus predicts the denial of Peter demonstrating that even the leadership of those who follow him are prone to disbelief and fear.
- 5. Jesus gives them "A New Commandment" 13:31-35, "I'm giving you a new commandment: Love each other in the same way that I have loved you. Everyone will know that you are my disciples because of your love for each other."

As John completes this first chapter of Jesus speaking candidly with his followers, we are reminded of his main message - Love. God is love and God is Spirit so we must worship God by loving others as we are loved by God. While the Torah is still vital to us as scripture, the prophet Jeremiah tells (in chapter 31:33-34), "But this is the promise that I will make to Israel after those days," declares the Lord: "I will put my teachings inside them, and I will write those teachings on their hearts."

As we mature in our relationship to God in this 21st century we are blessed with FAITH, HOPE, and LOVE. FAITH [Finding Authenticity In Today's Happenings], HOPE [Habitually Open to Progressive Exploration] and LOVE [Limitless Offerings Veraciously Expended]. May each of us grow in faith, be filled with confidence, and lovingly share our gifts with others and this world, our island home.

AMEN.