

ST. JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF THE PASSION

A Reflection

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ONE NOTICES a striking contrast between the end of John's account of the Passion and what precedes it. There much talk and action take place, mainly on the part of those who arrest Jesus, put him on trial, and eventually have him crucified. At the end Jesus is the only one who speaks; his final words are 'it is accomplished'. A sense of silence reigns as Joseph of Arimathaea and others quietly take the body away for burial. This brooding or pregnant silence is something that we often experience after witnessing some terrible or wonderful event and the crowd disperses. I'm sure that most of us were reduced to awed and horrified silence in seeing on TV the devastation wrought by the recent Queensland floods and the more recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Something similar can also happen when we witness a wonderful event.

These are not just empty silences; they call for or invite some response because we sense they are full of meaning. Human beings are always seeking to make sense of reality, to give meaning to life's experiences. John's account of the Passion provides us with a number of points for reflection that help us in the quest for the meaning of Jesus' death. But we human beings are limited, even inspired ones like evangelists. We see things from certain angles and we need to have others' angles on things otherwise we'd be stuck with just our particular take on reality. How much poorer our lives would be. So we can thank God for inspiring our four Gospel writers to give us four somewhat different angles on an event that we believe to be foundational for our faith and for

the whole of human history.

What are the particular features of Jesus' passion and death that John was inspired to 'see' and pass on to us? A key one is that the passion and death of Jesus is about the revelation of who God is and what is God's purpose for humanity. These two themes appear in the very first scene of John's account when Jesus asks those who have come to arrest him, 'Who are you looking for?' When they reply 'Jesus the Nazarene', Jesus says 'I am he'. Jesus' declaration is a clear echo of Exodus 3:14. When Moses asks what is the name of the God who is speaking to him at the mountain, God answers 'I am who I am'.

We often find statements in the Old Testament that God is doing something 'so that you may know that I am the Lord'. It is a particularly striking feature in the book of Ezekiel. One could be forgiven for thinking that God has an almighty ego and indeed this has to be the case because the Bible claims that it is only when we know who God is and what God's purpose is that we have a chance of knowing who we are and what life is about.

John is echoing Old Testament texts in order to proclaim that in Jesus we have the presence and manifestation in human form of God, the Word made flesh, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Appropriately therefore, John has the arresting party 'move back and fall to the ground' in adoration. But our God is not a God who repays violence with violence and Jesus allows himself to be taken prisoner.

At this point John signals a second key thing that he 'sees' in the passion and death

of Jesus; that God acts for our sakes. So Jesus provides for his disciples (who fail him) by commanding the arresting party to let them go free. And in obedience to the divine command they let the disciples go. A feature of John's account is the delicate balance that he seeks to strike between Jesus as sovereign divinity and Jesus as suffering humanity. John does not water down his account of the brutal treatment of Jesus: the reality and glory of God is revealed in the very real suffering of this human being.

These two themes or insights reappear towards the end of John's account, forming as it were a frame around the whole. Jesus, with divine authority, provides for Mary by telling the beloved disciple that 'this is your mother'. In the same way he provides for the beloved disciple by telling his mother 'this is your son'.

A further indication that the death of Jesus is a revelation of the presence of God and the triumph of God's purpose is Jesus' final words 'it is accomplished'. Within the context of John's Gospel, this does not mean 'it is over/ended' but that God's purpose in his life and death has been fulfilled. As God, Jesus is the only one who can make such an authoritative proclamation.

The lead-up to the crucifixion is dominated by two trial scenes, one before the Jewish high priest and the other before the Roman Pontius Pilate. Here John's account again draws attention to the presence and purpose of God in Jesus and it is, as before, in relation to two things. The first, to which Jesus testifies before both 'judges' is that he always speaks the truth openly. God is not a God of secrets but one who reveals—as the Bible claims. God has nothing to hide but is a mystery that is always unfolding its meaning.

We who are in the image and likeness of God are also mysteries that are forever unfolding their meaning. But a crucial difference between Jesus and ourselves is that we are sinners and this drives us to be secretive. Peter cannot speak the truth about who he is. In words that form a telling contrast to Jesus'



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earlier declaration 'I am he', Peter replies to his interrogators 'I am not'.

At times we all have stuff that we seek to hide from others who we see as prying eyes, wanting to take advantage of us. Our reaction to those who speak the truth about us, particularly a truth that cuts too close to the bone, is to slap them down (reduce them to silence) as the guards do to Jesus in the Gospel. Our supposedly open western society expends a lot of effort trying to shut up or shut down sources of information that expose our secrets. Yet the Bible teaches that this is a pointless exercise in relation to God because God knows all our supposed secrets anyway and comes to rid us of our fears about them. God does not seek to take advantage of us by exposing our failures but to give us the advantage; to free us from them and from the fear that they generate in us and in others. The truth that Jesus speaks about us is that we are, each one, unique and eternal presences of the image and likeness of God and that it is for the good of all humanity that this be made known and acknowledged. God is a lover and lovers do not impose; we are free to accept or reject God's invitation, God's courting of us. But it is not only bad for us but also bad for humanity and creation if we refuse or resist God's invitation to be 're-made' in the true image and likeness that we are meant to be.

Jesus' second testimony, that he is a king, is made before Pilate, the Roman governor. This scene provides a vivid contrast between God's notion of kingship and that of the domi-

nant power of the day, the Roman Empire. God's kingdom is not of this world; by that Jesus means that it is not another kingdom in competition for power as kingdoms and empires seem to have been and continue to be.

We like to speak of the great civilisations and their achievements, Rome being regarded as among the greatest. However, as I get older I have developed something of an aversion to celebrating 'great' civilisations. Sure, they have at times done good things but too often civilisation seems to me to mean one group living very well at another group's expense. So it has been in Australia where for over two hundred years now we have lived very well at the expense of the indigenous people of this land.

Kingdoms also see each other as rivals and competitors whereas God does not have to compete with anybody or any kingdom; God is sovereign and comes to free humanity from the desire to control others and from rivalries that frequently turn violent and destructive.

Jesus assures Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world and confirms this by pointing out to him that there is no army advancing to rescue Jesus. Pilate cannot appreciate any other kind of kingdom, particularly one that is about the truth, and so concludes that Jesus is completely insignificant, a threat to no one and should be released. His soldiers express much the same idea by dressing Jesus up as a toy king and mocking him with their little game. But they do not know that they are, in a way, acknowledging their one and only king—a touch of irony in John's account.

The almost inevitable outcome of a world that operates on secrecy, deceit, falsehood and violent control is ugliness and this is displayed in a most graphic way in the Roman practice of crucifixion. It is a telling irony that the greatest empire/civilisation of the day also had one of the cruellest and most degrading forms of execution. It was designed to make the victim repulsive to all onlookers and to instil into them fear of the same fate.

But this paradigmatic sign of how ugly

we human beings can be towards one another leads us to reflect on another powerful image in John's Gospel. Early in the Gospel (3:14) Jesus tells Nicodemus that 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life'. This is not only a reference to Jesus' crucifixion but also to a rather strange story in Numbers 21 where God tells Moses to make a bronze image of death-dealing serpents and hold it aloft. Any afflicted Israelite who looks on it is saved. The message seems to be that God can turn what is death-dealing into what is life giving.

At the end of John's account of his ministry, Jesus makes a second reference to his crucifixion as a lifting up (12:32) and adds that 'I will draw all people to myself'. The implication here is that God can transform what is most ugly and repulsive into what is beautiful and desirable. Christian art has sought to capture something of this mysterious transformation by the various ways it has represented the cross and the crucifix. One of the ugliest and most repulsive sights that a human being would ever see is turned into something beautiful and desirable. This theme is captured in John's report that the resurrected Jesus showed the disciples the marks of the crucifixion on his body, signs that now enhance his beauty and desirability rather than disfigure it (20:20). Similar reports occur in the other Gospels. The Gospels and works of art testify to the long-standing Christian devotion to the crucifix.

The emphasis on the presence of our good God in the figure of the suffering and dying Jesus, his testimony to the truth, and the theme of the beauty and desirability of the crucified Christ invite us to step outside the biblical world for a moment to draw on an insight of philosophy. According to the scholastic philosophers there are five attributes that above all characterise God. God *is* or *exists*, whereas the existence of everything else depends on God's existence and

on God's creative act. God is *one* because there is no other being that simply 'is'. God is *good* and the source of all goodness; God is also *true* and God is *beautiful*. From this we can draw the conclusion that the death and resurrection of Jesus is as complete a manifestation of God and God's purpose as can be made in this world to us limited human beings.

It reveals that Jesus is God, one in being with the Father. It reveals that all existence depends completely on God, as does Jesus in his humanity and all those who are bent on destroying him. God holds them lovingly in existence, hating their sin but loving them as sinners. God is good because Jesus through his life and death reveals that God is on our side, acting for our salvation. God is true, with no secrets and nothing to hide but unfolding the meaning of the Godhead to us. And last

but certainly not least, God is beautiful and desirable.

When we come to know God in Jesus, we will come to know what is true and good for us. In thus knowing God and acting accordingly, we will also come to appreciate that Jesus has given himself completely for our sake so that we too may become one in Christ. In this way we become fully our true, good and beautiful selves, each one of us in the image and likeness of Christ who is God.

Hopefully these few reflections will be of some use to those who have listened to or read John's Passion Narrative on Good Friday this year. Because it is an integral part of the mystery of Jesus, no one can claim that any explanation of it is complete. There is always more than our limited perspective can see at any one time; it will continue to unfold its meaning throughout human history.

BOOK REVIEW

Encounter, The Past and Future of Remote Kimberley by Brigida Nailon. Brigidine Sisters, Echuca, [2010], hard cover, 116 pages, illustrated, maps, ISBN 978-0-9579361 -7-1, RRP \$44.

The author, Sr Brigida Nailon csb, included with the complimentary copy she sent us a good synopsis of the book by Cathie Clement from Boab Bulletin):

'On 3 September 2008, the author of this book spoke to the Kimberley Society about what was then only a work in progress. An overview of her talk appeared in the *Boab Bulletin* in December of that year and is available on the Society's website.

'Sister Brigida's earlier works (as either author or editor) dealt with the encounter between Catholicism and Aboriginal peoples in

and beyond the Kimberley. Her new book draws on some of that material, delves into new areas, and ends with a philosophical look at the present.

'A 'Background' section introduces the author by way of her involvement with the church, education, and indigenous people. 'Beagle Bay Mission Stories' follow, telling something of life at the mission, leprosy, the taking of children from their parents, the Sisters of Saint John of God, and people's lives away from the mission. Author's comments on the individual stories clarify things mentioned in them, and, in some cases, explain how situ-