

John: The Arrest and Trial of the King Sunday, 4/10/22

It can be a little jarring to rush through the palm parade, skip the Last Super entirely, and then jump into the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, all in a few short minutes. We'll go back and linger in the Upper Room with Jesus and the disciples on Holy Thursday, but in truth it was only a matter of a few days between the so-called "triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem as King to his betrayal and arrest in the Garden. It might have felt like only minutes to the disciples, although Jesus clearly knew exactly what was going to happen and how quickly events would build. Today we're going to look at how John's account of these events differs from that of the other Gospel writers, all in service of his aim at portraying Jesus as the King of Kings, firmly in control of our futures as well as his own.

John's account of the Garden of Gethsemane is starkly different than that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all of whom include a description of the agonizing prayer of Jesus that his Father might take the cup of crucifixion away from him. Listen to these familiar words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark: "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death."¹ Mark describes Jesus as "distressed and agitated."² Luke adds this dramatic detail describing the suffering of Jesus as he wrestled with accepting his impending crucifixion: "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."³

Personally, I love these accounts and look forward to them every Lent, because they help me to relate to the suffering of Jesus on a human level. I need to at least try to relate to his pain during Lent in order to more fully grasp the joy of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. And John's account? He skips this anguished prayer entirely. Why?

Scholars are pretty sure that John was the last of the four Gospels written, so we should at least note that John was likely aware of the other Gospels and knew that they included this prayer of Jesus. More importantly though, the scene didn't serve John's goal. Remember that John, instead of relating a story of Jesus being born in a stable, gave us a theological prologue that announced that "And the Word became flesh and lived among

¹ Mark 14:34. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Mark 14:33. New Revised Standard Version

³ Luke 22:44. Ibid

us.”⁴ Instead of a demonstration of the human agony of Jesus in the Garden, John gives us a picture of King Jesus, firmly in control.

Mark describes the crowd that came to arrest Jesus as “a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders,”⁵ while John describes them as “a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees.”⁶ As Adam Hamilton correctly points out in his book, the Greek term translated as “attachment” is actually better translated as “cohort,” which usually has a specific meaning of 600 Roman soldiers!⁷ It’s not really the number that’s important here so much as the fact that they were mostly Roman soldiers. By identifying them as Romans, John is setting the scene for a contest of the kings: Jesus vs Caesar. This isn’t just an arrest by the Jewish authorities, John is signaling, but a contest between the Roman pretender, Caesar, and the true King, Jesus.

By the way, notice also in this scene that although John mentions Judas in the crowd, he doesn’t relate that he betrayed Jesus with a kiss, another omission by John in the service of portraying the divinity of Jesus.

John’s arrest is another outwardly confusing scene, with the soldiers falling to the ground when Jesus identifies himself instead of seizing him and binding him. What’s going on here? Do you remember our study of the “I Am” statements of Jesus that John uses to tie Jesus to God’s revelation to Moses in the burning bush? Here it is again, where we least expect to find it. Jesus set the soldiers up by asking the question, “Who are you looking for?”⁸ In typical fashion for John, Jesus’ reply has two meanings: I am Jesus of Nazareth, the man you’re looking for; but also, I am the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the Almighty Creator. It’s the second meaning that the soldiers appear to grasp, which is why they fell back and fell to the ground, suddenly overcome by the presence of the Divine as well as a sudden insight into the crime they were about to commit against their creator.

We’re meant to read this account and be assured that although Jesus was arrested, he remained firmly in control of the situation. By the way, notice also that instead of asking for

⁴ John 1:14. Ibid

⁵ Mark 14:43. Ibid

⁶ John 18:3. Ibid

⁷ Adam Hamilton. John: *The Gospel of Light and Life*, p. 123. Abingdon, 2015.

⁸ John 18:4. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

the cup of crucifixion to pass from himself, John records Jesus giving a rebuke to Peter, saying, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” John’s Jesus reveals no doubt about the path he’s walking to the cross.

Let’s move on to next passage, as Jesus appears before Pilate. I’m picking up the story in chapter 19 starting with the first verse. [{Read John 19:1-16 NRSV}](#)

John chooses to omit an appearance by Jesus before the Sanhedrin, most likely to highlight the conflict between Jesus and Rome rather than the Jewish religious authorities. The conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, is again, in typical John fashion, seemingly a little confused. I’m reminded a bit of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, where the two seemed to be missing each other completely. But reading deeper, we can see more sense in the questions of Pilate and the answers Jesus gives.

Adam Hamilton notes that the words king or kingdom are used 15 times in John’s account of the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion.⁹ Pilate believes this to be a trial of Jesus with the charge of insurrection against Rome- that is, claiming to be a King. But Hamilton suggests that John flips the script to put Pilate on trial, and by extension, each of us. How is that?

It's obvious that Pilate doesn't believe the charge of insurrection. He even says to the crowd, not once but twice, “I find no case against him.”¹⁰ Why then was Jesus convicted? Verse 19:8 says it all: “Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.” In other words, political pressure, fear of the crowd, and perhaps fear of Caesar led Pilate to execute Jesus.

Pilate faced and failed the test that we all must face. Will our actions and words align with what we know in our hearts to be true? If Jesus is Lord, that means all the time, everywhere, and in every circumstance. As Hamilton relates, we’re not Americans (or anything else) first and then Christians.¹¹ Our first allegiance must be to Christ. When we fail to acknowledge and demonstrate that allegiance, we take our place in the crowd,

⁹ Adam Hamilton. John: *The Gospel of Light and Life*, p. 125. Abingdon, 2015.

¹⁰ John 19:4, 6. New Revised Standard Version.

¹¹ Adam Hamilton. John: *The Gospel of Light and Life*, p. 126. Abingdon, 2015.

shouting, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”¹²

There’s so more to the story than we have time to look at today, and I encourage you to read the whole Holy Week account in John, beginning in Chapter 12 and all the way through Chapter 19. We’ll be reading from John 13 on Holy Thursday, and then the resurrection account in John 20 on Easter Sunday.

One additional detail for you to take notice of as you read is that John places the crucifixion on a day earlier than the other Gospel writers. Why? Because the Passover lamb was slaughtered on the Day of Preparation, the day before the first day of the Passover. John wants us to be clear that the King of Kings didn’t die a death of weakness, but a death of purpose and power. Just as the blood of the original Passover lambs saved the first-born Hebrews from the angel of death visited upon Egypt, the blood of the King was shed to save his people from their sins.¹³ John’s identification of Jesus with the Passover lamb is further strengthened by his mention of the hyssop branch used to offer wine to the crucified Christ,¹⁴ and you’d profit by reading Hamilton’s discussion of the hyssop branch in connection with the original Passover in Exodus 12 as well as the rites of purification in Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19.¹⁵

Knowing that Jesus is King of Kings, the divine Word, and the Bread of Life, confident of where he came from and where he was going, should we be any less horrified by the betrayal, beating, mocking, and crucifixion of Jesus? No, that’s not John’s point. Rather, it’s that in the face of a world that rejected and mistreated him, Jesus was still victorious, and that is reason for us to have great hope. Even his final words from the cross, “It is finished,” were an emphatic affirmation that he had fully accomplished his mission to bring life to those who would believe in him.

As we count down the days until Easter Sunday, I invite you back to a question I asked you on the first Sunday of Lent. How fully have you affirmed your choice to abide in Jesus? It’s still not too late to make that decision. Holy Week is a great time to affirm or

¹² John 19:6. New Revised Standard Version

¹³ Adam Hamilton. *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*, pp. 129-130. Abingdon, 2015.

¹⁴ John 19:29.

¹⁵ Adam Hamilton. *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*, pp. 132-133. Abingdon, 2015.

reaffirm your faith in Jesus, so that when Jesus rises from the tomb on Easter morning, you can share in the joy of rising with him.

Please take some time now to reflect on your upcoming journey through Holy Week. How will you make the most of these seven days to abide in Jesus more fully, your Lord of Lords and King of Kings?



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