

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Seeing Jesus – John 13-17 – Preparation

Imagine for a moment... If John's gospel was a film, and we were watching it at the cinema or on TV, the first half of the movie would move quite fast. We would start with creation itself, when the Word was with God and was God, and through whom God made all things. We would be taken to the Word becoming a human being and living among us in the person of Jesus, and then we would travel through three years of ministry, of signs and teaching. The film would have a fair amount of movement and action and changes of scene. But then, just over half way through, the pace would change considerably, and the second half of the film would move much more slowly than the first half, and would be devoted to just *one week* of the main character, the week leading up to his death. In fact, most of the second half would cover just *a single twenty-four hour day* in the life of the main character. That would be the film director's way of saying that *this* is what really matters; *this* is what the story is really all about; *everything* in the story has been leading up to *this* point. And the change of pace and the emphasis placed on the events would show us that we should take special notice of what's going on.

We've been looking at Jesus in the gospel, focusing particularly on those parts where John records *signs* of Jesus – Jesus turning water into wine (2:1-11), healing the official's son (4:46-54) and the lame man (5:1-15), feeding the 5,000 (6:1-15), healing the man born blind (9:1-7), and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44). No wonder the first part of John's Gospel, chapters 1-12, is sometimes called 'The Book of Signs'! And, as John tells us, he's recorded these signs so that readers will be able to see them and believe in Jesus (20:30-31).

Now, however, we're at the hinge in the gospel where everything slows down – chapter 13. And if chapters 1-12 are sometimes called 'The

Book of Signs', chapters 13-21 are sometimes called 'The Book of Glory', for it is in Jesus' death and resurrection that we see the glory of God supremely revealed. Here, then, we move from chapters 13-17 (Preparation) to chapters 19-20 (Crucifixion), to chapters 20-21 (Resurrection).

The first verse of chapter 13 introduces the whole section, and shows us that John clearly has Jesus' death in view. We know that for a number of reasons:

- First, it was 'just before Passover' (13:1a). We've noticed that John shows an interest in the Jewish festivals; here it's Passover. Passover reminded the people of God's deliverance of them out of Egypt centuries earlier, recorded in Exodus 12, when the people daubed their door frames with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, and the angel of the Lord *passed over* their house and spared them from judgment. John is applying the Passover to Jesus. In the very first chapter, we read that Jesus is the 'lamb of God' who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 36). In chapter 2, in Jerusalem at Passover, Jesus speaks of the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days – referring not to bricks and mortar but to his own body (2:18-22). No longer will people need the temple and its sacrifices to get right with God; Jesus' death and resurrection will bring about a new way for people to get right with God. In chapter 6, Jesus feeds the crowds at Passover time, and goes on to speak about feeding them his body and blood, so that through his death they might have life. And now John tells us for a third time in the gospel that it was Passover. Like a good detective novel, what looks like an irrelevant detail is actually a vital clue to unlocking the piece as a whole. It was Passover.

But the next sentence helps us further...

- Jesus' time has come (13:1b). It is time for Jesus to go to the Father. The language of

'going to the Father' crops up a few times in the chapters that follow; it's one way of speaking about Jesus' death and resurrection, the means by which he will go to the Father. So far in the gospel, there have been a few mentions of Jesus' 'time', or 'hour'. But it has been in the *future*; Jesus tells his mother in 2:4, 'My time has *not yet* come' (cf. 7:30; 8:20). But now it *has* come, and the hour is another way of referring to Jesus' *death*.

And, in case we're still not certain, John makes it clear in the third sentence...

- He loves his disciples, and now shows them his love to the uttermost (13:1c). The careful reader of John might remember chapter 10, where we're told that the Good Shepherd *loves* the sheep and lays down his life for them (10:11-18).

So, John invites us to read *everything* that follows in the light of Jesus' death. The day is just before Passover, and Jesus will be put to death as the Passover lamb of God whose blood will be shed on behalf of God's people to save them from judgment and bring about a new liberation from bondage. Jesus' time has now come, his hour of glory has arrived. Now he will show just how much he loves those who belong to him. And that's all in verse 1!!

So, what do we learn about Jesus from these chapters?

1. Jesus: Servant-King (John 13)

What we learn about Jesus from chapter 13 is that he is the servant-king. In fact, John has already told us in chapter 12 that when Jesus enters Jerusalem, he's proclaimed as the King of Israel (12:13). But he rides on a *donkey*, showing that he comes as a particular kind of king, not one who fights with a sword in his hand, but one who fights with a cross on his back. And chapter 13 is of a piece with that: the first verse means that however else we understand the footwashing, we understand its significance in the light of Jesus' death.

Washing one's feet before sitting down to a meal was common practice – nothing unusual in that. What was unusual in this incident was *who* did it. Normally guests would use basins

of water and towels provided by their hosts to wash their own feet when they entered the home. Or it would be the job of the most menial servant. No one peer would wash the feet of another. Some rabbis even said that owners couldn't demean Jewish slaves by requiring them to wash other people's feet; it was a job for Gentile slaves, or women. Jesus behaves not just like a slave, but *lower* than a slave. He lays down the status of a free, Jewish male, and takes on the status of the lowest slave, to do something which places him on the underbelly of life.

These are deliberate acts on the part of Jesus, and John uses the same verb for the *laying aside* of Jesus' garments that he uses earlier in chapter 10 when he speaks of Jesus *laying down* his life for the sheep (10:11, 15, 17). It's another way of saying that what is going on here is Jesus acting out what he will do for them in his death. He is the servant-king. He shows that in his entry into Jerusalem, and he shows it as he washes his disciples' feet – showing in a dramatic way that he will bring cleansing by laying down his own life, performing an act of service which points to the *supreme* act of service he will undergo on the cross.

Jesus says that he gives the disciples a pattern to follow (13:12-17). And it's no surprise when, later in the chapter, Jesus calls us love one another (13:34-35). Again there is a pattern to follow – 'as I have loved you'. On the basis of his own sacrifice, shown so beautifully and lovingly in the footwashing, Jesus calls us to serve one another and love one another – to allow his death to inform our lifestyle, to be servants of the servant-king.

2. Jesus: Spirit-Giver (John 14-16)

And then we come to chapters 14-16, where it becomes clear that Jesus is the one who gives the Spirit. These chapters are sometimes called the 'Farewell Discourse', because it's here that Jesus says farewell to his disciples. These are his parting words. This is what's on his heart as he faces the cross. People's final words are often seen as very important. If we knew we had only a certain time left to live – say five minutes or even five days – that would certainly focus the mind in terms of what we

would say to people, to friends and relatives. We wouldn't want to waste words; we'd want our words to express our heart and mind. What's on Jesus' heart and mind?

The first thing Jesus wants to do is to comfort his disciples; he is concerned about their anxiety and distress. That's how the section begins (14:1), and it's how the section ends (16:33). That's the first and last thing on Jesus' mind – to comfort and reassure the disciples. One of the ways Jesus comforts them is to explain that he is going to the Father, to prepare a place for them (14:2-3, 28; 16:5-7a, 28). And he tells them how he expects them to behave while he is gone: to keep his words (14:15, 21, 24; 15:10), to bear fruit (15:2), to remain in him (15:4, 9), to love one another (15:12). He also warns them about the dangers that lie ahead; just as the world has hated Jesus so it will hate the disciples (15:18-21; 16:1-4).

But Jesus isn't going to be around to help. So, will they be able to manage without him? Left to themselves, the disciples would fail and fall, but they will not be left to themselves. Jesus is leaving, but will send another just like him (14:15-18). He gives his disciples the Spirit. The Spirit mediates the presence of Jesus to us. And that's crucially significant.

In fact, throughout these chapters Jesus says it's *better* that he's with us in his Spirit than in his body (e.g. 16:5-7). Jesus' physical departure would bring another powerful and personal presence. He would send the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was part of God's plan of salvation. Only after Jesus had died on the cross, and risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven, could the Spirit be sent to the disciples.

There are two main aspects of the work of the Spirit which are picked up in these chapters – his witness, directed towards the world (15:26-27; 16:7-11); and his instruction, directed towards the disciples (14:26; 16:12-15). But in each case, the main focus is on Christ. The Spirit witnesses to the world on behalf of Jesus. And the Spirit instructs the disciples about Jesus. This same Spirit is the one who is given by Jesus to his people today. He is the one who helps us in our engagement with the

world; and he is the one who illumines the significance of Christ for us.

3. Jesus: Son of God (John 17)

And so we come to chapter 17. We've seen Jesus as the servant-king, as the Spirit-giver, and here we see him as the *Son*. If chapter 13 speaks about the significance of Jesus' death in a *symbolic action*, and chapters 14-16 speak about the significance of Jesus' death in a *discourse* or *monologue*, chapter 17 speaks about the significance of Jesus' death in a *prayer* – a prayer from Jesus' own lips, from Son to Father.

Jesus looks towards heaven and prays (17:1a). The prayer seals all he has said to the disciples, giving the point to all the instruction in the previous chapters. He begins by praying for his glorification (17:1b-5), a glorification which involves the cross. Jesus also prays for protection for his disciples (17:6-19). The main request comes in 17:11 – 'Protect them by the power of your name.' And he prays for unity for all believers (17:20-26) – that the church will be one, as Jesus and the Father are one (17:20-21a).

And, once again, we understand it best when we remember that it's prayed in the shadow of the cross. We best understand Jesus as *servant* in the light of his death, which the footwashing symbolises. We best understand what it means for Jesus to give the Spirit to his disciples and to us when we understand that giving in the light of his death, his going to the Father. And we best understand Jesus as *Son*, and his prayer to his Father, in the light of the death he is about to die.

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John would show us Jesus: see and know Jesus as the servant-king; see and know Jesus as the Spirit-giver; see and know Jesus as the Son of God. See and know Jesus supremely in his death – the death that was rightly yours and mine. Give thanks for him, for all that he is for us – at Easter time and at every time. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 1 April 2007