

GOOD FRIDAY

WE CONTEMPLATED A LOVE STRONGER THAN DEATH



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THE TEXT BELOW IS THE TRANSCRIPTION OF THE VIDEO COMMENTARY BY FR. FERNANDO ARMELLINI

Introduction

The dramatic agony on the cross has often led the preachers of the past to insist excessively on the gory aspects of Jesus' passion. From this preaching, images, popular representations, and some devotions, which aggravates the violence of the blows, of the scourging, the falls under the weight of the cross, the sadism of the exasperated soldiers, are derived.

This type of approach to the Gospel texts is a disservice to the understanding of the Easter events. Indeed, it blurs the meaning. The Gospels are moving in a completely different perspective. They are very sober in telling the horrendous torments inflicted on Jesus. Their goal is not to impress or move the readers, but to make them understand the immensity of God's love revealed in Christ. They do not linger on the sufferings because the passion they present is not that of suffering, but the passion of love. They want to show us that:

*"For love is strong as death
its jealousy lasting as the power of death
it burns like a blazing fire
it blazes like a mighty flame.
No flood can extinguish love
nor river submerge it.
If a man were to buy love
with all the wealth of his house*

contempt is all he would purchase” (Song 8:6-7).

In presenting the gory aspects of the passion, John is the soberest of all the evangelists. He skips all the humiliating details such as beatings on the head and the spitting. He refers only to the flagellation and the slaps. His story—what today’s liturgy makes us meditate—does not narrate the journey of Jesus to death, but to glory.

With Christ on the cross, we are made to understand where sin leads to: it renders a person unrecognizable. But immediately John has us contemplate God’s response to sin: the gift of his Spirit and the resurrection of the Holy and Just One.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

Lord, make me understand how great is your passion of love.



First Reading: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

To usher us in the culminating moments of Jesus’ life, today we are offered one of the most famous texts of the Old Testament: the fourth song of the Servant of the Lord. Servant of God in the Bible is an honorific title reserved for eminent men like Moses and David (Ex 14:31; Ps 89:21) and, above all, for an anonymous character who appears in the book of Isaiah called the Servant of the Lord.

He is an enigmatic figure. The prophet tells foremost of his vocation. He was called to be the light, first of Israel and, later, of all peoples. Then he recalls his commitment in carrying out the mission entrusted to him by God, his disappointment at the lack of understanding and failure, and finally the tragic end of his life. He was sentenced to an ignominious death.

After his death, a disturbing question surfaced in the heart of the disciples: was he or was he not the messenger of God? If he was innocent, why did God want him to suffer? Why didn’t he intervene to protect him?

A disciple who, at length and in silence, reflected on the tragic story of the teacher responds calmly, in the fourth and final act of the drama: He was innocent and in his favor, God performed an unprecedented miracle. This disciple’s meditation is reported in the central part of the reading (Is 53:1-11a). He is introduced (Is 52:13-15) and completed (Is 53:11b-12) by the words of the Lord who delivers his judgment on events involving his faithful Servant.

God, from the beginning, states that contrary to all appearances, his Servant will succeed (v. 13). It is true that his appearance is disfigured to the point that whoever approaches him remains scared because he does not even appear as a man (v. 14). Yet it happened—and one day everyone will experience it for themselves—an unheard fact, so extraordinary as to leave the same rulers of the world astonished (v. 15).

What miracle? It is not told. But today, re-reading this text in the light of Easter, we are able to recognize unmistakably the Servant of the Lord—as did the early Christians (Acts 8:30-35)—the figure of Jesus.

At this point, the moving meditation of a disciple begins (Is 52:1-11a). He speaks on behalf of all those who—like him—have lived next to the Servant and they were witnesses to his integrity.

One asks, *“Who can believe our announcement?”* (v. 1). We have seen a spectacular enterprise accomplished by the arm of the Lord; we saw a prodigy so extraordinary that to many will seem incredible. Even for us—one assures—it was not easy to understand God’s intervention in the history of his faithful Servant. Only later, in reflection and in silence, we were able to grasp the meaning of what had happened. Now we will continue to proclaim what we have seen, though perhaps none or only a very few will believe in our proclamation.

Here is his story.

It blossomed like a sapling in a dry land (v. 2). Thus begins the story of the Servant’s life. He has no name, his place of origin and ancestors are unknown. He belongs to humanity, a citizen of the world, a world that appears like a lifeless desert. Then he grew up and immediately pain and humiliation were his companions (vv. 2-3). He had nothing attractive in his appearance nor beauty—nothing that attracts the admiration of people, riches, power, and success—was despised because, according to human criteria, he was of no account. Because of his failure, he was even considered as one punished by God, one from whom it is good to stay away. Yet his pain that seemed absurd made sense: His wounds have healed us.

His suffering has opened our eyes (vv. 4-5), showing us to what vileness sin brings. His pains have made us realize how foolish the paths we have followed and led us to wisdom (v. 6). They have transmitted to us a message that will change the world, a truth ignored by the friends of Job and by all the wisdom of the East: sin is committed not by those who suffer, but by those who make others suffer; and the liberation of one who, suffering a wrongdoing, does not respond by returning evil.

The new world is not born of those who—like Lamech—respond to injustice with terrifying reprisals, but by those who—like Abel and the Servant—break up with love the vicious cycle of evil, leaving him to unload it on himself.

The Servant gave this message, not with words, but with his life, with his grief: *“Oppressed, he resisted, did not open his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter, like a dumb sheep before one who shears him, he opened not his mouth”* (v. 7).

Peter understood very well the message of this poem. Addressing the servants who often were subjected to humiliation by their masters, he exhorted them thus: *“Christ who suffered for you, leaving you an example that you may follow in his way. He did no wrong and there was no deceit in his mouth. He did not return insult for insult and, when suffering, he did not curse but put himself in the hands of God who judges justly. He went to the cross bearing our sins in his own body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live an upright life. For by his wounds you have been healed. You were like stray sheep, but you have come back to the Shepherd and guardian of your souls”* (1 P 2:21-25).

After having spoken of the Servant’s pain, the disciple tells how he got to his conviction: *“With violence and without trial he was taken away”* (v. 8). The injustice was committed by people, not by God; they were the ones who pronounced the unjust sentence. They killed him, then *“made his tomb with the wicked, put him in the graveyard of the oppressors”* (v. 9a).

They threw his remains in the mass grave of the executed, convinced that they have ended forever his story and have erased his memory from the earth. On his grave, not a plaque with the inscription was placed and his name has been forgotten. His disciple, however, has left

us, almost like an epitaph, a solemn statement: *“He had done no violence nor spoken in deceit”* (v. 9b). This recognition does him justice and honors him more than any monument.

The opponents of the Servant have decided to get rid not only of him but also his posterity. They have resorted to crime in order to make his message and his proposal of life disappear.

Is everything therefore over? In the last part of his reflection (vv. 10-11a), the disciple reveals the mysterious plan of God: the silent passion of the Servant will realize the project of salvation of the Lord. His name will not only be canceled but he will have an endless posterity.

The reading ends (vv. 11b-12) with the Lord’s judgment that confirms what was said by the disciple. The passion of the Servant will introduce God’s justice to the world and all shall know the Lord, that is, they will welcome as a model of man what they saw embodied in the Servant.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Ben Sirach recommended to the disciple: *“Son ... accept all that happens to you, be patient when you are humbled, for as gold is tested in the fire so those acceptable to God are tested in the crucible of humiliation”* (Sir 2:1,4-5). In the Bible there is no mention of the wicked tempted by God; temptation is a privilege reserved for the just because it is through it that their loyalty is stimulated to growth.

Being really man and being righteous, Jesus could not be saved from temptation. In fact, the Synoptic Gospels tell us that, at the beginning of his public life, he was tested by Satan. Mark reports this fact in just two verses. Luke and Matthew further develop the theme and, to make the readers understand what the temptations that accompanied Jesus throughout his life were, they introduce three parables that are images of the temptations of power, of having, and of showing-off, which we also ought to confront.

The author of the reading’s passage takes up the argument and indicates what is the meaning of the fact that Jesus was tempted for our lives. Having been tried in all things like us, he is able to understand our weaknesses. Between him and us, there is only one difference: while we often are unfaithful to God, he had never given in to temptation; he was never even touched by sin.

The fact that he, too, has passed through our own vicissitudes, makes us feel very close to him, for he is sensitive to our problems and understanding of our mistakes.

The toughest test he has faced was in Gethsemane and on the cross. The evangelist Mark reports that, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus *“began to feel dismay and anguish”* of the tragedy that was about to involve him and this frightened him (Mk 13:33). He was upset because, at the end of his life, he verified the failure of his work: both the people and his disciples had not adhered to his proposal. He has certainly asked himself whether it made sense that his existence, dedicated to building a new world, would end that way. What use could his death have?



Here is the temptation, the doubt that failure and defeat would not be of help to change the world. Was it worth sacrificing his life or was it better to run away as at other times he had to do (Jn 8:39; 11:54)? Finally, the last temptation, the one that shines from the cry on the cross: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mk 15:34).

In the second part of the reading (Heb 5:7-9) another consoling truth for us is communicated: from the things that he suffered, Jesus learned how hard it is to obey the Father.

We can have recourse to him with confidence, certain that if we pray with him and if we accept his Spirit, we will not be exempted from fatigue and trials, but we will have his strength to overcome them.



Gospel: John 18:1–19:42

All the four evangelists devote two chapters to the story of the passion and death of Jesus. They refer to the same dramatic events and, although their versions of the facts are not identical and cannot be put together into one perfectly consistent story from the historical point of view, they essentially agree.

The differences come from the particular sensitivity of each evangelist, for which some episodes are narrated by one and ignored by others; some details left out by the Synoptics are instead developed by John.

The goal of the evangelists was not to keep a written report, minutes, a chronicle of the facts, that are exact in every detail, but to nourish the faith of the believers and to enlighten them about the significance of the events during Easter.

The absurd death of Jesus caught the disciples unprepared. It had aroused in them disturbing questions, the same ones we ask ourselves today: will it be wise to trust a loser, who was betrayed and denied by his own friends? Does it make sense to take a man as a model that legitimate religious authorities have deemed a blasphemer, and that the Roman procurator sentenced to execution as a criminal? Do we admit that he was a persecuted just man, but then why didn't God intervene to defend him?

With the passion narrative, John, more than giving us information on how the events took place, wants to help us understand the meaning of what had happened.

Before going into the details of the message that this evangelist intends to communicate, it is necessary to preface a reflection on the reasons why Jesus was executed. To those who have internalized some fairly superficial image of his person, his death can only be completely absurd. How can one who cures the sick, embraces and caresses the children, loves the poor and became a servant of all be killed?

Must his death then be attributed to a mysterious will of the Father who, in order to forgive man's sin, needed to see the blood of the righteous? This kind of explanation cannot even be considered. Why, then, was Jesus crucified? In that sense, did he give his life for us? From which bondage has he delivered us by giving himself in the hands of men?

The reason for the hostility that has been unleashed against him is clearly indicated by John from the first page of his Gospel: Jesus was the light, *“the light that shines in the*

darkness, light that darkness could not overcome” (Jn 1:4-5). “He was the true light that enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9), “but people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (Jn 3:19).

Some rays of this light that illuminated the night of the world have been particularly intense and provocative. They have enlightened the hearts of the simple people showering them with joy and hope, but they annoyed those who preferred to act in darkness.

Four of these rays appeared particularly unbearable to the holders of religious and political power.

The first was the face of God shown by Jesus.

The spiritual leaders of Israel put aside the sweet images of God, husband and father, preached by the prophets, and had educated the people to believe in a legislative and strict judging God, ready to unleash reprisals and retaliation against those who transgress his commands.

The God preached by Jesus is the Father and is good, just good. We turn to him with the simplicity and confidence of a child, because he reserves the same tenderness to whoever accepts his word and whoever rejects it (Mt 5:45). He feeds the birds of heaven and clothes the lilies of the field (Mt 6:25-31), counts the hairs of our head and knows our needs before asking him (Mt 6: 8). No one, not even the worst sinner, may fear Him. He *“so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; instead, through him, the world is to be saved”* (Jn 3:16-17).



Nothing is more subversive to the mentality of the scribes and Pharisees who have built a God in their own image, a God who does not want to have anything to do with tax collectors and sinners. For these spiritual leaders, Jesus is a fool and a heretic (Jn 8:48), a blasphemer to be stoned (Jn 8:59; 10:31,39), be taken away, at the earliest possible time, because he is a danger to the faith handed down by the fathers and leads the simple people astray.

A second new ray of light is projected on false religion.

There is a religious practice that is an expression of true faith and this communicates serenity and peace. There is a religion that is just a set of external practices, invented by people to nourish, perhaps unconsciously, the illusion of an authentic relationship with the Lord. This kind of religion tires and presses; it is an unbearable and insupportable yoke (Mt 11:28-30). It is a religion that reduces the relationship with God to a scrupulous observance of rituals and always ends up being reduced to a cult and hypocritical formalism.

Jesus does not correct this religion. He does not merely denounce the abuses. In the heart, he rejects it in the name of his union with God. On several occasions, he quotes Isaiah’s phrase that is particularly dear to him: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, for what they teach are only human rules”* (Mk 7:7). He observes the Sabbath but believes man is superior to the Sabbath.

The apex of this rejection is the dramatic expulsion of the temple’s merchants. John places it at the beginning of his Gospel (Jn 2:13-22) because it sums up the rejection of ritual practices that are not the expressions of a life of love. The only acceptable worship to God is indeed that which is done *“in spirit and truth.”*

This second ray of light has annoyed those who preferred darkness to light. From refusal they passed on to hostility and finally took the decision to eliminate Jesus because he disturbed the orderly unfolding of their religious practices: *"It is better to have one man die for the people"*—Caiaphas, the high priest who presided over the solemn liturgies the temple, exclaimed (Jn 11:50).



A third ray was projected on people.

What is the model of man, the ideal of a self-realized person in our society? In Jesus' time, successful men were members of the Sanhedrin, the priests of the temple, the rabbis who loved *"walking around in long robes and being greeted in the marketplace, and who like to occupy reserved seats in the synagogue and the first places at feasts"* (Mk 12:38-39). Worthy of honor were Philip and Antipas, the two sons of Herod the Great, who lived in splendid palaces and were flattered by their subjects.

For Jesus to aim at this success and to get it is not a success, but a failure. One day he asks the Jews *"As long as you seek praise from one another, instead of seeking the glory which comes from the only God, how can you believe?"* (Jn 5:44).

Jesus also expects to be "glorified" and prays: *"Father, give me, in your presence, the same glory I had with you before the world began"* (Jn 17:5). But the glorious day that he expected is not the one in which, mounting a donkey, he receives applause at his entrance into the holy city, but that of Calvary. There, lifted up on the cross, he is finally able to show how far the immense love of the Father to man reaches. *"Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it produces much fruit. Those who love their life destroy it, and those who despise their life in this world keep it for everlasting life"* (Jn 12:24-25).

It is the reversal of the values of this world. For Jesus, the model of man is not the one who wins, but who loses; not who dominates, but who serves; not those who think of their own interests, but those who sacrifice themselves for others.

This third ray of light was also unacceptable for those who—like one day, with a touch of irony, Jesus observe—*"they preferred the favorable opinion of people, rather than God's approval"* (Jn 12:43).

The fourth ray of light was projected on society.

We live in a competitive society. Since childhood, we assimilate the belief that, if we do not compete to emerge, we risk losing everything. The eminent one dominates the others and draws more attention to oneself.

What ray of light does Jesus cast on a society based on these principles of life? One day he sits down, takes *"a child and placed him in the middle and embracing him he said to the Twelve: 'Whoever welcomes a child such as this in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the One who sent me'"* (Mk 9:36-37). In Jesus' time, the



children were the symbol of those who do not count, those who have no value, and those totally dependent on others. They do not produce anything; they only consume and need everything.

In the new world, these people go from the periphery to the center. They will be offered the place of honor. The community of Jesus “embraces” the poor and the “children” who need to be assisted in everything and may impede the orderly lives of others. He “embraces” them not in the sense that he passively accepts their whims and encourages laziness, but because he wants to help them grow and strive to become adults, who can be self-sufficient, capable of planning and building their lives.



If Jesus’ death was caused by the liberating light he introduced into the world, then—we wonder—could it have been avoided? Yes, of course. If he had moved away from Jerusalem, as he had done on other occasions (Jn 11:54; 7:1; Mt 12:15-16), if he had returned to Nazareth to work as a carpenter, leaving the world to continue as before, there is no doubt they would have left him in peace.

Jesus has not sought his death on the cross, but to avoid it he would have to put off the light he had turned on and deny all his proposals. He would have to join the ranks, adapt to the current mentality, resign himself to the triumph of evil, and abandon humankind forever in the hands of “the prince of this world.”

He was tempted to do it, and if he had agreed to the suggestions of the evil one, he would not have ended on the cross and would be successful. He would have obtained those “kingdoms of this world” that, from the beginning, Satan had promised. But it would be the failure of his mission.

What has been said until now helps us understand the theological message of the Gospel being proposed on this Good Friday.

John, in his Gospel, portrays a figure of Jesus quite different from that of the other evangelists. The difference is reflected in the accounts of the Passion.

There, one notices from the first scene the arrest in Gethsemane (Jn 18:1-11). The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus prostrated on the ground, seized by “fear and anguish,” “sorrowful unto death,” in need of his disciples’ moral support. He begged them to stay close, to watch and to pray with him. John does not stress any of these very human emotions of Jesus. He does not speak of the agony, his inner struggle, the prayer addressed to the Father to spare him “the cup.” He presents Jesus resolute and aware of everything. He is not overwhelmed by the events, but is able to guide them in a sovereign way. The soldiers were



not the ones who captured him. He gives himself spontaneously, repeating, twice: “I am.” No one takes away his life, it is he who, serenely, comes forward and gives it (Jn 10:17-18).

In front of him, the evil ones who, as always, move and act in the dark of the night, retreat and fall (Jn 19:16). The scene must be read and understood in the light of the Scriptures. “I am” in the Bible introduces a manifestation of God. When the Lord comes, the evil forces are forced to retreat. They panic and roll on the ground.

The passage is a Midrash the evangelist uses to convey a precious theological message. He invites to read the capture of Jesus and the events of his passion in the light of the Psalms: *“When the wicked rush at me to devour my flesh, it is my foes who stumble, my enemies fall”* (Ps 9:4).

With this reference to the Scriptures John wants to inspire courage and hope in those who are involved in the dramatic conflict between the light of the sky and the night of the world, and fear of being overwhelmed by evil forces. He invites them not to lose heart because the kingdom of darkness has on his side the power of the weapons, but they are no match against the light of Christ. Even if the ranks of the evil seem to triumph, actually they are in disarray, his warriors *“are groping in darkness, without light and stagger like drunks”* (Job 12:25).



The Synoptic Gospels relate that, after his capture, Jesus was brought into the house of the high priest Caiaphas. There, during the night, they gathered the elders and scribes to finalize an indictment to be brought before the governor, Pontius Pilate. John gives a slightly different version of the facts. He says that the interrogation took place overnight in front of Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas (Jn 18:12-24).

Why does he put in the first place this old and seemingly innocuous man? Annas was the high priest for ten years—from 6 to 15 A.D.—but, even after he was deposed by the Roman prefect, he remained powerful. After him, the coveted and prestigious office continued to be kept in his family for another fifty years; four (maybe five) of his children, a son, and a nephew succeeded him as high priests.

It was the patriarch of the family who controlled all the “religious” activities of the temple. It was he who controlled and managed the offerings of the pilgrims, the gains of the money changers, the businesses of oxen, lambs and doves for sacrifices, and pocketed the money that circulated under the table for the award of contracts ...

The expulsion of the vendors by Jesus was more than a sacrilegious provocation; it was an attack on the enormous economic interests of Annas’ family. He could not tolerate any longer that the son of a Galilean carpenter dared to accuse him of having reduced the temple of the Lord to a “den of thieves.”

Annas is the most sinister figure in the Gospels. It was he who headed all the plots of the trial against Jesus. This is why John presents him as the symbol of evil forces, as the personification of those who prefer darkness to light, those who are determined to perpetuate by all means, even with crime, their power based on intrigue, injustice, and lies. Jesus confronts him without fear. When asked for clarification on his doctrinal positions, he replies calmly: *“Why then do you question me? Ask those who heard me, they know what I said”* (Jn 18:21).



Annas is the prototype of those who can commit violence without getting their hands dirty. He brought up his servants to understand, even without his orders, when and how they should intervene to put an end to any hint of rebellion against the master. It is one of these servants who slaps Jesus. The reaction of the Master is calm, but firm: *“If I have spoken wrongly, point it out, but if I have spoken rightly why do you strike me?”* (Jn 18:23).

Like other characters in the Gospel of John, this servant too has taken on a symbolic value. He represents those who, most often through ignorance or naivety, but often also of interest, take the side of the strongest. It is easy to be enslaved by those who can emerge and prevail—no matter how and by what means. One is fascinated by those who succeed, but without realizing it, ends up by giving to them one's freedom and willing to do anything to get his approval and gratitude.



John invites everyone to reflect on the personality of this servant, because to please the powerful of this world and convinced of defending the religion, one can end up slapping Christ and denying his word.

In the passion narrative, John devotes ample space to the trial before Pilate—twice more than Mark's— (Jn 18:28–19:16).

Reading the passage, the insistence of the evangelist on the movements of the Roman procurator, his continual entry and exit from the praetorium, is surprising. This coming and going had a religious motivation—the Jews could not enter the house of a heathen because they would be contaminated—but John uses it to compose a scene in which the theme of the kingship of Jesus is introduced.

If we subdivide the text according to the movements of the governor, we are faced with seven very well laid out scenes (Jn 18:29-32; 18:33-38a; 18:38b-40; 19:1-3; 19:4-7; 19:8-11; 19:12-16). In them, in addition to the protagonist—Jesus—many characters move—Pilate, the Jews, the soldiers, Barabbas—who are real, but that, in the evangelist's intention, they are also symbols of different ways to position oneself in front of the kingship of Christ.

Pilate represents the kingship of this world, the opposite of that of Jesus. It is the image of one whose highest values are achievement and maintenance of power, not justice and truth. It is he who believes that everything must be sacrificed for the sake of power and thinks that even the innocent may be put to death if the reason of the state requires it.

The Jews are the icon of those believers that distort the kingship of Christ, adapting it to their narrow criteria. They are observant of religious practices but unable to give up the image of God they have in mind. At the foot of the cross, they got angry at the inscription of Pilate proclaiming the universal kingship of Jesus. They want to continue to believe in the God who overcomes by force, not by love; they do not accept a humiliated and defeated king.

The soldiers of the Praetorian Guard are poor men. They are more victims than perpetrators. Uprooted from their land, away from their families, often humiliated by their superiors, they have lost all human feelings and unleash their rage over those who are weaker than them. They are the image of one who has been brought up to believe only in the powerful, to respect the winners and to mock the losers. They represent those who take, without asking questions, the side of power and are willing to also perform unfair orders.



Barabbas—which means son of an unknown father—was the name given to the children of no one. He is a criminal, a true son of the *“father—the evil one—who was a murderer from the beginning”* of the world (Jn 8:44). He represents all the bandits of history, all those who committed violence and bloodshed. People have often considered them heroes and have always preferred them over the weak.

After observing the characters, we consider the two significant indications of time that appear in the passage.

The first is located in the onset: It was dawn (Jn 18:28). The new day has dawned, the night has ended on which the evangelist drew attention when Judas left the Upper Room, “*as soon as he had eaten the bread. It was night*” (Jn 13: 30).

In the darkness of this night various characters moved: Judas who, with the detachment of soldiers equipped with lanterns, torches and weapons, went to the garden and handed Jesus; Malchus, the servant whom Peter cut his right ear off; Annas and his son Caiaphas, puppets in the hands of the “Prince of Darkness” (Jn 12:35-36) and then again Peter who denied the Master. At last, the darkness of this night, in which the evil one has celebrated its triumph, is dissolving and the light begins to prevail.



The second indication of time—it was around noon—is recognized in the climax of the process (Jn 19:14). It will be when the sun will shine on the world in all its splendor that Pilate proclaims: “*Behold your King.*”

We are thus introduced into the theme of the kingship of Jesus around which revolve all seven scenes. In the ancient Middle East the task of the king was to ensure that his people enjoyed freedom and peace. The monarchical experience of Israel was, however, disastrous. For four and a half centuries, incapable and wicked rulers sat on the throne of Jerusalem. Moved with pity, the Lord announced, through the prophets, that one day he himself would come to rule his people. How? The way that God fulfills his promises is always surprising; it never corresponds to human expectations.

John has already mentioned the kingship of Jesus in the first part of his Gospel (Jn 1:49; 6:15; 12:13,15), now, in chapters 18–19, he mentions the word “king” 12 times.

The climax is reached in two scenes, in the middle (Jn 19:1-3) and in the last (Jn 19:12-16). In the first scene, we have a parody of the kingship of this world. The soldiers amuse themselves by proclaiming Jesus king scornfully.

John, so restrained in telling the sufferings of Jesus, gives emphasis instead to all the elements that characterize the enthronement of an emperor: the crown (of thorns), the purple robe, the cheers. Jesus who reacted to the slap of Annas’ servant does not oppose this travesty. He accepts it because it demolishes the image of a strong and triumphant Davidic messiah that people expected. He ridicules all ambitions, delusions of grandeur, the frenzy for power, the aspiration to honorary titles and the bows, and the race for the first places. The true king is now plain to all, the successful man according to God’s criteria: he is the one who gives his life for love.

The final scene (Jn 19:12-16) is introduced with great solemnity. Pilate leads Jesus out, makes him sit on an elevated grandstand and proclaims: “Here is your King.” No one can understand the scope of the event. Yet it is with these words that the representative of the

kingdoms of this world, without realizing it, handed over the power, and acknowledged Jesus as the new king.

For the Jews (we do not forget who they represent!) the proposal of the Roman procurator is so absurd that they take it as a provocation. They do not want this kind of king; he disappoints all expectations and is an insult to common sense: *“Away, away, crucify him!”*—they shout.

According to human criteria, Jesus is a failure. In God’s plan, however, his defeat dispels the darkness that overshadowed the world and allowed the perpetuation of all forms of injustice and dehumanization.

Jesus is there, in silence. He does not add a word because he has already explained everything. He expects each one to speak, to make one’s choice. One can bet on the kingship of this world or commit one’s life with him in the building of the kingdom after God’s own heart.

The success or failure of life depends on this decision. In John, the description of the way towards the place of execution is very short: *“Jesus, bearing his own cross went out of the city to what is called the Place of Skull”* (Jn 19:17). That’s all. There are no women who weep for him or the man from Cyrene who helps him to carry the cross. It is he himself who decided to go to the goal where he will manifest his “glory.”

In the story of the crucifixion (Jn 19:18-37), John introduces some scenes and some details ignored by the other evangelists.

The first is the inscription on the cross. It served to explain to the passersby the motive of his condemnation. While the Synoptics only give it a quick stress, John puts on it a strong emphasis (Jn 19:19-22). He recalls that it was composed and placed by Pilate and it was written in Hebrew (the sacred language of Israel), Latin (the language of the rulers of the world) and Greek (the language spoken throughout the empire).

The representative of Emperor Tiberius solemnly and officially confirmed again the kingship of Jesus and the new way of being king. All the people had to know that a new royalty was introduced in the world. The Jews (of yesterday and today) reject it, but it will continue to be proclaimed from the cross until the end of time. It is a final proposal, irrevocable, and cannot be changed.

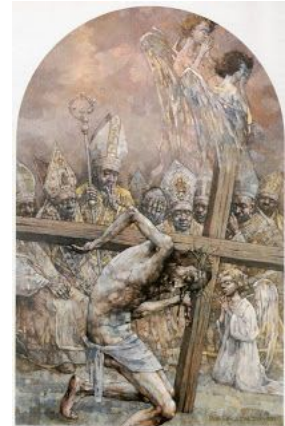
Unknowingly, Pilate was a prophet.

After the installation of the new king on his throne of glory—the cross—what happens? Unlike the other evangelists, John does not record the insults hurled against Jesus by the



passersby, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. There is a reason: this scandalous king for the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23) can be accepted or rejected, but no one, until the end of time, will ever ignore or make fun of him.

The division of the garments (Jn 19:23-24) is also narrated in the Synoptics, but only John precisely states that they were divided into four parts; only he speaks of the draw of the tunic woven in one piece and explicitly cites the verse of the Psalm: *“They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my raiment”* (Ps 22:19).



Why so much importance accorded to a seemingly minor incident? The ancients attributed a symbolic value to the habit. They believed that the habit was imbued or soaked with the spirit of the man who wore it. The habit indicated the person himself, his works, his way of posturing and relating to others. This is why, in the rite of baptism, the neophytes put off the old habit and put on a new one. Jesus' robes represent his person, his whole life given. The number four indicates the four cardinal points, that is, the whole world to which Jesus is delivered.



Now the theological message that John wants to convey becomes clear: the sacrifice of Christ has a universal value; it is shared with every person. Unlike the clothes, the robe is kept intact. Although announced to all people and handed over to people of different cultures, his Gospel—which is Jesus himself—will always remain intact; no one will ever make any additions or cut some parts.

The third scene that takes place on Calvary (Jn 19:25-27) is that of the mother who, at the foot of the cross, is entrusted to the disciple whom Jesus loved. From the historical point of view, the episode presents serious difficulties. Mark reports that some women—and mentions them by name—stood at a distance, but neither he nor the other two synoptic writers recall that Mary and John were at the foot of the cross.

Apart from this, it seems that the Roman law forbade relatives to get closer to the place of execution. It is really unlikely that Mary Magdalene and the other women have been so insensitive as to allow a mother to witness the horrendous torture of the son. If understood as a fact, the calm words of Jesus and the manner in which he addresses his mother are surprising. “*Woman*”—he calls her—as he did in Cana (Jn 2:4); but in Israel, no child has ever called his mother in this manner.



All these data direct us towards a different interpretation from the chronicle. John does not want to draw attention to the thoughtful gesture of Jesus who, concerned about the fate of Mary, would have entrusted her to the beloved disciple. Knowing the esteem enjoyed by this woman within the community of the disciples, it was to be expected that there was a competition to welcome her into their home.

We are faced with a page of theology, composed and inspired by a real fact: the presence, near the Calvary, of some Jesus' most loved persons. The mother is—for John—the symbol of Israel faithful to her God. In Hebrew, Israel is feminine that is why, in the Bible, the chosen people are imagined as a woman, a virgin, wife, and mother. It is from this “*woman*,” from this mother Israel, that the new people of the Messianic era was born.

Jesus exhorts first this woman-Israel to receive as son, as the legitimate heir of the messianic promises, every disciple who follows Him, the new king of the world, to Calvary, that is, up to the gift of life. Then he turns to the new community—represented by the beloved disciple—and invites her to consider herself the daughter of the mother-Israel from whom she was born.

If this desire of the dying Jesus had been understood and accepted, how many misunderstandings and crimes would have been avoided!

The death of Jesus takes place—as John tells us—in a sweet and serene way (Jn 19:28-



30). No cry, no earthquake, no darkening of the sun. From the cross, he is the enthroned king that sovereignly determines his own destiny. He brings to fulfillment the mission that the Father has entrusted to him: the veil that prevented man to contemplate the face of God's love has fallen forever.

Still, a piece is missing, one last card to complete the mosaic. *"To fulfill the Scripture, Jesus says: I am thirsty"* (Jn 19:28). Only John records these words and considers them important. The biblical text referred to can only be Ps 42:3: *"My soul thirsts for the living God."*

With this expression, the psalmist declared his ardent longing to encounter the Lord. John reads in a symbolic sense the real thirst of Jesus bleeding and now dying. The thirst alluded to is his burning desire to bestow upon humanity the living water of which he spoke to the Samaritan woman. Even there, and only there—it is well known—he was thirsty and asked something to drink, that is, acceptance and willingness to receive his gift.

His desire now is going to be realized. *"After receiving the vinegar, he says "It is accomplished!" He bowed down his head, gave up the Spirit"* (Jn 19:30).

Here it is the water that quenches the thirst of humanity, the water that is the source of true life and is poured out on all those who approach the crucifix.

After the death of Jesus, everything is concluded, the Spirit was given. One could pass on to the story of the burial. But John realizes that it is necessary to help the disciples understand the extraordinary event that happened. He does this by recalling a fact in itself marginal and unimportant: a soldier threw his spear against the lifeless body of Jesus (Jn 19:31-37).

On this fact, the evangelist draws attention with an insistence that may appear excessive; three times he appeals to the reliability of his testimony: *"The one who saw it, has testified to it, and his testimony is true; he knows he speaks the truth, so that you also might believe"* (Jn 19:35).

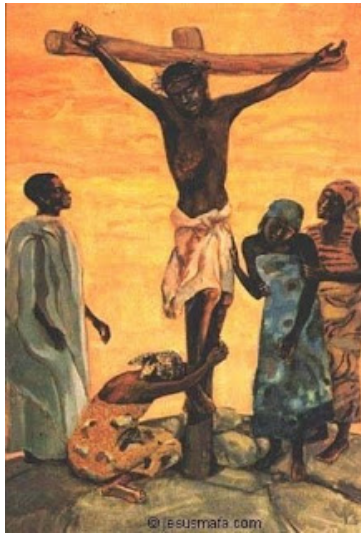
In this episode, he, therefore, saw a deeper meaning. The first key to reading is offered by mentioning—at the beginning of the passage—the time when it happened: it was the day of Preparation. It was the time when, in the esplanade of the temple, the priests were sacrificing the Passover lambs. It is an open invitation of the evangelist to read the event in light of the Exodus story.

It is on Calvary—John wants to tell us—that, on the day of Preparation, the true Paschal Lamb is sacrificed. Giving his own blood, Jesus saved all humankind from the exterminator angel, from the evil spirit that is rooted in man and causes death.

To highlight even more this message, the evangelist recalls another detail ignored by the other evangelists: the two robbers crucified with Jesus, the soldiers, to hasten death, break their legs while they leave intact those of Jesus, who was already dead. Here is a new reminder of the Paschal Lamb to which—according to the provisions of the Book of Exodus—no bone must be broken (Ex 12:46).



Finally, the most important detail: one of the soldiers with a spear, struck the side of Jesus and from the wound immediately blood and something like water came out.



The physiological fact in itself has very little relevance but, for John, it becomes an extraordinary sign. Blood for a Semite is the symbol of life: pouring it to the last drop means giving one's life. Through the wounded side from which comes the last drop of blood it is thus possible to see the heart of God, to see his boundless love: *"Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life"* (Jn 3:16).

What benefits does the world gain from this immense love? *"Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit"* (Jn 12:24)—Jesus had said. The fruit is the outpouring of the Spirit, symbolized by the gushing of water from the side of Christ. The living water promised to the Samaritan woman, flows from God's heart. John solemnly concludes the sublime page of theology that he has dealt with: *"They shall look on him whom they have pierced."* It is a biblical quote that refers to a mysterious prophecy pronounced towards the end of the fourth century B.C. and kept in the book of Zechariah (Zec 12:10). It speaks of a just and innocent man who was pierced; soon after, however, the Lord has awakened in people, responsible for that crime, a sharp pain, a sincere repentance. All repented and looked to him whom they had pierced. They broke out in a desperate cry, a cry similar to that of the parents who lost their only son, comparable to the mourning for the death of a firstborn son (Zec 12:10-11).

Who is this man and why was he killed? The prophet certainly referred to a dramatic event that happened in his time. We know nothing else. What interests us is that John has recognized in this mysterious person the image of Jesus.

All people will look to Christ, executed and pierced on the cross, as their savior. The Crucifix will become the reference point of all their choices and will direct all their lives.

The account of the deposition of the body of Jesus in the tomb (Jn 19:38-42) substantially corresponds to that of the Synoptics; however, John recalls some precious details that other evangelists ignore. *"Nicodemus, who had come to Jesus by night"* joins Joseph of Arimathea. He comes with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. The two take the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen cloths with the aromatic oils.

These details are amazing. First of all, the profusion of scents amazes. It speaks of 32.7 liters of precious, very expensive essences. An excessive quantity: to anoint a dead body a thousandth part would be more than enough.

In addition, the spices used are not suitable for embalming. They are those used in the wedding party to perfume the clothes (Ps 45:9) and the bedroom: *"I have sprinkled my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon"*—says the woman in the book of Proverbs (Pro 7:17).

John is not telling the burial of a corpse (note that he does not mention even the closing of the tombstone), but the preparation of the thalamus in which the groom rests.



The most beautiful image used by the prophets to explain the love of God had been that of the wedding. The Lord—they said—is the faithful husband and Israel is the bride who, unfortunately, often prefers the love of idols than God's.



In the Gospels, the bridegroom is Jesus. He is the Son of God who came from heaven to take back the wife who abandoned him. From the beginning of his Gospel, John has referred to him as the bridegroom (Jn 3:29-30).

On the cross, Jesus gave the greatest proof of his love. It is an immense love because *“there is no greater love than this, to give one's life”* (Jn 15:13), a passionate love like the one mentioned in the Song of Songs: *“for love is strong as death ... no flood can extinguish love, nor river submerge it”* (Song 8:6-7).

Now the groom who loved so much awaits the embrace of the bride, the new community, represented by the disciples Joseph and Nicodemus, who are at the foot of the cross. This community makes a gesture full of symbolism: she spreads on bandages—wedding dress that will envelop the body of the groom—all the perfumes at its disposal, without calculation, as did Mary of Bethany (Jn 12:1-11). With eyes full of tears, she shows to have finally realized how much she was loved.

The mentioning of the garden, finally, recalls the burial of the king of Judah (cf. 2 K 21:18,26). During the trial, Jesus was proclaimed king, crowned, clad in the purple robe and enthroned on the cross. Now he is buried not just as a groom but also as king.

READ: Romans crucify Jesus. As he goes to his death, he carries the cross himself. He controls everything. He does not need assistance. He speaks to his mother and the Beloved Disciple, and before he dies, he bows his head and hands over the spirit. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus.

REFLECT: Why did Jesus have to die? Why is there no pain and suffering in this Gospel's account of the Passion? Does the handing over of the Spirit indicate the birth of the Church in this Gospel? Did Nicodemus become a believer?

PRAY: The Church filled with the Spirit continues the mission of Jesus. Pray for church leaders, that they may recognize and act on their mission to holiness for themselves and others.

ACT: Jesus has already gained victory over the world: when you are in difficulty or in any situation that you cannot handle, reflect on your faith, in every decision you make. Follow the freedom of Jesus in taking up a task today that has been refused by other people.

