

Anointed to Die

After every sporting event or after watching a show with an interesting plot, we are often thinking about or looking for, the turning point. When did things start to go wrong for the hero, or for the bad guy? When did the game get away from the home team after they had started so well?

We've already seen one big turning point in the Gospel of John. It was chapter 5, which began with Jesus healing a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda - on the Sabbath. This was followed by a confrontation with the religious leaders who felt that Jesus was out of line to tell the man to carry his sleeping mat on the Sabbath Day. Jesus made them more angry with Him by saying that His Father never stopped working, so He shouldn't stop either. After this statement we see the word "kill" next the intentions of the Jewish leaders - and, in the chapters that follow, they become more and more determined to kill Jesus. This peaked in last week's study after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and the Jewish leaders realized that He had become a serious menace to their power and influence.

Up until chapter 12, however, these religious leaders had been unable to do anything about their frustrations with Jesus. They had fretted and plotted but nothing seemed to slow Jesus down. He carried on as He always had, making bold proclamations about Himself, His relationship with His Father, His authority. And He continued to draw people away from those loyal to the Pharisees and other religious leaders, to Himself and His teaching of the Kingdom of God. But in chapter 12, there is a second major turning point and it's summarized in one sentence in verse 23 where Jesus says: "The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory."

There are four scenes in John 12: Jesus is anointed in Bethany, He enters Jerusalem being hailed by the crowds as the promised Messiah, He announces that the time has come for His death and the chapter closes with Jesus making one, final appeal to the unbelieving crowds who are already in the process of rejecting Him and His message. It's a chapter that portrays both light and darkness in rather stark terms and it ends with the darkness growing stronger and the light being hidden.

First stop, then, is the return to Bethany and the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. From the chronology that John lays out in the first verse of this chapter, it seems likely that Jesus arrived in Bethany just before Sabbath - in other words, late Friday afternoon. The feast that is described would have taken place on the Saturday evening, right after Sabbath had ended. As they were enjoying the meal, Mary took a large bottle of expensive perfume and began to pour it out on Jesus' feet, then wiping his feet with her hair. It would have been an intimate and obviously fragrant and probably awkward event for the other guests.

We only know from John's writing of two reactions to Mary's act of love: Judas and Jesus. Judas is angry that what he called "a small fortune" had been wasted on his Master. He felt that it would have been better to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor. John tells us that he considered himself one of the poor - at least he

helped himself to the money that people donated to support Jesus and His disciples. John is pretty blunt in his assessment of Judas' motivations: Not that he cared for the poor; he was a thief who was in charge of the disciples' funds and he often took some for his own use. (v.6)

Jesus' response was quite different, and revealing:

Leave her alone. She did it in preparation for My burial. You will always have the poor among you, but I will not be here with you much longer. (12:7f)

Jesus is now talking very plainly about His death, and to a crowd that included others besides His disciples. He describes the anointing as a preparation for His burial - indicating that this is coming very soon now. In fact, it is less than a week away.

News of Jesus' arrival in Bethany travelled very quickly and people started to show up, both to see Jesus and also to see the man He had raised from the dead. John summarizes the situation with very few words, but they are heavily weighted words:

Then the leading priests decided to kill Lazarus too, for it was because of him that many of the people had deserted them and believed in Jesus. (12:10f)

Powerful people still need some allies. In political dictatorships, the guy at the top needs the support of the army's leading generals. The Pharisees and Sadducees and teachers of the law needed the support of the majority of the people. They needed to be respected and listened to and obeyed if they were to continue to have influence with the Roman occupiers. They saw their influence slipping away and decided they couldn't afford to lose any more.

The next day was Sunday, what we now remember as Palm Sunday:

The next day, the news that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem swept through the city. A huge crowd of Passover visitors took palm branches and went down the road to meet Him. They shouted, "Praise God! Bless the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hail to the King of Israel."

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, fulfilling the prophecy that said: "Don't be afraid, people of Israel. Look, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt." (12-15)

We'll skip down to verse 17:

Those in the crowd who had seen Jesus call Lazarus back to life were telling others all about it. That was the main reason so many went out to meet Him — because they had heard about this mighty miracle. Then the Pharisees said to each other, "We've lost. Look, the whole world has gone after him." (17-19)

John isn't being subtle in these details that he has chosen to include in this twelfth chapter. The religious leaders are jealous because they have lost a number of followers to Jesus and now they express their despair that the whole world, the huge crowds that have come into the city for Passover Week, have gone after their enemy - the one

whom they have decided must be their enemy, the One to whom they cannot, must not, bend their knees in worship.

If you compare John's account of Palm Sunday with the other three Gospels, you see a greater emphasis on the desperation of the religious leaders and, of course, you see a very central role for Lazarus as it is his healing that has drawn the crowds out to see Jesus enter Jerusalem. The raising of Lazarus is not mentioned in the other Gospels which all portray Jesus as coming to Jerusalem only at the end.

Because Lazarus and his sisters lived just outside Jerusalem, their story didn't fit within the larger plot of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) because their portrayal of Jerusalem was as the site of major confrontation with the powers that led to Jesus' sacrificial death. In their telling of the Good News, Jesus avoided His confrontation with the powers until the very end of His ministry.

I started by talking about turning points, and now we come to that part of John 12 which marks the major turning point of this section. It wasn't the anointing for burial or the oddly-named "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, but a seemingly simple request from a group of Greek pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover:

Some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem to attend Passover paid a visit to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee. They said, "Sir, we want to meet Jesus." Philip told Andrew about it and they went together to ask Jesus. Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory. The truth is, a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone - a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels - a plentiful harvest of new lives." (12:20-24)

Throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus saying, in a variety of circumstances, "My time has not yet come." But here we read the opposite: "The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory." What kind of "glory" is John talking about here? Glory, remember, is the weight, the value of a person, their character, the substance of who that person is. The glory of Jesus is who He is as the Son of God and what He does in laying down His life for the sins of the world.

Why did Jesus respond the way He did to this request from the Greek pilgrims in Jerusalem? Some commentators have noted that John writes his gospel for a Greek audience and that Jesus' whole ministry, up until this point, had been to reach the Jewish nation. But this is the point where He will be rejected by the Jews and the Gentile peoples will be welcomed in. This is a pivotal point for the gospel reaching to the ends of the earth. John, who spent most of his years after Jesus' resurrection in ministry to Gentiles, is very aware of the significance of this point in history. It's a turning point and Jesus notes it well with His, "the time has come."

As we move on in this passage, we see Jesus teaching on the cost of discipleship, what it means to truly follow Him. Then He asks, "Should I pray, 'Father, save Me from what lies ahead'? But that is the very reason why I came! Father, bring glory to Your

Name.” And a voice comes from heaven assuring Jesus that the Father was receiving glory and would continue to. And then Jesus says:

The time of judgment for the world has come, when the prince of this world will be cast out. And when I am lifted up on the cross, I will draw everyone to Myself. (12:31,32)

Now He is specifically indicating how He is going to die - on the cross. And He is saying that this will be the means through which He will draw everyone to Himself. Notice that the judgment on the world is judgment directed at the prince of this world, which is a spiritual power that is opposed to the rule of God, the Kingdom of God. The judgment of this world will result in the overthrow of the powers of evil that dominate human life and opening the door to the life of the age to come.

But the crowds will not have it. They don't accept that their Messiah will have to die and so they protest that the Messiah would live forever and ask Jesus, “Who is this Son of Man you're talking about?” And Jesus ends the discussion with this:

“My light will shine out for you just a little while longer. Walk in it while you can, so you will not stumble when the darkness falls. If you walk in the darkness, you cannot see where you are going. Believe in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light.” After saying these things, Jesus went away and was hidden from them. (v.35f)

John has made light and darkness one of the major themes of his gospel. We saw it in the Prologue, in the “light of the world” statement, in the healing of the man born blind and His later statements to the Pharisees. He makes it clear in these verses that we have to choose to walk in the light; that walking in darkness is always an option for us, but that it leads to stumbling around, confusion, loss. Again, the call is to believe into the light, into Jesus. The invitation is to become children of light, but the invitation is not taken up and the darkest scene in this chapter is that Jesus went away and was hidden from them. The light was rejected and He left them, plunging the world He left into total, suffocating darkness.

This is made clear in the verses that follow, the final section of John 12. John explains the spiritual significance of what had just happened:

But despite all the miraculous signs He had done, most of the people did not believe in Him. This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted: “Lord, who has believed our message? To whom will the Lord reveal His saving power?”

John goes on to tell us that some of the Jewish leaders actually believed in Jesus, but they were so afraid of the Pharisees and the potential for being excluded from the synagogue, that they wouldn't admit it to anyone.

And then John closes this section, and this final public appearance of Jesus as a free man, with one final invitation, one last chance for people to respond in faith to their Messiah:

Jesus shouted to the crowds, “If you trust Me, you are really trusting God who sent Me. For when you see Me, you are seeing the One who sent Me. I have

come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in Me will no longer remain in darkness. If anyone hears me and doesn't obey Me, I am not his judge - for I have come to save the world and not to judge it. But all who reject Me and My message will be judged at the day of judgment by the truth I have spoken. I don't speak on My own authority. The Father who sent Me gave Me His own instructions as to what I should say. And I know His instructions lead to eternal life; so I say whatever the Father tells Me to say." (12:44-50)

This is a summary of the teaching of Jesus - that He is the Son of God, that He does what the Father shows Him to do and that He has come as light into a dark world, offering us the opportunity to respond in faith, believing in Him, and so escaping from the darkness all around us. The ultimate judge is truth itself, the truth about who Jesus is and what He said. Those who receive the truth, those who believe into Jesus, are on their way to zoe, eternal life with Him.

We know what's coming next, the Passover feast with the disciples, the betrayal, trial and crucifixion of Jesus and His resurrection and final teaching to His followers. But we need to stop and feel the sadness, the darkness, the absolute betrayal of their Maker by God's world that is taking place in these verses. What are we left with? "I came as a light to shine in this dark world", "most of the people did not believe in Him", and, "After saying these things, Jesus went away and was hidden from them." That wonderful ministry that Jesus had conducted in the streets and the synagogues, in fishing boats and the Jerusalem Temple, a ministry of healing and powerful, life-changing teaching, of deliverance and forgiveness, of giving hope and giving eternal life, was about to be crucified. The world rejected the light that was offered and He was hidden from them.

Now, what do we take from this chapter of John and how do we apply it to our own lives?

1. The powerful central message is that believing the truth about Jesus is the key to living within the light. Faith opens our eyes to see what is real and helps us to avoid the false things that the world offers as substitutes for the truth of God's Word, His love, His purposes. And yet, even with those gifts of revelation, we still find the New Testament filled with teaching about walking in the light, choosing to keep on the path that the light shows us. We can't just take for granted that we're never going to be deceived. We have to be on guard, vigilant, testing the spirits as we keep growing in the knowledge of God's Word. And we need to seek the counsel of other believers, others who are on the journey with us, so that they can speak into our lives when we get confused or discouraged. Faith has a starting place, of course, but it is also a journey, and that journey often requires that we ask ourselves, "Am I still walking in the light, or am I stumbling a bit here? And if so, how do I get back on track?"
2. The second application for today is the incredible value, the absolute privilege, the wonder and joy of knowing Jesus. He is so far above anything else we could entertain as being our ultimate value in the way we conduct our lives. Jesus is worth pursuing, with our thoughts and devotion, our use of time and our money

and our talents. Mary poured out expensive perfume on Jesus - and in those days that was how you stored your valuables; not in bank accounts or precious metals or the stock market, but in a flask of perfume that Judas described as being worth a small fortune. Her act is just another picture of how worthy Jesus is of all that we have to give Him. Start with your heart and see where that takes you.

3. Finally, all the waving of palm branches and shouting of hosannas on Sunday, along with the despairing words of the Pharisees, "We've lost! Look, the whole world has gone after Him", show us how shallow loyalty can be overturned in a moment. By Friday morning the crowds were clamouring for Jesus' crucifixion. Eugene Peterson once wrote a book called, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction" - I bought it for the title, have never read it, but I think he expresses what being a disciple of Jesus is all about. It's about taking another step every day, a step of faith, a response of worship, an act of obedience, that draws us closer to the plans that He has for us, the purposes for which He has called us, and the love He will show through us.