

ACT II : JESUS' TRIAL AND DEATH
JOHN 18:1 – 19:42

¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.

³So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

Act II Scene 1. Jesus allows himself to be arrested

We are in an olive grove on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. In the light of the full moon we can see Jesus with his disciples. The narrator informs us that Jesus had to cross the dry bed of the Kidron to reach this 'garden'. In his account of the passion, we will notice that John is continually focusing on the kingship of Jesus. Perhaps he mentions the Kidron here to remind us of the time when king David made the same journey when he was betrayed by his son, Absalom (see 2Samuel 15:14,23).

In choosing to call the place a garden, John may be alluding to the garden of Eden. It was there that the first man, Adam, encountered evil and succumbed, binding humankind in sin. Now, in this new garden, Jesus, the new Adam (see Romans 5:15-19) is about to encounter the full force of evil and master it, freeing humankind from its bonds.

Luke, too, tells us that Jesus made a custom of spending the night here: 'Every day he was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives' (Luke 21:37). Judas knew where to find him. All the Gospels mention the police sent by the Sanhedrin. John alone mentions the Roman officer and soldiers. Pilate must have placed them at the disposal of the Jewish authorities either because of the special problems that were likely to arise on the occasion of the festival, or because he and Caiaphas had a prior agreement to arrest Jesus whom they judged to be a likely rallying point for troublemakers.

Both Roman and Jewish authorities were responsible for Jesus' death. By mentioning both groups here at the beginning of the passion, John places the whole scene on a world stage. Jesus, the light of the world, is in the quiet shadows of the moonlit garden. The powers of darkness, both Jewish and Gentile, with their lanterns and torches and the noise and clatter of their weapons come striding through the night. This is the night that encompassed the world when Judas went to arrange this evil deed (13:30). This is the night about which Jesus has already warned us: 'Those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them' (11:10; see 12:35).

Jesus makes the first move. Earlier attempts to arrest him have failed. Now the hour has come and Jesus shows that it is an hour which he freely chooses in obedience to the mission given him by his Father: 'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father' (10:18). John tells us that Jesus knew 'all that was to happen to him' (compare 6:6; 13:1). Once again he is reminding us that we are watching God's Word. Jesus' question to those who have come to arrest him is almost identical with the question he put to John's disciples when they first came to him: 'What are you looking for?' (1:38). It is a question meant for us all.

When they respond by telling him that they are seeking Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus gives the by now familiar reply: 'I am' (see commentary on 17:6). We are witnessing a theophany and the arresting party, among whom Judas has taken his stand, falls to the ground. Satan has entered into Judas (13:27). We are watching Satan fall back in the presence of Jesus (12:31; 14:30).

The soldiers and police have been despatched to arrest Jesus. He can say with the psalmist: 'My enemies will retreat in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me' (Psalm 56:9). 'When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall' (Psalm 27:2). We recall the words of the Prologue: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (1:5).

Jesus is in charge, not the Roman officer or the Jewish temple police. He presents himself to them and commands that they let his disciples go free. Jesus is the good shepherd protecting his sheep (10:28-29). John refers to Jesus' words (see 6:39 and 17:12) in the same way as he refers to sacred Scripture, for, as we have frequently heard, Jesus' words come from God.

This scene would have been a source of great peace to John's contemporaries, faced as they were with the same kind of threat that faced Jesus in the garden. They were being assured that they were under God's protection. If, in spite of this, they were taken and martyred, like Jesus they could see in this a providence of God and place themselves confidently in God's hands.

⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?'

⁵They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

Jesus replied, 'I am he.'

Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.

⁶When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they stepped back and fell to the ground.

⁷Again he asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?'

And they said, 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

⁸Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.'

⁹This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, 'I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.'

¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus.

¹¹Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

¹²So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

Simon Peter had boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus (13:37). He draws a short sword (compare Luke 22:38) and attempts to defend Jesus, but in a way that Jesus rejects. What is happening here is in accordance with the will of God and Jesus' will is in complete conformity with that of his Father (4:34; compare Mark 14:36).

Act II Scene 2. In the house of the high priest

It is night at the house of Annas. Jesus is being interrogated inside. Peter is being interrogated outside in the courtyard where a charcoal fire is burning. John has arranged the narrative to indicate that both scenes are happening at the same time. He also highlights Jesus' witness by setting it in stark relief against the failure of the leader of his disciples.

Annas was appointed high priest by Quirinius, the Legate of Syria, in 6AD, the year in which Rome took over direct government of Judea, placing it under the jurisdiction of a military prefect. Annas was deposed in 15AD by the prefect Valerius Gratus. However he was still considered high priest by the Jews and he was able to continue to exercise his power through his son-in-law Caiaphas who was appointed high priest in 18AD and was exercising that office during that fatal year of Jesus' crucifixion.

It seems as though an arrangement must have been made that Annas would make a preliminary investigation to ease the way for the Sanhedrin under the leadership of Caiaphas to decide how best to deal with Jesus and to make a formal charge early next morning. For John this is the final confrontation between Jesus and his own people who in the person of the high priest do not accept him (1:11).

John refers back to an earlier meeting of the Jewish council (11:47-53) to remind us that a decision had already been made to put Jesus to death, and also to keep before our eyes the significance of what we are witnessing: Jesus is giving his life for the people.

¹³First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.

¹⁴Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

Peter denies being a disciple

¹⁵Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus.

Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,

¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate.

So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in.

¹⁷The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?'

He said, 'I am not.'

¹⁸Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves.

Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

Our attention is first drawn by John to the outside courtyard. Peter is there and 'another disciple'. This is possibly the Beloved Disciple (see Introduction). Challenged by the woman at the gate, Peter denies being a disciple. His 'I am not' rings out in stark contrast to the 'I am' of Jesus. This denial is taking place at the very time that Jesus, inside, is telling the high priest that he is innocent of encouraging subversive activity – which fact the high priest can find out by questioning those who have heard him speak. The irony is striking. The person best able to speak in Jesus' defence is saying that he is not even a disciple.

The dramatic effect of this scene is to highlight Jesus' isolation. As he said at the supper: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered ... and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me'(16:32).

The high priest's interrogation covers two areas. He asks Jesus about 'his disciples' to see if the council could sustain a charge of Jesus being a revolutionary and so guilty of treason against the emperor. He asks him also about 'his teaching' to see if they could sustain a charge of his being a false prophet. If Jesus was guilty of the first charge, the authorities would have no trouble having him killed by the Romans. If guilty of the second charge, they would be justified by Jewish law in having him killed: 'Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die' (Deuteronomy 18:20).

Jesus has nothing to hide and no one who has heard him speak can truthfully accuse him of being a revolutionary (compare 7:26 and Mark 14:48-49). John feels the need to add in parenthesis that the Jews gather in the synagogue and temple. He is clearly writing for a largely Gentile audience, as this would have been obvious to Jews.

One of the temple police strikes Jesus (compare Mark 14:16b; Luke 22:63) and Jesus challenges him. The law states: 'You shall not revile God, or curse a leader of your people' (Exodus 22:28). Jesus has done neither (compare 8:46; 15:25).

Having made no progress in the interrogation, Annas sends Jesus off to Caiaphas. John tells us nothing of the subsequent meeting of the Jewish council. The way they decided to frame the charges against Jesus will emerge in the trial before Pilate.

¹⁹Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching.

²⁰Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple (where all the Jews come together). I have said nothing in secret.'

²¹Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.'

²²When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?'

²³Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?'

²⁴Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are not also one of his disciples, are you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.'

²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

John then describes what has been going on outside in the courtyard while Jesus was being interrogated by Annas. At the supper Peter had boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus warned him: 'Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times' (13:38). Peter's first denial, mentioned earlier, was a private one, made quietly to the woman guarding the gate. The second denial is in public as he stands with the slaves and the police in the courtyard warming himself by the charcoal fire. Finally one of the slaves recognises him as the one who cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Peter utters his third denial. To deny knowledge 'three times' means to deny it consistently and obstinately.

Nothing is said here of Peter's reaction. For that we must await chapter twenty-one.

Act II Scene 3. Jesus is handed over to the Romans to be crucified

We are in the Jerusalem headquarters of the Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate. Traditionally this has been located at the fortress Antonia just northeast of the temple precincts, but modern opinion tends to favour the Herodian palace on the western hill of Jerusalem (southeast of the present Jaffa gate).

John gives us a powerfully dramatic presentation. Pilate is the military prefect who governed Palestine from 26-36AD. He moves from outside where he is in confrontation with the high priests (John makes no mention of a crowd) to inside the palace where is alone with Jesus. As we have already noted, John presents the minor characters primarily in their relation to Jesus. Pilate is symbolic of those who will not follow the truth. He appears in the role of judge, but it is he who is being judged by the way he relates to Jesus.

It is early morning. The first rays of dawn are beginning to light up the darkness. The Jewish authorities, who will be identified as members of the leading priestly families (18:35; 19:6,15,21) will not enter Pilate's headquarters. They were to celebrate the Passover just after sunset that evening, so they were particularly careful not to incur the kinds of ritual defilement that might come from contact with Gentiles. It is ironic that they have no scruple in seeking Jesus' death. We might recall Jesus' lament: 'Hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith' (Matthew 23:23).

There is a further irony in their wanting to avoid defilement in order to be able to sacrifice the Paschal lamb, and here they are bringing pressure to bear on Pilate to condemn to death the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'(1:29).

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters.

It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.

²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?'

³⁰They answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.'

³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.'

The Jews replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.'

³²(This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

Because the chief priests will not come in to him, Pilate goes out to them and we witness the first exchange in the struggle between the Jewish and Roman authorities. When they avoid making a specific accusation, Pilate tells them to look after the matter themselves. This forces them to declare that they want Jesus killed and to admit that in this, as in other matters of importance, they had to defer to the occupying power

The way they will treat Stephen later on (see Acts 7:58-60) shows that they were not above taking the law into their own hands, but in the case of Jesus they are obviously determined to have him killed by the Romans. This frees them of responsibility. It also ensures that Jesus suffers the shameful death of crucifixion which comes under the same category as hanging and carries a curse in the Law (see Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13).

The expression 'handed over' has already been used eight times by John, always in reference to Judas. Now it is the religious leaders who are fulfilling this role.

Jesus is not there but it is his presence that is dominating the scene as John makes clear by referring to what Jesus has said: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (12:32). There, as here, John adds: 'He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die' (12:33). The Jewish and Roman leaders may appear to be determining his fate, but he is the one who is, as it were, orchestrating everything. He may appear a victim but he is freely choosing to carry out the mission given him by his Father. For the second time John uses the expression 'fulfil' in relation to words earlier spoken by Jesus (see commentary on 18:9).

There is a further irony here: the Jewish authorities are handing Jesus over to prevent people believing in Jesus (see 11:48), yet what they are doing, because of the love with which Jesus chose to accept his death, will in fact be the very means of drawing everyone to him.

When Annas questioned Jesus about his disciples (18:19) he was testing to see if he could find a case to accuse Jesus of being an anti-Roman revolutionary. Pilate's question to Jesus indicates that this is the central thrust of the accusation being brought against Jesus by the religious authorities. With Jesus' response we see that it is Jesus who is the judge and Pilate is the one on trial. Does Pilate really want to know who Jesus is? Pilate brushes Jesus' invitation aside and returns to the accusation coming from 'your own nation and the chief priests'.

Jesus bypasses the title 'King of the Jews' with its anti-Roman nationalistic overtones (see 6:15; 12:12-14) and explains to Pilate that if he were a king in the worldly sense he would have subjects and they would be fighting for him. Obviously this is not the case. Jesus' kingdom (called 'the kingdom of God' by John only in 3:3,5) 'is not from this world' (compare 17:16).

Pilate realises that Jesus is claiming some sort of kingship, but when he questions Jesus on this, Jesus, without affirming or denying kingship, says that he has come from elsewhere into the world 'to testify to the truth'. We recall an earlier statement by John: 'The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true' (3:31-33).

Jesus came into this world for judgment (9:39). Pilate is being judged on how he responds to the revelation of the truth that Jesus is making. To do so he will have to rise above the pragmatic, political, rational level on which he is working (for his questions to Jesus are in themselves quite legitimate). He will have to be 'born from above' (3:3). Jesus is the shepherd-king inviting Pilate to belong to him and so 'listen to my voice' (see 10:3). Pilate sees that Jesus is not a political threat, but he shrugs off the opportunity to go deeper and enter into a proper dialogue with him.

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'

³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'

³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?'

³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'

³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?'

Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

^{38b}After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him.

³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover.

Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?'

⁴⁰They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.

¹Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.

²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe.

³They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face.

Pilate goes out once more to the Jewish leaders. He does not want to lose the opportunity to humiliate them. He dismisses their accusations and offers to release Jesus whom he calls their king. It appears that Pilate had some private arrangement with the Jewish authorities to mark their festival of liberation, the Passover, by releasing a condemned prisoner.

He is provoking them for it is obvious from their mood that they will not want Jesus released. They prefer a 'bandit'(see 10:1-2) to the good shepherd. They prefer the guilty son of the father ('Bar-Abbas') to the innocent Son of the Father.

Pilate has no care for Jesus. Having declared him innocent, he determines to show the absurdity of their claim by submitting him to a terrible flogging, usually inflicted only after a sentence of guilt has been pronounced. He will show them how stupid is the claim of any Jew to be a king.

The soldiers carry on the charade by a mock crowning of this 'king' with thorns and by clothing him in a soldiers scarlet cloak. As the soldiers mimic the 'Hail Caesar' with which the emperor was greeted, they are ironically acknowledging the shepherd-king, who, in identifying with the poor and outcasts is bringing about God's reign of love.

We are watching the suffering servant of the Lord: 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting'(Isaiah 50:6).

Pilate seems to be enjoying himself at the expense of the Jewish leaders. For the second time he declares Jesus innocent and then he has Jesus brought out in the mock regalia. 'Here is your man', he says. 'Here is the pathetic creature whom you claim is a threat to my authority!' Unwittingly Pilate has chosen words which echo those spoken by the Lord to Samuel when Saul was presented to him: 'Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall rule over my people' (1Samuel 9:17).

The scene is staged after the fashion of the ceremony of presentation of the emperor. In failing to acclaim him it is the authorities, not Jesus, who are being shown up as frauds. The irony is masterful.

The chief priests and police cry out for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate tells them he will have nothing more to do with the case. He tells them that if they want Jesus crucified they will have to do it themselves. He knows that they have no power to do so. For the third time – which makes the judgment legally definitive – Pilate declares Jesus innocent.

It is only when their attempt to have Jesus judged for a political crime has failed that 'the Jews' finally state their real reason for wanting Jesus dead. It is because, according to them, he has 'claimed to be (literally 'made himself') the Son of God'. They remain obstinately closed to Jesus' word. He does claim to be the Son of God (see 10:36), but he has not made himself anything. Everything that he is has been received from the Father.

They judge Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy (compare 8:56-59; 10:33) for which the punishment in the Law is death: 'One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer' (Leviticus 24:16).

Pilate is under instructions from his superiors to respect the religious sensibilities of his subjects. We know that his patron in Rome fell from power in 31AD. If this trial is taking place in 33AD, he would be feeling all the more vulnerable. His insecurity is complicated by his superstitious nature. When he hears that Jesus has been making divine claims, he is impelled to interrogate Jesus further.

⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.'

⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'

⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'

Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.'

⁷The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

⁸Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.

⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?'

But Jesus gave him no answer.

¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?'

¹¹Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'

Pilate asks Jesus a question that has occurred in different words a number of times earlier in the Gospel: 'Where are you from?' Those present at Cana were faced with the mystery of Jesus (2:9). So was the Samaritan woman (4:11). The Jewish leaders were constantly confronted with the question as to Jesus' true identity (7:27-28; 8:14; 9:29-30). In Pilate's case, he may be simply looking for a way of avoiding having to deal with the case (compare Luke 23:6). Since Pilate has no real interest in the truth, Jesus remains silent.

When Pilate makes a claim to having power over Jesus, Jesus agrees but states that this is only because he has received it 'from above'(compare 3:27). John is not concerned with Pilate's authority in general; only with his authority in this case over Jesus. He should exercise this God-given authority properly and if he fails to do so he is guilty, but not as guilty as Caiaphas and the other religious leaders who are the ones clamouring for an unjust sentence and who should have known better. As he had said to them earlier: 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains'(9:41). They have seen and heard Jesus and still they have rejected him.

Pilate wants to release Jesus (compare Acts 3:13), but the religious authorities have his measure. They change the kind of pressure which they are exerting upon him and threaten to denounce him to Caesar. Pilate has nothing to gain from acting justly towards Jesus, especially when this was so unwelcome to the Jewish authorities. The matter was not worth an official investigation which could give his enemies in Rome an opportunity to have him disgraced, so Pilate decides to pass sentence against Jesus.

John heightens the drama by reminding us that sentence is being passed on Jesus at the very time that the lambs are being slaughtered in preparation for the Passover. According to the ancient law the lambs were to be slaughtered in the evening (Exodus 12:6). By the time of Jesus, however, there were so many pilgrims in Jerusalem that, to accommodate the numbers, the evening was interpreted broadly as commencing when the sun begins its decline, that is at noon.

One last terrible irony. The Jewish leaders prided themselves in having no king but Yahweh: 'O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone' (Isaiah 26:13). In demanding that the sentence of crucifixion be passed against Jesus, they unwittingly reject the covenant in claiming: 'We have no king but the emperor'. They did this just as preparations were under way to celebrate the Passover liturgy when they would go through the motions of renewing the very covenant which they were now rejecting. Pilate hands Jesus over to them to be crucified.

¹²From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

¹³When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha.

¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon.

He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!'

¹⁵They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!'

Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?'

The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.'

¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

^{16b}So they took Jesus;

¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.

¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'

²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek.

²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews," but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."'

²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.'

Act II Scene 4. Calvary

Before Herod Agrippa I extended the north-western section of the city walls, the place of the skull (Latin: *calvaria*) was just outside the wall. It is here that this scene takes place.

We know from the other Gospels that at one stage a man called Simon was made to either carry the crossbeam for Jesus or to help him carry it (see Mark 15:21). John focuses not on the physical weakness which overcame Jesus on the journey, but on the moral strength and the willingness with which he set out to meet his death: 'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (10:18).

Along with the other Gospels John mentions the detail of the others crucified on either side of Jesus. He may want us to recall the words of Isaiah concerning the suffering servant: 'he was numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12).

This is Jesus' 'hour'. John is presenting it as an enthronement and stressing, by the reference to the three languages, that Jesus is carrying out his promise: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (12:32). We are watching the shepherd-king offering his life for us (10:11), loving us to the end (13:1).

Having had to bow to the pressure of the Jewish leadership, Pilate is determined to have the last word. In doing so, the official representative of the emperor of Rome is unwittingly proclaiming to the whole world the universal kingship of Jesus. The Latin version of the psalms witnesses to an ancient scribal addition (indicated here in italics) to Psalm 96: 'The Lord reigns *from the wood*' (Psalm 96:10). The scribe picked up John's intention well.

The soldiers divide up Jesus' clothing, but decide against tearing his seamless undergarment (Greek: *chitôn*). By quoting Psalm 22:18, John is making the point that even in this action the soldiers are unwittingly fulfilling Scripture. In other words, there is a providence working here beyond the fickleness of human decision.

The verse quoted is a typical example of Hebrew poetic style: the second half of the verse repeats the first half in a slightly different way. The psalmist is not distinguishing 'clothes' from 'clothing'. John, however, wishes to make a distinction between the various outer garments, sandals etc. which a person could wear or not wear according to the situation, and the long undergarment which was a permanent covering under the disposable outer garments. The tunic is a symbol of the permanence of the person through the many vicissitudes of life.

In crucifying Jesus, the soldiers are able to bring about a change in his external circumstances – they can divide up his outer garments. In not tearing the seamless undergarment, they are unwittingly demonstrating that Jesus' person will remain intact through his death. The seamless and intact tunic prepares us for Jesus' resurrection.

²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier.

They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.'

This was to fulfil what the scripture says,

'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.'

And that is what the soldiers did.

²⁵Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.'

²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'

And from that hour the disciple took her into his own [home].

John is the only Evangelist to mention the presence on Calvary of Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple. The sister of Jesus' mother is perhaps Salome (Mark 15:40), 'the mother of the sons of Zebedee' (Matthew 27:56). This would make John Jesus' cousin (therefore 'brother' according to Aramaic usage) on his mother's side, and if John is the Beloved Disciple, the author of our Gospel, it would explain why Jesus entrusts his mother to him.

Mary the wife of Clopas is possibly the woman called by Matthew 'Mary the mother of James and Joseph' (Matthew 27:56). Hegesippus (c.150AD) says that Clopas was the brother of Mary's husband, Joseph. This would make James and Joseph cousins ('brothers') of Jesus on his father's side (see Matthew 13:55). Mary Magdalene is named in all four Gospels.

In this scene John focuses attention on Jesus and on Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple. Neither is named for it is their symbolic value that is important to John. Entrusting his mother to the care of the Beloved Disciple is Jesus' final act and it brings his mission to completion (see 19:28). What is John telling us that is so important?

We already have some idea of the significance of the Beloved Disciple for it is he who reclined on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. He is the key witness to Jesus in the community within which this Gospel was written and he is offered as the model disciple. Jesus' mother is being committed to the care of the one who was most open to receive God's word and who best understood the heart of Jesus. This much is clear. The 'his own' of verse twenty-seven may include his home, but it may also refer to his faith, love and witness. The Beloved Disciple carried out Jesus' final wish to the best of his ability.

To understand the significance for John of Jesus' mother we have to go to the only other scene in which she appears. It is the marriage feast of Cana. There too she is called 'the mother of Jesus' (2:1). There too she is addressed by Jesus as 'Woman' (2:4). There too Jesus speaks of his 'hour' (2:4).

At Cana Mary represents faithful Israel which is listening to the word of the Lord, waiting for the fulfilment of the promise and open to receive God's gift. Jesus could not meet her request then, for the wine for which the people were waiting was the wine of the Spirit, the full communion in the love of the Father and the Son, which Jesus could give only when his 'hour' had come. Now that the 'hour' is here, the mother of Jesus still stands as a symbol of expectant Israel, indeed of every people who welcome the Word of God and await the fulfilment of God's promises.

Jesus is about to die. He is about to depart and go to the Father. From the fullness of his glory, from the fullness of his communion with the Father, he will pour out his Spirit upon all who believe. His mother represents those who believe and Jesus entrusts her to the care of the Beloved Disciple, his chosen witness. He will witness to Jesus, and all who listen to the word of the beloved Disciple and live in communion with him will receive the outpouring of the Spirit.

Jesus is offering the Beloved Disciple to his mother not only as his witness but as her son. As we contemplate her standing there as a symbol of the new Jerusalem, mother of God's new covenant people, we recall Isaiah's words:

The children born in the time of your bereavement will yet say in your hearing: 'The place is too crowded for me; make room for me to settle.' Then you will say in your heart, 'Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away – so who has reared these? I was left all alone – where then have these come from?' Thus says the Lord God: 'I will soon lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.'

– Isaiah 49:20-22

If the Beloved Disciple is her son, she is also being given to him as his mother. In the light of the rejection of Jesus and of his disciples by the majority of the Jewish people, John is here making a poignant comment. Israel is still the mother of the Christian community, for it is the First Covenant that has been brought to perfection in the New Covenant of love revealed and realised by Jesus.

While the mother of Jesus is primarily a symbol of faithful Israel, she is more than that. He calls her 'Woman', for as he is the new Adam she is the new Eve, the mother of the living, bringing forth children in pain (see Genesis 3:15-16; Apocalypse 12:1-5). We are reminded of Jesus' words at the last supper: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (16:20-22). Mary has pain now, like a woman in childbirth, but she will rejoice: 'Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her – that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom' (Isaiah 66:10-11).

²⁸After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.'

²⁹A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

³⁰When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.'

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John frequently presents Jesus' knowledge as not bound within the limits of our human condition (see 13:1; 18:4). As noted first in the Introduction, John is not giving us an insight into Jesus' human psyche. He is reminding us that we are watching the Word of God. Jesus has completed the mission given him by his Father (3:35; 13:3; 15:15). He has loved us to the end (3:16; 13:1). He has drunk the dregs of the cup that the Father gave him (18:11).

In completing his mission he has also brought Scripture to its goal. The scene with the wine is found also in the other Gospels. Here the soldiers are responding to Jesus' command. He is thirsting for that full communion with God which he had before the world existed (17:5): 'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?' (Psalm 42:2). He is thirsting, too, for the world which God loves so much, thirsting for it to open its heart to God and receive the love which it was Jesus' mission to bring.

The soldiers offer him diluted vinegary wine on a 'branch of hyssop', the small bushy leaves of which were used to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on the doors of those to be redeemed (Exodus 12:22). The Passover lambs have been slain for the feast. Here is another reminder that Jesus is 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29).

Jesus had said once, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (4:34). Now, with regal composure, he announces that his mission is complete. He has been glorified (7:39) and so now he bows his head in death and hands over the promised Spirit.

John has already told us that Jesus' trial took place on the day of Preparation for the festival of Passover (19:14). Now he tells us that it is also the day of Preparation for the Sabbath (compare Mark 15:42). The religious authorities were bound by ancient law:

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

– Deuteronomy 21:22-23

They had already tried to ensure a hasty death by the use of nails (see 20:20). A crucified person who was simply bound to the cross could take several days to die. They now sought to have the death of the crucified men hastened in the normal way by having their legs smashed with a heavy mallet.

When the soldiers were in the process of carrying out Pilate's instructions, Jesus appeared to them to be already dead, so one of them, to make sure, jabbed his side with a spear. What the Beloved Disciple saw then struck him as profoundly significant. To highlight this the narrator interrupts the flow of the narrative to underline the reliability of the Beloved Disciple's testimony. From Jesus' side flowed blood and water. The hour of glory has come and the Spirit is being poured out over the world.

Medical experts suggest different possible causes for such a phenomenon. John focuses on its symbolic significance. We might recall the purpose of his writing: 'These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). To reveal the inner meaning of what he saw John has recourse to the sacred Scriptures.

³¹Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity.

So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed.

³²Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him.

³³But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

³⁴Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out.

³⁵(He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)

³⁶These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled,

'None of his bones shall be broken.'

³⁷And again another passage of scripture says,

'They will look on the one whom they have pierced.'

The Psalmist is confident that God cares for the oppressed in spite of the terrible treatment which they are receiving. The symbol for this is that their bones remain intact: 'not one of their bones will be broken' (Psalm 34:20). Since the Passover lamb was a symbol of Israel, those preparing the lamb for sacrifice were instructed: 'you shall not break any of its bones' (Exodus 12:46; see Numbers 9:12) – a symbolic action demonstrating their faith that, in spite of their opponents, Israel would not be broken. John has already linked the time of Pilate's sentence with the hour of the slaughter of the Passover lambs (19:14) and we have suggested that his speaking of a 'branch of hyssop' (19:29) is another connection. He sees in the fact that the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs another sign of Jesus' redemptive mission as 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29).

John sees in the piercing of Jesus' side a fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah (compare Revelation 1:7). The prophet was given to understand the Messianic age as coming through the suffering and mysterious death of the one chosen by God to lead the forces of good against the forces of evil. The dirge recalls the lament that rose from Jerusalem at the untimely death of king Josiah (309BC):

I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication
on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem,
so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced,
they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child,
and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born.
On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great
as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo.

The land shall mourn, each family by itself;
the family of the house of David by itself,
and their wives by themselves;
the family of the house of Nathan by itself,
and their wives by themselves;
the family of the house of Levi by itself,
and their wives by themselves;
the family of the Shimeites by itself,
and their wives by themselves;
and all the families that are left, each by itself,
and their wives by themselves.

On that day a fountain shall be opened
for the house of David
and the inhabitants of Jerusalem,
to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

– Zechariah 12:10 - 13:1

They will lament, but God will pour out upon them a spirit of compassion and a fountain shall be opened to cleanse them from sin. The spear thrust at Jesus' side, like the rod with which Moses struck the rock (Numbers 20:11), is a symbol of the many ways in which we reject God's offer of life and love. Just as God's response was to pour water from the rock to quench the people's thirst (see Psalm 78:15-16), so water comes from the heart of Jesus to give life to the world.

For John the water is a symbol for the Spirit, promised by the Baptist (1:33) and by Jesus himself (6:63). We recall Jesus' words on the feast of Booths: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."' John adds, 'Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified'(7:37-39). Jesus' mission is just completed (19:30). He has 'poured himself out in death'(Isaiah 53:12) in giving his life for the world. Now he can draw everyone to himself (12:32). Just as healing and life-giving water flows from the right side of the temple (Ezekiel 47:1-12), so now from Jesus' pierced side the healing and life-giving Spirit flows out upon the world.

There will be different reactions. Some will mourn their own folly but refuse to accept his forgiveness or to receive his Spirit. Others, like the Beloved Disciple, will be drawn to the Son of Man who has been lifted up and, believing in him, will have eternal life (3:14-15). Let us, as Jesus' beloved disciples, stand with Mary near the cross and watch the water flowing from his pierced heart. Let us draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation (Isaiah 12:3). It will become for us a spring that will well up to eternal life (4:14).

With the water came blood. The price of our redemption was high. Nothing less than Jesus' complete gift of himself could persuade us of his love. In giving us the Spirit, it is his own life of communion with the Father that he is pouring out upon us. As we read in the First Letter of John: 'This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree'(1John 5:6-8). It is 'the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin'(1John 1:7).

Ancient commentators saw in the water and the blood symbols of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments that continue to draw beloved disciples into the mystery revealed from the open side of Jesus. Theodoret of Cyr is typical:

His side, like Adam's, was opened, not to reveal the woman who by her error brought death into the world, but to reveal the fountain of life, bringing life into the world with its double stream. One stream gives us new life in the baptistery and clothes us with the robe of immortality, while the other feeds those who have been reborn at the divine table, like infants being fed with milk.

Theodoret of Cyr, On the Incarnation of the Lord nn 26-27

The constant reference to the Scriptures reinforces the message that a mysterious providence is at work here. God is achieving his purpose even through what Paul calls 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'(1Corinthians 1:23).

His testimony is true

The testimony of the Beloved Disciple

Before we leave Calvary, let us stand a little longer with Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple and contemplate the blood and water coming from Jesus' pierced side. We have watched Jesus giving his flesh for the life of the world and now from his heart we see the love which he shares with the Father pouring out over the world in an infinite act of forgiveness. He is giving his Spirit to anyone who wants to receive it to enable us to experience his life welling up from within our souls as we love with his love.

As we watch Jesus on the cross we can see the truth of many of the amazing things which the Beloved Disciple has said of him. We can see that Jesus is, indeed, the Son of Man, sent to us by God, sharing our human condition, and revealing what matters in life and on what we shall be judged. We can see that he is, indeed, the Son of God, saying and doing only what comes from his communion with his Father. Watching Jesus on the cross, we can see that he has the Spirit without reserve. He is the bread for which we really hunger, the spring for which we really thirst, the light that dispels the darkness, the gate that leads us to paradise, the shepherd who takes us to pasture and the vine whose sap makes our lives fruitful. It is on the cross that Jesus shows in complete clarity that the life which he lives is the life which he shares with God and it is a life of love. It is this life that pours out from his pierced side and is offered to everyone. He is the way, the truth and the life. He is, indeed, the Saviour of the world.

The statements which the Beloved Disciple makes about Jesus are not theoretical. They come from what he saw and heard and from the experiences which he continued to have after Jesus' death. When he calls Jesus the 'Saviour of the world', for example, he is expressing something that he has come to realise through experience. After Jesus' death, he found that Samaritans and Jews who had experienced centuries of antipathy were coming together in love and finding meaning in the life of the Christian community. And not only Samaritans and Jews but Greeks and Romans and people from other nations as well. From experience the Beloved Disciple learned that Jesus' relevance was universal. He could say that Jesus is the one who takes away the sins of the world, because he saw it happening. What, then, of those other claims that he has made: that Jesus is God the only Son in the bosom of the Father, that he is the Lord, the 'I am', the eternal Word of God made flesh?

As we stand with the Beloved Disciple on Calvary we want to ask him about his experience of Jesus over the years that came to their climax on Calvary: 'When you were watching Jesus, what was going on inside you? As you listened to him what were you thinking? What kind of questions stirred your heart and demanded an answer? What dreams were you dreaming? And when you touched him, when he was touching you, when you watched him smiling, when you watched him healing people and when he spoke words to you from the mystery that you call God, what was happening that led you later on to find these words to express what he came to mean for you and for those you loved?

These questions are love-questions. As Origen says (see page 32), we can answer them only to the extent that we rest with the Beloved Disciple on the breast of Jesus at the supper and receive from Jesus the gift of his mother as our mother too. We can answer them only to the extent that we stand with the Beloved Disciple on Calvary and open our hearts to receive from Jesus the gift of the Spirit, his love-communion with the Father.

Over the years, the Beloved Disciple would have wondered about himself and his life. There were plenty of things with which to fill in the day, pleasurable things and things that were hard to bear. But whatever happened the sun kept setting and rising, and time was passing. Many questions were awakened in his heart, some curious, some urgent. The most persistent question, the one he found himself pondering as he tried to keep warm out on the lake at night, was about the very meaning of his own existence. It was not a selfish question, for it concerned everybody. He knew that if his life had meaning, everything must have meaning. On the other hand, if there was no ultimate significance in his existence, then nothing mattered for anybody. His life was part of the flux and movement of creation. He knew that everything stands or falls together.

The Beloved Disciple longed to be his true self. He sensed that finding oneself means finding what one is for another. This deepest of questions ‘Has my life meaning?’ is not one that can be answered in isolation. It is a question asked by a person who is involved with other persons. It is a love question. ‘Am I significant?’ really means, ‘Am I significant for you?’ It is a way of asking ‘Do you love me?’ He found himself wanting other people. He wondered did they really want him? Sometimes there were small flashes of experience that fanned this question into a flame for him. There was the excitement of being loved by his family and fishing companions. At such moments he felt alive, he was nurtured, he grew and blossomed and found that, by receiving love he was able to give it. At other times he was disappointed. A promise of love wilted, the flower faded and fell away. At these times he was tempted to divert the deep stream of his being into some shallow creek. He was tempted to develop ways of living without love, ways of dulling the ache and the disappointment by avoiding any kind of dependence on others. He could bury himself in his work or in shallow camaraderie in the inn at close of day.

Could he? The question and a quest would not go away. He recognised such strategies as distractions for they failed to attend to the question that demanded an answer, Does my life have meaning? The Beloved Disciple knew that he was asking an ultimate question here. Moments of love were relevant but only momentarily. He wanted to know the meaning of his life. He sought a response to his quest, a response that transcended the moment and that would engage all his energies, all his mind and heart and soul, and all his days. He wanted to be in love, without conditions and finally. Was this desire foolish or sensible? Could he expect to find an answer to it?

He knew as little and as much about God as everybody else and he did know that the question which he was asking is a God question. Whatever God is, however we might imagine the mystery, the presence and the power that we name God is related to this question about meaning.

His testimony is true

Whatever it is that explains the world and the changes of the seasons, birth and death, pain and love – whatever it is that makes sense of life, it is there that I must look for the meaning of my life. Whatever it is that accounts for the relationships that I discover in creation, and in history, it is this that accounts for my relationships. That much he knew. But was there a meaning to it all? Did the life of the Beloved Disciple have any ultimate significance or must he just fill in each day as successfully as he could, a victim of blind chance, of other people haphazard actions, and of his own fickle whims? Must he break the glass to lap up the spilt wine, getting as much temporary satisfaction as he could in an effort to dull the question which his heart would not let him forget?

He listened to the big stories that were told over and over among his people: stories of a desert journey and a promised land, stories of a powerful presence, a redeeming liberating loving God who gave meaning to peoples lives – or so they claimed at any rate. That was a long time ago, yet the story was told and retold because somehow it rang true. The Beloved Disciple could sort out the true from the false, to some extent at any rate. He knew people who lived beautiful human lives, people who seemed somehow to be in touch with a spring of living water that welled up from inside. Their lives were in a way an answer to his question but they were so few and so far between and there were so many lies being told, so many masks being worn, that their example did not dispel his doubts.

One of the tragedies of our world is to see religious insights such as that of Moses being lost in a welter of traditions. The insights seems to deteriorate because we somehow fancy that we do not have to go through the joy of conceiving again or the pain of giving birth. We think we can just memorise what another has seen and hand it on. It becomes lifeless. Religions born of heroism and prayer can bog down in traditions, in law, in logic, in moral systems, and in ritual. All these features of social life have their place and importance, and they can be the skins that hold the wine. Or to alter the image, they can be the flowers that burgeon forth on the tree of religious experience. But if there is no insight, no religious experience, no joy at the profound answer to our deepest questions, either the flowers wilt and die or we replace them with plastic imitations that look the same but have no perfume and no life.

One thinks of the famous fig tree in the gospel of Mark (11:12-14). It was all leaf, all show, but no one could ease his hunger from it. The Beloved Disciple's religious environment was largely like that, so it seems. He and his friends found little nourishment in the temple- cult God of the Sadducees, or in the law-enacting God of the Pharisees. Even the condemning-judge God of the Baptist gave them little to hope for. All of them left untouched this young man who was looking for meaning and who needed to be loved. Then he met Jesus. Jesus loved him, but then so did Simon. He felt at home with Jesus. But he had felt at home before. Jesus was straight with him and clear and honest. He had known people like that before. Jesus was like a brother to him, but he had brothers anyhow. Jesus grew on him, but so had John the Baptist. Yet there remained something special about Jesus and it was related to this God question, this deepest question of his heart. It was related to the mystery that he encountered in prayer.

Jesus constantly spoke about God, and so about life and life's ultimate meaning, and when he spoke his words rang true and stirred up hope in the Beloved Disciple's heart and awakened an innocence that he thought he had lost. Jesus spoke with authority. It was recognisable but somehow different, beautifully different, from anything the Beloved Disciple had ever heard before. What Jesus said was not only about Judaism; it was about life. It was about everybody and therefore about the Beloved Disciple, and the Beloved Disciple knew it. It was easy for him to see Jesus as a teacher and a prophet, for no one else spoke quite like him.

As the Beloved Disciple found himself hurrying to listen to Jesus, and as he noticed all kinds of energy being released in him thanks to Jesus, he found that love, with all its wonder and all its pain, would not let him run any more and kept challenging him to face his deepest quest. He noticed that it was not just isolated words spoken by Jesus that excited him, it was Jesus himself.

Jesus himself seemed to be an answer for his questions. Jesus himself was a word from life, a word from God. The Beloved Disciple watched the way he cared, the way he caressed the sick, the gentleness, the respect which he demonstrated to the broken hearted. He watched the way Jesus made peace and brought about reconciliation. As he saw how Jesus committed the energies of his body and heart and soul to the poor who cried out in their distress, he could not help thinking of Yahweh and the big story of the journey of his life. He saw also the way Jesus walked in the desert, and how he was misunderstood and persecuted for his pains. He saw him lied about, and pushed around, and yet nothing could stop him loving.

As the Beloved Disciple listened and watched he found himself growing. He could feel the roots of his being striving for the spring and drinking deeply from the living water. He felt nourished and enlightened and purified. And there was something ultimate about what was happening to him, and not only to him. Conversations with friends assured him that what he thought he was seeing was true for them as well. All who let Jesus love them had the same personal and ultimate response. Jesus showed them what God really is. He showed them that their life was meaningful. He gave it meaning by loving them.

Statements which they had associated with religion now become answers to real questions. God was truly alive for them because Jesus was the Yes to their questions and their hopes, and the more they allowed themselves to ask what was in their heart, the more everything began to make sense. It was not easy. It was not an escape. It challenged them to expend all their energy in loving others as Jesus had loved them.

No one who related to Jesus in love could doubt that Jesus' life had meaning. In many ways his life did not differ from the life endured by others. He was flesh like all of us. He had to live with what history and time and stupidity do to people. The extraordinary thing about Jesus was that he did live with it. He did not get distracted. He was at home. The flower and the fruit were there to demonstrate the human beauty of his person.

His testimony is true

Jesus was sinless. Is it possible? He trusted life. He trusted the ultimate meaning of things. He trusted God. He stayed in touch with his life experience at depth. They often saw him at prayer. He listened to life, and responded in love to whatever the call was. He was sensitive, and sensible, aware and trusting, forgiving and full of hope. When they asked about the ultimate mystery that they called God, there came from his lips the gentlest of words 'Abba'. Jesus saw himself as receiving life from whatever it was that made sense for him of the world. He was a son of life, a Son of God. His responses to people were accurate, sensitive, creative and life giving. The Beloved Disciple was in no doubt that this lovely personal interdependence that he experienced with Jesus, and that others experienced as well, was being nourished by an ultimate relationship that went to the very core of Jesus' own being.

When Jesus spoke about himself, his life and his deepest love, the Beloved Disciple remembered the story he had heard in the synagogue, the big story of his people. He could see in Jesus what the story had been trying to say all along. All his religious words started to take on meaning because they took on the features, the gestures and the character of Jesus. He was unable to think of life any more, or of God or of the journey or of the promised land without thinking of Jesus. From the depths of life itself and the depths of history a word was spoken to the depths of his being, an answer came to the deepest searching of his heart. Flooded with light and peace and life energy, the Beloved Disciple knew he was loved, not just here and now, but ultimately, for Jesus' love was life-love, God-love. He knew that he need not be distracted again. His heart sang with joy the song of life. He saw this happening to others as well, with profound effect on their lives. He learned from Jesus not to be afraid. He learned to be in touch with his own life experience and to handle gently not only Jesus himself but every person, every living thing and the very world itself. He learned to believe. He learned to be in love. Call it what you will, it was real, it was ultimate, it was transcendent, it was life-giving; it was all that the word God ever wanted to say.

The Beloved Disciple was a monotheist. He thought of everything as belonging, as being interconnected and as having the one ultimate meaning and cause. He thought of heaven and earth and the underworld, man and nature, all life, all being, as coming from the same source and as sustained by the same energy. His religion had taught him to give expression in worship to his natural sense of wonder and awe. It had also taught him to believe his own personal religious experience. It never occurred to him to think of this God as unknowable, as not communicating with this world. God was at the heart of everything. The clouds did God's will, every kiss could be a message of love, every thought was open to God. God was at the heart of everything, though mysteriously transcendent.

Jesus put words on the word of God and gave a face to the glory. Something in the depths of the Beloved Disciple's being knew that when he listened to Jesus he was listening to God and when he looked upon Jesus he was seeing not just a beautiful expression of God, but God himself as God willed to communicate with mankind in our own terms in the flesh. Jesus was God himself communicating to his people. Somewhere here I believe is the key to the faith of the Beloved Disciple and the faith experience of those who followed Jesus.

This has been the core of the church's faith ever since. In the man Jesus, God himself loves, redeems, saves, heals, and gives meaning to our world. Jesus is God's focal word, binding everything together, making sense of everything and revealing God to us. Jesus showed the Beloved Disciple not just what God is like but what God is. His life now had a meaning for the whole of creation made sense. There is a God and God is the love that Jesus gave to him. It was a baptism experience for him, an experience of being purified, cleansed, refreshed and overwhelmed by the love of God, by the creative power and energy of life itself. It was a baptism into intimacy with Jesus and with anyone who dared the same journey. It was a baptism into love and therefore into pain and hurt as well as into disappointment and apparent failure. It was a baptism into the truth – the truth about himself as well as the truth about God. Jesus unveiled to him the author of all and the source of all life and all energy. Jesus showed him what love really is. It is the real name for what we have called God.

The Beloved Disciple experienced this when he first heard Jesus speak of God. The Hebrew word for God (*Elohim*) was associated in his mind with many different things, many of them conflicting. It released him and yet trapped him, it encouraged him and it cast him into the deepest depression. It was about the only hope he had and yet it was about ultimate failure, it was about salvation and it was about condemnation. Jesus was honest and clear about life and about success and failure. There was nothing soft about Jesus' words or the challenge he urged on people, but Jesus was also very clear about where God was in all this. *Elohim* means something like Almighty. Whatever it is that holds this universe together and brings everything into existence must be immensely powerful. Jesus showed that the power is the power that we call love. It is love that does it all. We knew love meant a lot to us, we did not realise the extraordinary significance it has in relation to the very existence of the world. The God of Jesus was unconditional, positive, life-giving love. This would have been unbelievable except that Jesus showed it to be true.

Love could be accepted or rejected and there is a world of difference between the two. But Jesus left the Beloved Disciple in no doubt about the reality of love or about its consistency and fidelity. The idea was already there in the memories of the Beloved Disciple's nation, but it was always balanced and moderate and reasonable. This meant it was always obscured. Jesus said it without any bargaining and he demonstrated it without any compromise. God is good. God is for people, all people, whether just or unjust, whether living or dead, whether Jew or Gentile.

The Beloved Disciple saw this at the marriage feast of Cana. Whatever happened there it was about love. It was about generosity and a release of life energy as people learned to celebrate their existence. The Beloved Disciple saw it by the pool of Beth-zatha and in the healing at the Siloam pool where a man who was born blind opened his eyes for the first time and saw. As we have read through the gospel, we have heard the kinds of reflections that these events led to in the Beloved Disciple's consciousness. What they have in common is that he saw in them and in the person at the centre of them the meaning of life itself and the answer to his ultimate quest. He saw God revealed as the enlightener, the life giver, the saviour and redeemer of the world.

His testimony is true

Then came the passion and death of the one who loved him. The Beloved Disciple witnessed the fidelity of Jesus as everyone's pain, frustration, sin, disappointment and anger fell on him and tried to crush him. People's fears and preference for error, darkness and distraction all overwhelmed Jesus, crashed down on him and killed him. It was the manner of his accepting death that finally opened the Beloved Disciple's eyes.

Everything that we have read in the gospel is what the Beloved Disciple came to see in the reflected light of the cross. Everything else became a sign of God but only in the light of the way Jesus died. The key to the Beloved Disciple's basic insight must be found here on the cross. This is the hour of glory, the hour when life was unveiled and shown to be endless loving. The contrast between light and dark could not have been any stronger. What Jesus said on the cross is final, ultimate, transcendent, complete: 'It is accomplished'.

As we look at Jesus on the cross, we can see all the arguments against life having meaning. We see sin in all its horror. Watch the high priests, watch the Roman soldiers, watch Pilate. On Calvary we can see what has become a powerful symbol of the ultimate question that troubles us. Why do the innocent suffer? There we see all the stupidity and all the pain of a broken, hurt, frustrated, lost world and so the question is acute to anyone watching. Does life have any meaning? Does the life of Jesus of Nazareth have meaning? Does the life of those who condemned him have any meaning, really? Is there any hope for any of us if Jesus can be crucified?

The eyes of the Beloved Disciple are fixed on the figure around whom everything is happening. What Jesus is saying to him from the cross is being said mainly in silence. What the Beloved Disciple sees there he has already shared with us throughout the Gospel but especially in the supper discourses which open with the words: 'The hour had come for Jesus to pass from this world to the Father. He always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed them how perfect his love was' (13:1). To someone passing by Jesus might seem to be the victim, but the Beloved Disciple knows that he is watching a free person whose one concern is to accomplish his Father's loving will. There is something of gift about what is happening on the cross, something beautiful that shines through the ugliness. As Jesus said: 'No one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own free will, this is the trust that I have been given by my Father who loves me'.

The night before he died, as he dined with 'his own', Jesus lived his dying in painful anticipation and he made of it an offering of love. As he took the bread and broke it, his heart broke. As he saw the blood-red wine, he asked them to drink his life into their thirsty souls. As he shared this last meal under the shadow of the morrow, he gave a new meaning to the Passover meal and to the blood of a Pascal lamb. By his love, he showed them that, in spite of the ugliness, violence and stupidity of the crucifixion, it is about love. As the Beloved Disciple looks at Jesus on the cross, he knows that Jesus is right. Jesus had given of himself day in and day out and now he hangs there a free man, innocent of evil, amid the terrible injustice. Whatever others are doing to him and about him, he keeps believing in people, believing in the world, believing in himself. He keeps believing in God and the Beloved Disciple can hear him still praying to this God.

Jesus gave everything. Now he is giving his life. The two criminals are there to remind everyone that Jesus belongs to us, and, belonging to us, he shows finally and conclusively that sin is not the inevitable consequence of being human that we thought it was. From the cross Jesus shows the Beloved Disciple and anyone else who cares to stand there and contemplate him, that we do not have to be distracted by distractions. Not even death can take life away. Life is from God, God is the life giver. Jesus is rooted in love and built on love and he remains in love on the cross. That is what the Beloved Disciple sees and this is what he remembered. In the reality of the pain, the suffering, the failure, the rejection, the accusations, the injustice and all the apparently meaningless absurdity of the crucifixion, Jesus is in peace. He feels for those who are lost in it all. He speaks words of forgiveness, and reconciliation. He keeps striving there to piece together the broken fragments of people's lives, right to the end.

The Beloved Disciple is feeling desolate. The one who has given meaning to his life, the one who loves him, is being violently taken from him. But there is something about the way Jesus is looking at him that says: 'Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God still and trust in me'. There is something about Jesus on the cross that says to the Beloved Disciple: 'Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your heart be troubled or afraid. You are sad now, but I shall see you again and your heart will be full of joy and that joy no one shall take from you. Be brave, I have conquered the world'.

The Beloved Disciple realises now what he has heard often enough but it has never really penetrated his heart before. I am worth dying for, the world is worth loving and loving unto death. He is learning for the first time what God is. God is what is being revealed there on Calvary. Here are the Beloved Disciple's ultimate questions being answered. His heart is breaking and so is that of Jesus, but what he sees and hears here will remain in his memory as the ultimate revelation of God and the ultimate experience of meaning. He would never forget Jesus' final gesture when he asked him to care for his mother. It was a simple gesture, a love gift from the heart, a sacred trust and in it was the answer to the Beloved Disciple's deepest quest. The one who had given him so much love, needed him, wanted him, expected of him. His life must have a meaning. Jesus gave it meaning.

Then Jesus died. How the Beloved Disciple loved him then. Jesus had said once: 'Anyone who loves me will be loved by my Father and I shall love him and show myself to him'. Was it too late for that now? Could he live without him? What now? He had no time for thoughts such as these, for as he stood there, holding and being held by the mother, he saw Jesus' side pierced and the blood and water flow from his heart. The heart of Jesus is the heart of God. In our blackest hour when all that human pride and folly could do to pierce the heart of God was done, from the living heart of the glorified Jesus, life blood and a spring of living water poured out over the Beloved Disciple and Mary and over the world to cleanse, to nurture and to give life.

His testimony is true

Jesus had promised: 'If any of you is thirsty, come to me. Come and drink, you who believe in me. As scripture says "from his breast shall flow fountains of living water"'. Jesus had said 'I live and you will live' and the Beloved Disciple knew it that day. The one whom his heart had loved was alive in the embrace of God, in the bosom of the Father. From the cross Jesus drew the Beloved Disciple into that same embrace and from that place of love the Beloved Disciple had no choice but to go out to everyone and draw them into the same mystery. He had seen God. He knew that God is love, and that eternal life, life without limit, was given to him from that cross and is offered to everyone who believes. Jesus is indeed the Saviour of the world.

In a book on the Sacred Heart written in 1900, Jules Chevalier, the founder of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart as well as of their sister congregation, the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, wrote: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary I see a new world coming forth, a great and life giving world inspired by love and mercy. A world which the church must perpetuate on the whole earth'. The Beloved Disciple saw that and so has everyone who has dared to risk the contemplation that we are attempting now.

How are we who were not on Calvary with the Beloved Disciple to look on the one we have pierced? How are we going to see what God is? How are we going to enter into what the Beloved Disciple saw that day? The Beloved Disciple will answer that question for us in his account of the apparitions of the risen Christ to his Disciples. As we shall see, it was when Thomas looked at the wounds in the hands of Jesus that he had held so often, and when he put his hand into the side of Jesus, his response and the response of believers everywhere was, 'My Lord and my God! My Lord and my God!' It must be the same for us.

God is the one who creates me and who sustains me, who breathes life into me. God is the one who is reflected in a million ways by the creation around me and who communicates with me in every event of my life. If my mind cannot comprehend the mystery, I still have to live and I want to live with meaning. Jesus lived, the Beloved Disciple lived, Thomas lived and Peter lived, and Jesus' Mother lived. What was their secret? They loved. They touched the wounds of the world with devotion, with care and with prayer. They did not run from evil, but they remained good when surrounded by it. It was in the practical carrying out of the consequences of fidelity and love that they grew to see what life was about. It was in the experience of loving that they knew that God is love.

In giving their lives in love their lives were given meaning and the thirst of their spirit was slaked and peace came to their restlessness. But love is learned as a response before it becomes itself a source of life. The Beloved Disciple learned to love from Jesus whose love was experienced by him as the love of the one he called God. May it be the same for us.

It was Roman custom to allow relatives and friends to dispose of the body of a criminal. Joseph is mentioned here for the first and only time in John. Nicodemus has already been mentioned (3:1ff; 7:50). Jesus is continuing to 'draw all people' to himself (12:32).

According to the Synoptics there was no time to give Jesus a proper burial. John too reminds us that they had to carry out the customary burial in haste for 'it was the Jewish day of Preparation' (also 19:14,31). However, John continues to focus on Jesus as king and the amount of spices indicates that his burial as a truly regal one.

Myrrh is a fragrant resin. Aloë is aromatic sandalwood in powdered form. Both were used for perfume. Together they were also used as incense in the cult. Is John reminding us that Jesus' body is the new temple? The king's garments retain their perfume on the night of his wedding (Psalm 45:8). Is John reminding us of Cana? The hour has come and Jesus is celebrating his nuptials with God and with us.

They wash Jesus' body, mix the spices with oil and anoint it, bind it in cloth and lay it in an unused grave in the garden area near Calvary.

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.

³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

⁴¹Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.

⁴²And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.