

John 19:23-42

We are nearing the end of John's Gospel, also referred to as the Fourth Gospel. which we began after Christmas. We have considered this narrative from the perspective of a Jewish mystic and have seen John use symbols and signs to tell his story which was never meant to be actual history.

Today's scene centres on Jesus' last breaths on the cross. Jesus is not alone with his enemies. He is surrounded by some of his own, including his mother, his mother's sister, Mary of Magdala, and the disciple whom he loved. Jesus' mother and the beloved model disciple are given to each other by Jesus to establish a new community in faith and love. Even on the cross, Jesus' primary concern is for his own as he forms a family to nurture the children of God.

The earthly life and ministry of Jesus, the son of Man, ends with his declaration, "it is finished" ... the affirmation that all has been brought to completion and perfection. The concluding remarks of this fourth act indicate that the new community of the children of God begins its own mission of faith and witness through the testimony of the Beloved Disciple who is joined in a new community with the mother of Jesus.

At this point, John reintroduces Jesus' mother and the Beloved disciple, the two symbolic figures through whom he is going to reveal the meaning of the cross. This is Jesus' mother's first appearance since the wedding feast at Cana, where she was taught that it was not her role to force Jesus to act before his "hour had come".

Even at that early moment in John's story, the mother of Jesus looked more like a symbol than a person. As we have seen previously, most of John's characters are symbols rather than historical figures.

Now John places the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross. There is no reference in any other gospel to her presence at the place of Jesus' execution. This detail is not history. After all, it was the tenth decade of Christian history before the mother of Jesus and the cross were brought together in any Christian literature. She is not a major figure in any of the gospel portraits of Jesus. Her rise to prominence in Christian tradition was very, very slow. It is some sixty-five to seventy years after the crucifixion that she is finally portrayed as being at the foot of the cross – and that only in the fourth gospel.

The other symbolic figure at the foot of the cross, also nameless like the mother of Jesus, is the "Beloved Disciple" or "the disciple Jesus loved", and John will portray him as the first disciple who believed. This person's identity has been debated throughout Christian history. The favourite or most popular was John, the son of Zebedee, but no one outside fundamentalist circles still believes this. Others have proposed Thomas as the "Beloved Disciple", as well as John, Mark, Mary Magdalene, James the brother of Jesus, and even Lazarus.

The "Beloved Disciple" is the final great literary creation of the author of the Fourth Gospel – and is not a person of history. The "Beloved Disciple" is crucial to John's development of the Jewish mystical theme developed in this book. Does John

give us any clue to this figure's identity? He is said to be beloved of Jesus, a character from the "Book of Signs" introduced earlier in the Fourth Gospel and part of our journey through this Gospel.

It is only after the story of the raising of Lazarus that the description "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is first used. Mary and Martha send the message "Lord, he whom you love is ill." When "the Jews" see Jesus weeping, they interpret his weeping by saying, "See how he loved him." The author is deliberately making the point that Lazarus is "the beloved" of Jesus. Lazarus, who passed from death to life, is repeatedly referred to as the one "whom Jesus loved". It makes sense that John seats the "beloved disciple" next to Jesus at the Last Supper, "leaning on his breast", and now places him at the foot of the cross. The "beloved disciple" is the one, alone of all disciples, who follows him to his death. If not a historical figure, whom does the "disciple whom Jesus loved" symbolize?

He is a mythological character, a symbol of those who see, of those who respond and of those who are transformed. He's the archetype of the Jesus movement. He represents the ones who are able to taste and experience, to share in the new life that Jesus came to bring. He is the "Lazarus" who passed from death into life, the one who knows that to be in Christ is to have the life of God flow through him as the life of the vine flows through the branches. He is the symbol of the new creation, the first citizen of the new Israel, the representative of the first fruits of the kingdom of God. He is the one who sees, who believes and who understands.

He is the ultimate representative of the Johannine community of believers who have been excommunicated from the synagogue and then purged of those, like Judas, who cannot go all the way into the life that Jesus represents. He is the one who confronts those, like Peter, who waver and doubt, and he is the one who finally enables Peter, and those like him, to walk with his doubts and fears into the presence of all that Jesus means. It is the “beloved disciple” who opens the door so the wavering Peter can get into the courtyard of the high priest.

The “beloved disciple” is the ultimate definition of a follower of Jesus. Judas, another of John’s symbols, cannot see and remains in the darkness. Peter embodies the intense struggle of faith. Pilate is the symbol of earthly power, a symbol of the world against which the followers of Jesus must forever struggle. Finally, the “beloved disciple” is the symbol of what it means to journey beyond life’s defensive boundaries into the mystery of new life, new consciousness, that is to be found in the Christ experience.

So John has this symbol, the “beloved disciple”, take his place at the cross, at the moment when this gospel asserts that the meaning of Jesus is finally revealed, at the moment of Jesus’ glorification. He is the symbol of those who can make the transition and step into the meaning of eternity.

The “beloved disciple” is at the foot of the cross with the mother of Jesus who herself is a symbol - a symbol of Judaism, the people of God. The Jewish people had great trouble receiving what was their own great gift to the world. So John has

Jesus on the cross commend his mother, Judaism, to the care of the “beloved disciple”, the one who embodies the future fulfilment of the Jesus movement.

John is saying to the community of the followers of Jesus who have been expelled from the synagogue: “You cannot forget the past, you must accept and cherish the womb that bore you. You must embrace Judaism, your mother, and incorporate her into your own life.” The distress over excommunication, the tension, their hostility toward the Jews, chief priests and Pharisees - all this must be overcome. “Woman, behold your son.” *“Judaism, behold your child, the Jesus movement.”* Then he says to that anonymous symbolic disciple, “Behold your mother.” From that day forward, “the disciple took her to his own home.” John is creating a mystical portrait of oneness, of new life, of a transition into a new being, a new consciousness. As the mother is commended to the care of the “beloved disciple”, the barriers separating the human family are portrayed as falling away.

Two things remained for the author of the Fourth Gospel to complete before his story of the passion was finished. He wanted people within the Jewish tradition to see that Jesus was the fulfilment of their own sacred scriptures, and he wanted to open the possibility of new life for **all** to share – Gentiles as well as Jews.

The “beloved disciple” was charged to carry the one who symbolized Judaism, the mother of Christianity, with him into the future. The synagogue and Temple leaders had purged themselves of the revisionist followers of Jesus. Yet, the followers of Jesus were to see themselves as the next phase, the universal phase

of the Jewish story. It would be their responsibility not to reject or to destroy their mother, but to transcend her limits.

The people of Israel had survived through a difficult history by erecting defensive barriers such as kosher food rules, the forbidding of intermarriage, purity laws, circumcision, behind which they could survive as a people, as a separate unique community. All their practices were grounded in what they called “the law” found in their sacred scriptures. They believed that in their scriptures, they could hear the “word of God.” This word, however, seemed to come to a halt at the boundaries of their tribe and the limits of their faith.

The author of the Fourth Gospel would never want to abandon the faith of his fathers and mothers, but he did want to transcend its limits, to transform its pillars of exclusion into an inclusiveness. He wanted to open the treasures of Jewish life for all to share as they journeyed into a new understanding of what it means to be human.

That is why John perceived Jesus as a new “word of God”, a new Torah spoken to the world. The boundaries that separated Jew from Samaritan and Jew from Gentile faded. That is why true worship could not be limited to either Mount Gerizim in Samaria or the Temple in Jerusalem, for the God who is spirit must be worshipped everywhere in truth. That is why the “beloved disciple” had to embrace and take to himself the “mother of Jesus”, the faith of the people of God, and to make her forever a part of what the Jesus movement would become. The “Word of

God” in Jesus was destined not to destroy Judaism, but to open it to possibilities that were grander and more inclusive than a national life, based on the deep-seated human desire to survive, would ever be or imagine being. That is why the crucifixion was Jesus’ moment of glorification, for in that ultimate act of self-giving he had escaped that human desire to survive.

So, at the cross, John has the “beloved disciple” embrace Jesus’ mother, the symbol of the past, incorporate her into himself, the symbol of the future, and transcend all her limits. The task of the faithful followers of Jesus was and is to seek to lead the world into a new universalism, a new understanding of what it means to be born into the life of the spirit.

John now wanted to complete his story by demonstrating that the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people pointed to and found their fulfillment in the life of this Jesus. Jesus did not come to create a new religion, but to transform their religion of the past by transcending its boundaries and removing its limits. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit was, therefore, to “open the scriptures”, or to recall to people’s memories the scriptures.

The details around the crucifixion were in fulfillment of the scriptures. The new creation is now accomplished. A door has been opened into a new meaning of life, a new humanity, a new being. “I have shown them the way to new life”, says Jesus. I have revealed God’s glory, the glory which calls us to live fully, to love wastefully and to be all that each of us can be. There is no atonement here; there is just

expanded humanity – humanity that enters into the life of God and shares in the eternity of God.

To fulfill the scriptures, to fulfill the words from the prophet Zechariah, John has a soldier hurl a spear into the side of Jesus. Then John files one final symbol into his deeply symbolic, non-literal work. From their spear wound came “blood and water”. The blood is the wine of the Eucharist. The water is the water of baptism. The wine of the banquet which was to mark the arrival of the kingdom of God, is now the wine of the Eucharist in which the life of Jesus is believed to enter the life of the believer. We are the branches living on the life of the vine through which the divine life flows into each of us. Jesus opens the door to mystical oneness. His death is the ultimate revelation of life.

Now the time has come to remove the body for burial. Two people carry out the preparations: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The burial is elaborate. A hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, an extravagant amount for burial, is used. The body is bound like that of Lazarus, in linen cloths. It is placed into a new tomb in the midst of an unnamed garden. The meaning of this life is now enclosed by a tomb. The world waits! The meaning of life transformed is about to dawn!

Amen.