

Jesus knew that his hour had come

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-35

Text: John 13:1

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Introduction

Historian Thomas Cahill penned a series of books under the title Hinges of History, as a retelling of the story of the influences that gave rise to of the Western world. One of those books was on Jesus of Nazareth, *Desire Of The Everlasting Hills: The World Before And After Jesus*. The title is a line taken from Jacob's blessing of his son Joseph. (Genesis 49:26) Published in 1999 Cahill writes, "Jesus was a small town Jew, born in a bad time for Jews. ... This unlikely character has long been accounted the central figure of western civilization. Even now, as we cross to the beginning of the third millennium since his birth, we count our days by his appearance on earth; and, though our supposedly post-Christian society often ignores and even ridicules him, there is no serious suggestions for replacing him as the icon of the West."¹

1. The thirteenth chapter of John marks the start of the second section of his gospel—the section that chronicles the last week of Jesus' life. John begins this section telling us that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Jesus, John tells us, is conscious that his hour had come. And what an hour this would be.

John uses the word 'hour' metaphorically to speak of this sequence of events when Jesus would "depart from the world and go to the Father." The church John writes to are familiar with these events; events that surround Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. But more specifically, the 'hour' refers to what we call Jesus' passion—his crucifixion when he would give himself for the sins of the world. In the preceding chapter John tells us of some Greeks who were at the Passover

¹ Thomas Cahill, *Desire Of The Everlasting Hills*, Doubleday, 1999. p. 8.

festival and asked for an audience with Jesus. This prompts inner turmoil for Jesus who, speaking of his death, said ‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.’ The word translated ‘troubled’ means to be anxious or distressed.

Cahill is correct that we count our days by Jesus’ appearance on earth, so profound is Jesus’ influence in our world. We only need to look on tombstones or at obituaries to see that we mark our time on earth in relationship to his. The point I would underline with you is this—if it wasn’t for this particular ‘hour’, as John speaks of it, we would not be marking time in relationship to Jesus. So momentous is this ‘hour’ that culminates in his unspeakable execution at a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, that we would not ever have heard his name save for the significance of his dying. He would have been like the thousands of other nameless victims Rome crucified. Crucifixion was designed to make sure the name of the crucified was expunged from history—never to be spoken again. The observation that Jesus has profoundly influenced Western history isn’t particularly earth shattering. The question is why is this man’s life so influential. All the gospels point to this hour.

2. It is good to remind ourselves of the emphasis that the New Testament puts on this approaching hour. Close to half of everything recorded by the gospel writers of Jesus’ life is about the events of just one week—this week we call Holy Week. You will also note, upon reading any one of the gospels from start to finish, that the speed of the story changes. The beginning takes us rapidly through Jesus’ Galilean ministry moving from event to event that occur over a three year period. As we approach Jerusalem things begin to slow down, events are closer together in the calendar. And then we get to Palm Sunday and things really slow down going day by day until we get to Golgotha when we come to a stop where we are invited to stand and observe.

The Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians that he had but one sermon in his filing cabinet. “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) To proclaim a crucified saviour in the Roman world was a saviour who had been executed was the worst of the worst, yet Paul would say in his great Romans letter, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Clearly, Paul has his crucified saviour in mind.

Note how the pace of John’s gospel has slowed down to a virtual crawl as he talks about Jesus’ ‘hour’ that is coming. He gives much detail about Jesus’ teaching at

this last supper and as they are walking together to Gethsemane. John loads up the opening sentences of this account with information so we are aware that it takes place in the context of this approaching hour that is very close at hand. John sets the stage telling us what Jesus knew; “that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father; the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him; the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.”

Perhaps you are like me, when something difficult that I must face is on the horizon it is hard to concentrate on the work or endeavours of the present moment. When some challenge is approaching it is hard to shut out that distraction to be able to concentrate on sermon writing, for example. When I consider what our Lord knows about his hour that is now so close and then see that he got up from the table, took off his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around himself; it is, to me, a marvel that he was able to set aside the turmoil of what was coming to do this at all. Reflection on that may help us to understand what John has in mind when he says of Jesus, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

I invite you to consider the approaching darkness that is casting its shadows over this meal. The devil had put it into Judas to betray him and Jesus will confront him at this meal. Jesus will have to tell Peter that he will deny him. Luke tells us that a dispute about greatness had erupted at this meal among the disciples. In a song reflecting on Jesus’ crucifixion, the late Leonard Cohen wrote, “You want it darker We kill the flame.” The darkness is circling at this meal; the killing of the flame is just around the corner.

As one theologian wrote, “John makes use of this massing of theological propositions in order to bring out the great truth that this divine self-consciousness of Jesus, confronted by the final assault of the devil directed through his instrument Judas, manifested itself not in a sovereign display of omnipotence but in an amazing act of self-humiliation.”

The washing of the disciples feet is so much more than an acted out parable. This is a foretaste of the Saviour of the world who will go to any length for our sake; who will pour himself out with remainder that he might bring us home. As I watch him washing feet and coming now to wash my feet, how can I not follow him in this way of service that he shows me.

3. The Epistle reading appointed for reading in Maundy Thursday in the Lectionary is 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The passage where the Apostle Paul gives the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. We will read that text during the communion portion of our service this evening. "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you," writes Paul, "that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you.' And so on.

The three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all agree that these words of institution were given by Jesus at this last supper. It may surprise some to know that the gospel of John does not have these words of institution. John tells us of foot washing and great detail about what Jesus taught that night—detail that the other gospel writers do not include. This has been a puzzle for many biblical scholars.

If you follow the timeline of when the various New Testament writers pen their books Paul's letter to the Corinthians appears many years before any of the gospels are written. Since Paul gives us the words of institution it is clear that the churches have been practising this for some time—it was something Paul also handed on. By the time the gospels are written this is common church practice and the story is told in the gospels to point out its origins for future generations. John's gospel is written after all these others appear towards the end of the first century and I think he simply assumes everyone knows this and doesn't need him to repeat it. Many scholars believe the details of Jesus' teaching on that evening that John gives us are excerpts from sermons he preached at his church's celebration of the Lord's supper.

I want to point out something in these words of institution. It is the two little words 'for you.' The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you.' The 'for you' is implied in the giving of the cup in Paul's rendering; Luke makes it explicit in his account of the institution—Jesus said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20) For you.

Our Older Testament reading appointed for this service is the institution of the Passover. This is the meal that Jesus is participating in with his disciples. (Now I know that John says that it was before the festival of the Passover that this took place, so many wonder at the apparent discrepancy between John and the other gospel writers. I commend to you a wonderful book by Colin J. Humphreys *The*

Mystery Of The Last Supper that solves this mystery with a work of painstaking scholarship.)

I invite you to take note of these two little words ‘for you’ in the institution of the Passover. The month will be for you (vs 1-2); The lamb will be for you is implied in its description(v 5 & 6); the blood will be for you (v 12-13); this day will be for you (vs 14). These words are repeated at the Passover meal and you can see how Jesus takes these words and reinterprets them about himself. The bread as his body for you, the cup of wine as his blood for you. All the disciples know the Passover story by heart.

Theologian Hans Frei argues that something remarkable occurs in the gospels’ description of Jesus. In many places the New Testament writers cite prophetic and historic material from Israel’s history in order to interpret Jesus’ identity. However, a subtle but important reversal takes place in the course of the gospel story. Jesus is initially interpreted in light of Israel’s prophets and history, but as the story progresses, Jesus, in his particularity, redefines things. He, the unsubstitutable Jesus, now makes Israel’s story his own. In other words, Jesus is initially interpreted as fulfilling the words of Israel’s prophets; but by the time his identity is fully manifested in his death and resurrection, readers are to understand Israel’s prophets in the light of Jesus. He identifies them, not they him.

All of this is ‘for you,’ says Jesus. His giving of himself on the cross that is now not many hours away is for you. This is what this meal means for us. I have probed these things with you tonight that we might see Him. Look in his face as he washes your feet. Receive from his hand the bread and the cup. Hear his question as he finishes washing our feet; Do you know that what I have done to you? Hear his word with the bread in his hand ‘for you;’ and now with the cup in hand, ‘for you.’ I press this point that we might again refresh ourselves with the wonder of this relationship with Him that is life for us and that eternally. All of this he does for us even as his hour is upon him.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.