

## The Passion of Jesus in John

By Brian Traynor, C.P.

The gospel of John was written many years after and is very different from, the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. John presents the Cross as the symbol of meaning and hope, from the perspective of wisdom. Let us start with a note then about crucifixion, to see how such a cruel death could lead to this hope. Crucifixion was a very public and horrific death. It was meant to serve as a deterrent to rebels by discrediting their heroes. Death could take several days. Victims were humiliated. They were without clothing and they usually lost control of their bodily functions and became demented. The torture was an effective way of showing that these people really had nothing to offer. In the light of this, it is significant that the early Christians made no apology for the fact that Jesus was crucified. They turned the apparent scandal of the cross into a triumph of life.



John's gospel displays a perspective of wisdom that the others don't have. There are two clear types of wisdom. One is the simple naivety and openness of a small child. Children often express quite profound insights by their questions or comments. Some friends of mine were watching a movie on television, with two of their children. One child was a girl aged 6 and the other was a boy about 9. The movie had quite an intrigued web of hurt around a relationship and when the movie ended without any real clear outcome, the boy said "I wonder who was to blame Mum" and before her mother could say anything, the little girl said "No one was to blame, that's just the way some things are"! The mother said she was amazed that her little daughter could see right into the web of all that was involved and say it would be too simplistic to lay the blame at any one person's feet.



One of my favourite Peanuts cartoons expresses this simple naivety. Charlie Brown, Linus and Lucy are all looking up at cloud formations discussing what they can see. Lucy says that she can see the stoning of Stephen. She says "there's the apostle Paul standing by with all the clothes and you can see the whole pile of rocks they are using to stoning Stephen." She asked "What can you see Linus?" He said "Well I can see four charioteers and each of them has

got the four horses out in front. Over there the philosopher Plato seems to be looking at this race". They asked together "What can you see Charlie Brown?" and he said "Well I was going to say 'a duckie and a horsie' but I think I'll forget it".

The other kind of wisdom comes from life experience, a viewpoint gained as a result of trial, pain and the joys of life. It is the perspective of the contemplative, the one who sits back and observes life. Some years ago I was conducting a Mission in Walgett, in Western New South Wales.

There was a fellow out there whose name was Cubby Burke, who was aged 54. He had been a drover all his life; he had slept out under the stars from the time he was 14 until his 30s. Cubby would take cattle on long drives, and while he was outback, he would watch nature. He said he learned a great deal about life from sitting and watching animals and trees and clouds. It was interesting to hear him talk about the weather. Even though he was extremely modest, when pushed, he admitted "Yes, I can tell the weather better than the television forecasters". He continued, "You just have to watch what the ants do, what the rabbits do, what the cockatoos do, where the kangaroos go. You can tell what's going to happen, when there's a drought coming, when the rain's going to come, because all the animals know, they've got some sort of intuition."



Cubby said "It's simple; I've been watching it for years, I've been sitting down and watching where the animals go. Where these flocks of black cockatoos go, how the sheep go on the high ground when the rain's coming, sometimes weeks before. How the kangaroos won't breed if there's a drought coming." There were so many more illustrations Cubby had been sitting and watching as a contemplative. He had no University degree, but he had a personal degree in watching and reflecting on life.

This is the gift of the poet, the gift that many true students have when they observe. They sit back and reflect and then write down their



thoughts in helpful and inspiring images. A poet like Kahlil Gibran obviously had the powerful insights into life he wrote about, as a result of withdrawing enough to see life in a wider perspective. If you're looking really closely at something you can only see what is in your immediate vision. If you draw back you note that this forms part of a bigger picture.

When we come to John's gospel and the

Passion particularly, it seems necessary to appreciate this contemplative view because that's what John is offering. He suggests, for example, in Jesus' death that there is something much bigger happening, some sort of big outpouring of life. Jesus' death is not what appears first to be the reality – it is not a defeat. Instead, John sees it as a triumph.

In complete contrast to Mark, John suggests that Jesus is really in control of everything. He is the one who interviews Annas; Pilate is in awe of him; there is no Simon to help him carry the cross and he dies with confidence and freedom. It is significant that prior to his Passion in Chapter 10 Jesus had said "No-one takes my life from me, I lay it down of my own free will".



You may have read the biography or seen the film "Choices of the Heart", associated with Jean Donovan, a 24 year old lay missionary girl in El Salvador. She and three religious sisters were raped and murdered. Jean had gone home to Ireland to attend the wedding of a friend. While she was there she got talking with a priest whom she knew well, about the need she felt for her to go back to El Salvador. She then spoke with her boyfriend who gave her an ultimatum, "If you don't choose to stay with me this is your last chance. I'm not going to wait around for you". Jean wrote a letter to him to say "I can't explain why, but I have to go back. I don't know what's going to become of me - I may be tortured, I may be imprisoned, I may even be killed. It may not be pleasant but I must go back and although there are so many attractions here.....I must go back." In her own way, she was saying no-one was taking her life from her, "I give it up of my own free will.". Perhaps she died somewhat like that presentation of Jesus in the gospel of Mark; perhaps she died screaming because of the horror of being raped and murdered. If there had been witnesses recording her death they might have said, "she died screaming".

John presents Jesus' death differently. Jesus does not die screaming. Rather, he is in total control, because his underlying conviction is the same as the one Jean Donovan expressed to her priest and to her boyfriend. "No- one takes my life from me .... I must go back .... I lay it down of my own free will". I think this is a helpful insight into why there is this difference in the gospels. John sits back as this contemplative and sees that Jesus has quite freely given his life in the same way he had lived it.



The reason given in John's gospel as to why Jesus died, is because of Lazarus! Lazarus had been raised from death and the Jews warn that they are going to kill Lazarus and that they are after Jesus. It seems the message given to Lazarus by Jesus "untie him and let him go free" is the

whole point of John's gospel. Death is defeated, Lazarus is unbound and he is free. We all share in this ultimate freedom.

Jesus is described in the beginning of John's gospel, as 'the Word', which is a theological term, a symbol. It is good to appreciate how powerful a word can be. Imagine that you have just gone to the doctor because you are very worried about a lump that you've discovered. The tests have been done and you have returned to hear the outcome from the doctor. Suppose you say to the Doctor, "Can you tell me in one word, is the news good or bad?" It is going to be a powerful word isn't it! It is either going to be good or bad, but the power of the word is much bigger than just that.

When the phone goes in the middle of the night and someone says 'there's a phone call for you' the voice and the news that comes across from the other end of the phone is very powerful because of the apprehension that has built up. This is the way John presents Jesus - as 'The Word', the most powerful expression of God. This is how God communicates. The most powerful thing God can say about God is in this person Jesus.



Many people find John's presentation of Jesus difficult to understand. John appeals to the dreamers, the visionaries and contemplatives and reminds us of the need for such people. It is interesting that the more radical forms of ecumenism are happening in contemplative monasteries where people have a removed place to see a wider perspective and they are not caught up all the time in argument and dialogue. John's gospel helps us to appreciate the need to find images and words for our faith and about God, and present them with beauty, in the language that we use. It also helps us to appreciate the difference between hope and optimism. An optimist sees that everything is good; a person of hope recognises that some things are not good, but they will not bring defeat. John is the gospel of hope.

There is a practical need for each of us to be somewhat of a contemplative. If we are going to break the word open for other people it has to come from reflection and experience. There is a lot of alienation amongst people today, a lot of loneliness, a lot of broken relationships, mistrust and suspicion, fights for power, rule of the dollar, stress, pressure to conform, busyness, noise, frenetic pace and much more. Many people admit that that there is too much to do and that they don't have enough time to do



everything.

We live in a throwaway/takeaway environment, where nearly everything is instant. It begins with items like food, and extends to the expectation that there should be instant happiness. There is also a conspiracy against silence, which makes it difficult to be contemplative.

There are two popular places in the Jewish and Christian tradition for solitude; the desert and the mountain. In such a (quiet) place, a person can 'be still and know that I am God'. A businessman in his mid-30s told me that soon after his first marriage broke down at the very young age of 21, his life fell apart.. He was in Canada and he went off for three



months on his own. He took tinned provisions with him and lived in a small hut in the snow and did not see another human being, listen to radio or TV and didn't see any newspapers. He said he came back with a totally different perspective of life. All the things that seemed so important took on a different

perspective. Many years later he still uses that experience as a strategy for putting life into perspective. He remembers what it was like in the hut, and that being unaware of what was going on in the world had given him a totally different focus. The 'desert' experience allows people to discover what the real issues are.

Jesus sought out those places. He took 30 years before 'going out on the road'. He was 'soaking up' life; contemplating, reflecting and learning about life. When he started his ministry he linked up with John the Baptist but in time he found John's message too harsh for people. Jesus had to keep learning. The gospels do not apologise for the time Jesus spent in prayer ('forty days in the wilderness' or 'the whole night').

When he sent the disciples out and they returned, he said "Let's go away to a lonely place where we can be by ourselves and rest". This was recognition that they didn't have to be available all the time. There is a need to re-energise. On this occasion the disciples were so busy that 'they didn't even have time to eat'. Rather than praise this busyness, Jesus said, 'let's get away for a rest'. While Jesus must have known there were great needs, apart from brief journeys to Tyre and Sidon, he never travelled outside Israel. He did not get on a boat and go to



Asia. He restricted himself to a very small area approximately one hundred and fifty kilometres long and eighty kilometres wide. He didn't think that over-activity was the answer, rather it was the quality, that reflective tone, that he contributed to his active ministry.

As is particularly clear in Luke's Gospel, many times Jesus prays, and as a result of his prayer, he heads off in a different direction. That contemplation, that solitude was a vital part of orienting his life. We need to recognise the value of it for our own welfare and the harmony of our relationships, to find that space within and between ourselves. We each have a responsibility to create that environment. We can help to save other people from the distractions that impose on them unnecessarily. One of the gifts that we can give family members or a community is respecting their need for quiet. Helping to reduce noise at appropriate times can assist them in being people of peace..

In an ordinary family it is very difficult to find this kind of space especially if there are children around.. People have to find strategies for removing themselves for a while to create space - time away. Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, and to some degree if we fail to integrate activity with reflection we run the risk of losing sight of why we are doing what we are doing. We can find ourselves running around in circles (being active) and risking 'burn out'.

It has been said that fanaticism is doubling your efforts but forgetting your purpose. Any Christian community whether it be a family, a marriage, friendship, religious or family community only really truly grows when there is some solitude. This helps create an environment that allows people to grow in imitation of Jesus. That is the greatest gift community members give to one another. It is playing together and spending time together but also growing in the image of Jesus that contributes most powerfully to each person and the group becoming stronger and deeper. We have to help one another achieve this in practical day to day ways. Inner solitude, harmony within ourselves, is more important than outer solitude, because if you have inner solitude you can be at peace even in the midst of a crowd.



So John's Passion invites us to appreciate the value of reflection. The perspective of that Gospel demanded sound reflection. It was written long after the others and for needs that were arising in the community to which it was addressed.

John invites us to appreciate the need for contemplation in our lives. The Cross in John expresses confidence in victory and this is the focal point of the gospel.



John is saying "Looking back and reflecting on a lot of things that have

happened since Jesus' death, we can see very clearly the by product of all of this. Jesus is our hope – for life. We have been unbound and we are free”.