

**THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
PART II**

**By**

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### **Introduction**

In the first part of this talk we saw that there is substantial evidence that the author of this Gospel was John the disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

We saw that he most probably wrote this Gospel in Ephesus, perhaps as early as 65-68 AD, but I think between 85 and 90 AD.

We saw that this Gospel was totally different in presentation and content from the Synoptic Gospels and was written not only to supplement them and correct various heresies of those times, but John's main purpose was evangelistic. To bring people to faith in Christ and to encourage and teach Christians in order that they might grow in their faith.

At this point let me just briefly take up this final objective of John's and emphasise just how important I believe the study of scripture – God's word and revelation to us – is for our Christian lives. Yes we do need a personal relationship with Christ as well as head knowledge, but that relationship needs to be founded in and sustained by a thorough knowledge of scripture. If it is not then we shall depart into heresy (which will certainly distance us, or even separate us, from Christ) or our faith will become weakened and unable to sustain us in those dark and barren times when God seems distant or even absent at the experiential level.

Finally we saw that the Gospel of John is the only Gospel to contribute important insights on the major foundational focuses of the Christian faith, such as the nature and attributes of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the church and its mission, the life in the next world, the work of Christ and finally and supremely the aspects of the person of Christ.

We're now going to look at the second part of John's Gospel in some detail, but due to limitations of time and the enormous amount of material to be covered we shall deal with some of the most important verses in quite a lot of detail and skip over other material. That doesn't mean that the verses we skip over contain nothing worthwhile. All scripture is valuable as Paul says in his letter to Timothy (Timothy 3:16), it's just that we have to make choices due to the limitations of time.

### **Chapter 12 – The Close of Jesus' Public Ministry**

The signs or miracles are complete and Jesus' 'hour' is drawing near. This chapter contains Jesus' last public teachings prior to his crucifixion and we commence with the account of Jesus' anointing at Bethany in verses 1-8:

“Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared

about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." (John 12:1-8 NIV)

Now there are accounts of an anointing of Jesus by a woman in all four Gospels and the relationship between these accounts is complicated.

The first account is found in Mark 14:3–9 and is closely paralleled in Matthew 26:6–13. These accounts tell of an anointing in Bethany by a woman who poured "very expensive perfume, made of pure nard" over Jesus' head. This provoked great indignation among some who thought the perfume might have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus defended the woman, saying, "She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial" (Mark 14:8).

The second story is in Luke 7:36–50. It appears to take place in Galilee earlier in Jesus' ministry and is located in the house of a Pharisee. His name is given as Simon, but he is not called a leper (as in Mark), nor indeed could he be under the circumstances. In any case Simon was one of the commonest of names, so we need not think of these persons as identical. The woman who carried out the anointing is called "a sinner." She first wet Jesus' feet with her tears, then wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and finally anointed them. This led the Pharisee to think that Jesus could not even be a prophet, and this opened the way for Jesus to speak of the greatness of the woman's love. The story in John is clearly different from that in Luke. There is no reason for equating Mary of Bethany with Luke's "sinner" and, although the anointing is of the feet, and the hair is used to wipe them, the time, the circumstances, and the discussion are all different.

It is otherwise with Mark's story. There the similarities with John's account are great. Both use the most unusual Greek words translated "pure nard" for the perfume. Both locate the incident in Bethany, and if Mark says the house belonged to Simon the leper, John does not say to whom it belonged. Perhaps he means that the house belonged to Lazarus and the sisters, but more probably he does not say whose house it was because the owner had no part in his story. Particularly strong are the resemblances in the reaction aroused by the anointing. In both the suggestion is made that the unguent should have been sold. In both a sum of three hundred denarii is mentioned (in Mark the price is "more than" this), and in both it is suggested that the money be given to the poor. In both Jesus' answer includes "Leave her alone" and a reference to his burial. The chief differences are that Mark appears to place the incident after the triumphal entry, John before, and second that Mark speaks of an anointing of the head and John of an anointing of the feet. The amount of perfume used is considerable, and we should bear in mind that Jesus speaks of his "body" as being anointed (Mark 14:8), which is an unusual way of referring to the head (or for that matter, the feet).

Carson is surely right when he says, "it is reasonable to suppose that what actually happened was comprehensive enough to generate" both accounts. There are also minor differences of wording and word order, and Mark's words about the woman's having done a good work are absent from John, as is the reference to people being able to do good to the poor when they will. Mark does not name the woman, but John says it was Mary. Mark speaks of the woman as breaking an alabaster cruse to release the unguent, and he reports Jesus as saying that wherever the Gospel is preached the story will be told in memory of the woman, neither of which is in John. He also refers generally to some of those present as being indignant, whereas John says that Judas objected.

In some points John's account is nearer that of Matthew than of Mark. Thus Matthew says it was "the disciples" in general who were indignant whilst John specifically names Judas, and he omits Jesus' words about being able to do good to the poor at any time.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Matthew, Mark, and John all refer to the same incident. But Luke's story appears to refer to a different occasion.

Six days before the Passover would have been the Sabbath – assuming that the Passover that year fell on Friday, which I believe to be the case as we shall see a little later. From all the elements of the story, we can suppose that this took place on the Sabbath after sunset. The meal would probably have been part of the ritual which separated the Sabbath from the rest of the week. John characterises Bethany by the great miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead which has been performed there. John does not say who arranged the dinner in Jesus' honour, although the fact that Martha's name is mentioned first may indicate that she was the hostess.

Some commentators believe the word the NIV uses at the beginning of verse 3 "Then" is a mistranslation and should be "Therefore" – that makes a lot more sense of the whole event. Mary is honouring Jesus because of the miracle he has performed. The quantity of perfume Mary used was large, about three-quarters of a pound, and this was an expensive perfume, so her action was a costly one. Nard is an oil-like perfume extracted from the root and spike of the nard plant, grown in India; definitely not one of the lower-quality brands sold at the Bethany supermarket! Anointing with perfume as a sign of honour was not unusual, but it was the head that was normally anointed rather than the feet, although it is quite possible that Mary anointed the head as well as the feet or even the whole body especially given the amount of perfume used, which would harmonise John's account with that of the Synoptics. Of course, John focusing on the anointing of the feet could just have been to emphasise the humility of the act. To attend to the feet was usually the task of the lowliest slave. This is reinforced by the fact that she wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. This is even more surprising than it might seem to us as Jewish women never unbound their hair in public. John's comment that the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume sounds like the comment of an eyewitness and also emphasises that the *fragrance* of the event will extend far beyond that time and place.

Judas objects that the perfume should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. The Synoptics tell us that the perfume was worth 300 denarii or about a year's wages for an ordinary worker. But, John says that Judas did not say this out of concern for the poor, but from dishonest motives. Before he betrayed Jesus' person he betrayed Jesus' trust. This is the one place in all the Gospels where Judas is portrayed as being of bad character prior to his betrayal of Jesus. John says he was something like a sneakthief (to better translate the Greek used here) although he had been appointed treasurer of the band of disciples.

Jesus immediately took Mary's part. He would have nothing to do with the criticism brought against her, though there is difficulty in understanding the precise bearing of his defence. It is curious that he should refer to his "burial." Anointing was usually a mark of festivity. Its omission was an act of discourtesy toward a guest (Luke 7:46). When people were engaged in solemn activities such as fasting, they sometimes refrained from anointing as a way of drawing attention to what they were doing, a practice that Jesus discouraged (Matthew 6:16–17). Anointing was thus associated with revelry rather than with funerals. A remark about a

burial is not at all what we would have expected. We must take this as a measure of the extent to which the Passion was in Jesus' mind at this time. Perhaps this anointing is a sign that Mary had entered more closely into the mind of Jesus than anyone else. It is also very possible that this perfume may have represented Mary's dowry, if so this anointing was an ultimate expression of attachment and commitment to Jesus.

Next we learn that a major reason for the Jewish leadership having decided firmly to kill Jesus was his raising of Lazarus which was bringing many of the people to faith in Jesus. "Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him." (John 12:9-11 NIV).

The words "as well" in the last verse here are significant, as we see that the Pharisees had already firmly decided to kill Jesus and now included Lazarus as well. They wanted to destroy both Lazarus and the man who had raised him. In chapter 11 Caiphas had said "it is better for you that one man die ..." but now two men had to die. That's how evil grows. Everyone who sins becomes a slave to sin (John 8:34).

We then move on to the account of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. "The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:12-19 NIV)

The narrative of the triumphal entry is found in all four Gospels. At this point accordingly John's story links up with those in the Synoptic Gospels. John does not include all the details we find elsewhere, and, for example, he says little about the procuring of the ass, saying only that Jesus "found a young donkey and sat upon it" (verse 14). But John tells us enough to bring out the royalty of Jesus. Characteristically John does not think of this as a glorification of Jesus (for that he looks to the cross, verse 16). But he leaves no doubt but that the challenge of Jesus was felt and appreciated. He has some touches of his own. John alone dates the incident on the Sunday preceding the Passover. He alone mentions the palms, the reference to the raising of Lazarus, the fact that the disciples did not understand the significance of these happenings until after Jesus "was glorified," and the pessimistic utterance of the Pharisees.

I think it is very significant that at the beginning of this passage Jesus, for the first time accepts the acclamation of the crowd, certainly a large crowd as historian Josephus tells us that two and a half million people attended the Passover in those times – although probably the real number was less than half that. This acceptance was probably because Jesus knew that his time had finally come. For the first time he was acting as they expected their

Messiah to act. Consequently the crowd's enthusiasm knew no bounds and they acclaimed him.

We are told that the crowd took palm branches and cried out, a clear reference to the forthcoming triumph of Jesus since palms were an emblem of victory.

As they proceeded, Jesus was persistently greeted with shouts from Psalm 118, a Psalm used to greet pilgrims during festivals such as the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Passover: "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Here the term 'Hosanna' is literally a prayer for help – 'Save us [please]', or 'salvation now' – but as time went on it became a greeting much more like our present day 'Praise the Lord'. The crowd didn't appreciate how relevant what they were really asking for – save us – was.

The fact that this was a normal pilgrim psalm, which was often shouted to pilgrims in general, explains how Jesus could have entered Jerusalem in this way without arousing a reaction from the Romans. However, I believe that he did receive a special welcome since the crowds all acknowledged him as a revered teacher and many thought that he was a prophet or even 'the coming one'. Certainly, the palm branches were far more than an ordinary pilgrim would have received.

Nothing is said by John as to the way Jesus obtained the ass on which he rode. John simply says that he found it, and sat on it. This is the only time in the Gospels where we read of Jesus riding on any animal. The Synoptic Gospels tell how Jesus sent disciples into a village with instructions for finding the animal. They also tell us that when the ass was brought the disciples sat Jesus on it, using their garments as a saddle. John says nothing of these things. But he does go on to speak of the fulfillment of Scripture. For him it is important that the will of God was done. He quotes from Zechariah 9:9, although alone of all the Gospel writers he changes the quotation from 'Rejoice greatly' to 'Do not be afraid'. I don't think that is an accidental error on John's part – he well knew what was involved in the salvation the crowd was shouting for.

Zion appears originally to have denoted either the citadel at Jerusalem or the hill on which it stood, but the word was used poetically as a designation of the city itself. "Daughter of Zion" is a collective, referring to the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a whole. The words of this prophecy point to a distinctive mark of Christ's kingship. The ass was not normally used by a warlike person. It was the animal of a man of peace, a priest, a merchant, or the like. It might also be used by a person of importance but in connection with peaceable purposes. A conqueror would ride into the city on a war horse like Judas Maccabaeus (Isaiah 31:1-13), or perhaps march in on foot at the head of his troops. The ass speaks of peace. Thus John sees not only a fulfillment of prophecy, but such a fulfillment of prophecy as indicates a special kind of king, one who will not only be non-military, but also one who will be multi-national – he rules over people from every nation.

Certainly for Jesus, His entry was messianic in nature, given the special preparations he had made, but also peaceful. He rode not on a stallion as a warrior Messiah leading the people to battle. To establish this kingdom will be costly, Jesus came humbly and in majesty He rode on – to die.

It would seem that neither the Roman nor the Jewish leadership saw the triumphal entry as a messianic act, since the Romans did not take action and neither group mentioned the matter during his coming trial.

After the triumphal entry John gives us a rather curious account of an encounter with some Greeks.

“Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:20-23 NIV)

This rather curious incident is peculiar to John. It is “rather curious” firstly because it is unusual that we encounter Greeks in a narrative of events at Jerusalem – the word John uses doesn’t mean Grecian Jews, secondly because the Synoptic Gospels do not mention the incident, and thirdly because the Greeks simply say, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” and then disappear from the narrative. Clearly John regards their coming as significant but he doesn’t say why. Jesus recognizes in their coming an indication that the climax of his mission has arrived. Right through the preceding chapters the ‘hour’ has been ‘not yet’, suddenly the ‘not yet’ is over; the ‘now’ has arrived. Immediately when he hears of them he says, “The hour has come,” and goes on to speak of his glorification and of death. In this Gospel we see Jesus as the world’s Saviour, and evidently John means us to understand that this contact with the Greeks ushered in the climax. The word Greeks doesn’t necessarily imply that these people were from Greece, but could well mean Gentiles who were Greek speaking. The fact that the Greeks or Gentiles had reached the point of wanting to meet Jesus showed that the time had come for him to die for the world. He no longer belongs to Judaism, which in any case has rejected him. But the world, whose Savior he is, awaits him and seeks for him.

In fact the tense of the Greek used by John where the Greeks ask to see Jesus is continuous, they kept asking. Also the word translated “see” means something more like “interview”, it would seem they wanted to speak with Jesus at some length and get to know him better. Jesus appears to totally ignore the Greeks, we have no record that he ever even spoke to them. The Greeks and gentiles couldn’t yet belong to Jesus until his hour had passed. The salvation of the new covenant was only brought into effect by the crucifixion. Jesus addresses his response to the disciples, making it clear that the hour of his passion for which he has been destined is at hand.

His next words make it completely clear that he is talking about his coming death:

“I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24-25 NIV)

Jesus is saying that, like the grain of wheat, he can only become fruitful through his death – his death will bring a rich harvest. He must be separated from all that he was and sown like a seed which has within it the basis of new growth. Later, Paul discovered the way of the cross, the deepest truth of the Christian Gospel, to be ‘a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks’ (1 Corinthians 1:23). It still is. To believe that only through that blood-stained cross can the meaning of existence be discovered, and the life for which we were made experienced in its fullness, is still widely dismissed as unacceptably narrow-minded, ethically dubious, intellectually naive, and religiously intolerant. The choice lies

before the world. Jesus, however, still points the way to glorification by the narrow and only way of the cross. The link made by Jesus between glorification and crucifixion is fundamental to John's presentation of the Easter drama. The death and resurrection of Jesus are not divisible into a defeat at Calvary which was righted by the subsequent powerful, victorious act of the resurrection. Rather, *both* death and resurrection represent one inseparable event in which Jesus achieves the glory of God.

Given the identity between glorification and crucifixion we should see that it is no mark of Christian maturity to focus almost exclusively on the risen and ascended Christ and upon the Spirit, the life-gift of the exalted one, as is the tendency in our modern-day expressions of Christian faith and worship.

Jesus goes on to widen the meaning and says that anyone who loves his life will lose it. In fact the word which the NIV translates as "lose" could be better rendered as "destroy". Jesus is saying to us that loving this life here on earth is a self defeating process which destroys the very life we seek to retain, because it denies the sovereignty of God. "Hates" here is not really to be taken literally, it is of course the opposite of "loves", but the real point is that we should be so focused on the life to come in heaven that our existence here is of no account. People whose priorities are right have such an attitude of love for the things of God that all interest in the affairs of this life appears by comparison as hatred.

Thus the 'life through death' principle which Christ has given us must also touch our Christian service. It is in fact 'the law of the Kingdom of God'. Fruitfulness is costly. It is in dying that we become life-givers. Paul expresses it: 'We who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you' (2 Corinthians 4:11–12).

Jesus then says that he is very troubled by his coming ordeal:

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." (John 12:27 NIV)

At first sight it appears that Jesus is praying for the Father to save him from his coming ordeal, but I think this is better understood as a hypothetical prayer, something that Jesus could pray but refuses to pray, otherwise the immediate repudiation of the notion of being spared death at the end of the verse would make no sense. If it is a real prayer then I think we must take it as a prayer to be brought safely through trial rather than to be removed from it. Jesus recognises that he must face the cross. Certainly this verse contradicts the idea which some commentators have proposed that John displays a Jesus devoid of human passion.

Jesus now prays for the Father to glorify his name:

"Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." (John 12:28 NIV)

This is the only place in John's Gospel and one of only three times between all the Gospels where we hear of the Father speaking in an audible voice. The rabbis called this a *bat qôl* (literally the daughter or echo of a voice), which was all that could be expected since there had been no prophetic voice in Israel since the time of Malachi. If God's will was to be confirmed it must be done by a voice from heaven. Jesus' prayer, of course, implies the overall sovereignty of the Father. It's not really clear what the "I have glorified" refers to here. It could be the baptism of Jesus or the transfiguration – although neither of these events are recorded in John's Gospel, but the "will glorify it again" surely refers to the coming crucifixion.

The crowd who were listening to Jesus heard the voice – see verse 29:

“The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.” (John 12:29 NIV)

This was no subjective event, but a real audible voice, but the crowd doesn't recognize it, they don't perceive that a turning point in history was about to come. It's not clear whether or not the crowd referred to here is the same crowd as is mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, because there is a natural break in the narrative at the point where the Greeks arrive to see Jesus – which we looked at a moment ago. That also means we don't know whether this took place immediately after the Triumphal Entry or not.

Jesus responds to the crowd's perplexity – verse 30:

“Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine.” (John 12:30 NIV)

He says the voice was for their benefit not his. Presumably those who could not hear it lacked the spiritual perception to recognise and hear the voice of God.

Jesus now proceeds plainly to the meaning of the cross – see verses 31-33

“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” (John 12:31-33 NIV)

In a sense the cross passes judgment on the world by exposing the sin of mankind and mankind's rejection of the Son, whilst at the same time bearing the penalty that the judgment of sin brings and thus saving the world. The cross which at first sight appeared to be a victory for the forces of evil, will in fact be the defeat of the prince of this world – the defeat of Satan. The lifting up, which in the Greek carries the meaning of out of the earth, clearly relates to both the crucifixion and the resurrection. Jesus is not only to be lifted up on the cross he will be lifted up to glory. Jesus is not saying here that everyone will be saved, although he is saying that salvation is available to all and certainly not restricted solely to the Jews – let's remember that it was the arrival of the Greek gentiles who triggered the whole process.

The crowd then asserts that Jesus' teaching is contrary to scripture – see verse 34:

“The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain for ever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"” (John 12:34 NIV)

Since the Jews believed that the Old Testament taught the eternity of the Messiah, how can Jesus be the Messiah if he is to be 'lifted up' or crucified? How could they believe in a crucified Messiah, since the OT certainly taught that the Messiah would be triumphant? This difficulty of reconciling Jesus' claims with his cross was a real one, not only for Jesus' audience, but also for John's first-century readership. Many Jews, attracted to Jesus on other grounds, struggled understandably with his rejection by his own people, and with his shameful death. Jesus doesn't answer their questions directly, but points them to the urgent necessity to forget their preconceived notions of the Messiah and to act on the basis of the light they have been given, to enter into a knowledge of, and a relationship with, Jesus – see verses 35 and 36:

“Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.” (John 12:35-36 NIV)

Jesus was their light and he is still our light today, in order to be saved we must believe, or put our trust, in him or we shall be shut out from the light forever.

John now brings his account of Jesus' public ministry to a close. Even after the weight of evidence they have seen in terms of the numbers of stupendous miracles Jesus has performed, the Jews will still not believe in him – look at verse 37:

“Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.” (John 12:37 NIV)

as had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah as John goes on to explain. John is absolutely insistent that this unbelief is divinely ordained. Of course, some of the Jews did believe as John makes clear – see verse 42:

“Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;” (John 12:42 NIV)

The ministry of Jesus was effective even amongst the highest circles of their leadership – Nicodemus clearly became a believer, as did Joseph of Arimathea, as we shall see later and there were obviously others – but opposition was so severe that to confess Jesus meant excommunication. Many of John's readers would have faced the same dilemma, and it is no different today. Following Jesus is costly and we should reflect on the implications of this in our own lives.

Yet Jesus makes a final tender appeal to believe in him – see verses 44-46:

“Then Jesus cried out, “When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” (John 12:44-46 NIV)

Here Jesus emphasises that belief in him will take us out of the darkness of sin and into the light of Christ. He has come to deliver us not to condemn us.

Jesus then repeats the appeal in different words – see verses 47-50:

““As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”” (John 12:47-50 NIV)

Jesus is saying that his incarnation is to save mankind and not to judge them, but he also makes it clear that those who persistently reject him will stand condemned, condemned by the very word of salvation they have rejected. Jesus also disclaims personal responsibility for this message – he is a shaliach or “sent one”.. The “For” at the beginning of verse 49 makes it clear that these are the Father's words. Of course, Jesus is not saying that he disagrees, indeed this is what he has always proclaimed. In the final words of his public ministry in verse 50 Jesus once again proclaims that obeying what he has commanded – to believe in him – will lead to eternal life. Here John uses the word “command” not in the sense of legalism, but in the best sense of the Torah as a principle for life (Deuteronomy 32:46-47). He then re-emphasises that this is what the Father has told him to say – Jesus is not a figure of independent greatness, he is the Word of God or he is nothing at all.

## Chapter 13 – Farewell Discourses

The public ministry of Jesus is over. John tells us nothing more of any words spoken by Jesus to the crowds. There are a few words to those who arrested him. There are a few to those who examined him. But apart from these the whole of the rest of the Gospel concerns Jesus' final teaching to his own disciples and the events surrounding the Passion. These chapters 'unpack', before the event, the significance of Jesus' departure—his death, burial, resurrection, exaltation and the consequent coming of the Holy Spirit. The section on the farewell discourses is noteworthy. There is nothing like it in the Synoptic Gospels. From them we learn that Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples in the upper room and that he instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion there. Curiously John says nothing about this, and the reason is by no means clear. I think that all we can say for certain is that Jesus DID institute the Eucharist at the last supper, otherwise it would not have become such an important part of the practice of the early church (which it was as we know from Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:20-26)) and we simply have to admit that we don't really know why John doesn't mention it, although it may have been because the early church gave undue significance to the sacraments. John may omit the Eucharist, but he includes much that the Synoptics omit. It is to John that we owe our knowledge of the priceless teaching which Jesus gave to the disciples before the crucifixion and of two significant actions of Jesus with which our chapter 13 begins.

The first of these is of course the washing of the disciple's feet. Let's look at verses 1-11: "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean." (John 13:1-11 NIV)

In the Synoptic account of the events of this evening we read of a dispute among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. John doesn't record this, yet the feet washing was an action of Jesus that rebuked the disciple's lack of humility more strikingly than any words could have done. The account also has many details which mark it as an authentic eye witness account.

Yet we should not take the feet washing, standing as it does at the head of the long section of the Farewell Discourse, as no more than a reaction to the petty-mindedness of the disciples. It is a significant action, setting the tone for all that follows. As Richardson says "It foreshadows the cross itself: the voluntary humility of the Lord cleanses his loved ones and gives to them an example of selfless service which they must follow". This is particularly the

case because it takes place during the meal and not on arrival when the feet would normally be washed.

This shows that it was an action undertaken deliberately, and not simply the usual act of courtesy. It is a parable in action, setting out that great principle of lowly service which brings cleansing and which finds its supreme embodiment in the cross. It also emphasizes the necessity for the disciple to take the Lord's way, not his own.

It is important that we see these points. Many people take the story as no more than a lesson in humility, quite overlooking the fact that, in that case, Jesus' dialogue with Peter completely loses its significance! But those words, spoken in the shadow of the cross, have to do with cleansing, that cleansing without which no-one belongs to Christ, that cleansing which is given by the cross alone. As Hunter says, "The deeper meaning then is that there is no place in [Christ's] fellowship for those who have not been cleansed by his atoning death. The episode dramatically symbolizes the truth enunciated in I John 1:7, 'We are being cleansed from every sin by the blood of Jesus'."

We see this strongly in verse 8

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." (John 13:8 NIV)

We start out with Peter apparently trying to be humble and yet arrogant enough to dictate to his master, but Jesus tells Peter that unless he is washed by Jesus he can have no part with Jesus. Here we shouldn't miss the contrast between Jesus' knowledge of what was to come and Peter's lack of understanding concerning eternity. Unless Peter submits to the feet washing he may not eat with Jesus. But Jesus means more. A literal washing of the feet is not necessary before one can be a Christian. The words point us to a washing free from sin that only Christ can give. Apart from this washing no one can be Christ's, so the question is have we allowed Christ to wash us. Pride must perish. We are helpless sinners for whom no amount of good works, religious exercises, or Christian ministries can atone. Only the blood of Christ can save us—his sacrifice offered for us on the cross, and received by an act of simple, personal faith. So we come to Christ and allow him to wash us. There is literally no sin which he cannot cleanse in this way. All guilt can be forgiven; even sins we would be ashamed to admit to any other person. Unless we are washed in this way we have no share of the inheritance promised by Christ – because the *part* of our verse 8 refers to an inheritance.

Verse 9 typifies Peter's character.

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (John 13:9 NIV)

Convinced by Jesus' words, Peter will not do the thing by halves. Hands and head must be washed as well as feet. Of course, Peter may not have meant the words to be taken literally, but as a wholehearted renunciation of his previous refusal to be washed at all. But, Peter's answer is still the product of self-will. Peter is reluctant to let Jesus do what he wants. He prefers to dictate the terms. There is also a misunderstanding of the meaning of the action. It is not a way of cleansing the disciples, but a symbol of that cleansing. It is not the area of skin that is washed that matters but the acceptance of Jesus' lowly service, both here and on the cross.

In verse 10 Jesus gently discourages excess.

"Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." (John 13:10 NIV)

The imagery is that of a man going to a feast in those times. He would bathe at home, then when he arrived he needed only to wash his feet (soiled by the dusty paths) to sit at table wholly clean. Jesus applies this to the spiritual situation of his followers. "A person who has had a bath" points to the permanent character: he is not simply one who once upon a time was washed, but one who continues in the character of "the washed one." Such a person has no need for washing except the washing of the feet, but "his whole body is clean." – although the word "body" is added by the NIV and the original sense of "wholly clean" emphasises the spiritual meaning being conveyed here. To put it another way, there is a once-for-all cleansing when we become Christians as all our sins are judged and put away in the cross, but in the course of our ongoing Christian lives sin obtrudes daily. That sin too is to be cleansed through a daily coming to the Lord for his renewed washing.

Jesus then proceeds to explicitly teach the meaning of his actions in verses 12-20:

"When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. "I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He. I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." (John 13:12-20 NIV)

Apparently Jesus completed the task of washing the feet of all the disciples – presumably including Judas! He then emphasizes his dignity as Lord and teacher and tells them that since this exalted person has washed their feet, they ought to wash one another's feet. Jesus is saying that his disciples must be willing to perform the lowliest services for one another. Verse 17 contains what is one of the only two beatitudes found in this Gospel (the other being 20:29).

Jesus also refers to the tragedy of Judas, making it clear that this was a shameful betrayal of an intimate friend who had "shared bread" with Jesus. John mentions Judas often, so this tragedy must have made a big impression on him.

Jesus then returns to the forthcoming betrayal by Judas in more explicit terms in verses 21-30:

"After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me." His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, but no-one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night." (John 13:21-30 NIV)

Immediately after the foot washing, Jesus prophesies that one of the disciples will betray him. Jesus is described as “troubled in spirit”. Although John always portrays Jesus as fully in control of the situation, he does not let us think of him as unmoved. We are made fully aware of the humanity of Jesus.

Jesus’ announcement of betrayal brings consternation amongst the disciples. There is no mention of suspicion of Judas. Clearly he has hidden his duplicity well.

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, described in this way for the first time in this verse, was reclining next to Jesus. Incidentally, this choice of description by John doesn’t imply arrogance (John isn’t boasting that he’s loved more than the others), but amazement that he should be so favoured by grace from the Son of God. Choosing anonymity is probably a way of refusing to ‘share the platform’ with Jesus – like John the Baptist he is only a voice. His identity isn’t important, only his witness counts. That should be a lesson for us all – we need to give Jesus the glory. Returning to the supper, the usual arrangement at a formal meal was to have a series of couches arranged in a U around the table. This arrangement was virtually obligatory for the Passover in NT times. The guests reclined with their heads toward the table and their feet stretched out obliquely away from it. They leaned on the left elbow, which meant that the right hand was free to secure food. The host, or the most important person, reclined in the centre of the chief couch, a couch for three, placed at the junction of the two arms of the U. The place of honour was to the left of, and thus slightly behind, the principal person. The second place was to his right, and the guest there would have his head on the breast of the host. The place of the beloved disciple, was clearly on the principal couch in the second most honoured place where he could lean back on Jesus’ breast. This brings to mind the last verse of the prologue (John 1:18) where Jesus was said to be in the bosom of the Father, suggesting that the relationship between Jesus and John was very close – comparable to Jesus’ relationship to the Father.

Peter’s position is not given. From our knowledge of the apostles we might have thought he would be on Jesus’ other side, the place of honour. However, if this had been the case, he could just as easily ask the question himself. So he probably was elsewhere. We have no way of knowing how seating would be arranged in the apostolic band. But Peter was somewhere where he could be observed by the beloved disciple and he made signs indicating that he would like to know who it was. It seems not unlikely that Judas was in the chief place. From Matthew’s account it seems clear that Jesus could speak to him without being overheard by the others (Matthew 26:25). His position as treasurer would give him a certain status in the little group, and thus make the seat of honour not inappropriate. It is also possible that the giving to Judas of this place was part of Jesus’ last appeal to the traitor.

Jesus answers that he will point the traitor out by an action. It is implied, though not actually stated, that the words could be heard only by him to whom they were spoken. It is clear that Jesus did not want the group as a whole to know the identity of the traitor. The giving of the “piece of bread” would not do this; indeed, it might be understood as a mark of honour, and thus help to keep his identity secret. John is referring to a small piece of something, perhaps bread or meat that the host would dip in the common dish and pass on to one of the diners – the addition of “bread” by the NIV and most English translations is just an assumption. This Jesus did and gave it to Judas (who must accordingly have been seated fairly close to Jesus).

Satan (mentioned here for the first and only time in this Gospel) now entered Judas. John is under no delusion as to the magnitude of the issues involved or the real source of Judas's inspiration. It was Satan who entered him and inspired his actions. John sees this as the critical moment. If the giving of the sop was a mark of favour or the like, it would be in the nature of a final appeal to Judas. But Judas did not respond, he received the morsel but not the love. Rather, he gave himself the more fully to Satan's leading. Jesus realized this and accordingly urged Judas to do what he had to do speedily. But his words are general and their real import remained hidden from the eleven.

John makes it quite clear that the rest of the disciples had no idea what Judas was going to do and gives two other possible reasons for his departure. Incidentally, the mention of giving to the poor points up the fact that this was the Passover night as it was the custom to give to the poor at the Passover, the Temple gates being left open from midnight on. The mention of night in verse 30 is more than an indication of time. John always equates darkness with evil and Judas had given himself up to the evil one. Even though the paschal moon was shining Judas was swallowed up in darkness.

Once Judas had left Jesus began teaching the disciples in earnest. First of all he tells them that he will imminently be leaving them and gives them the commandment to love one another – see verses 31-35:

“When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:31-35 NIV)

The departure of Judas is significant. The group has now been purged of its evil element, but the betrayal is underway – the machinery of arrest, trial and execution is in motion, and time is limited, so Jesus begins to teach in earnest. The fact that the betrayal is underway also means that the great saving act to be consummated at Calvary is launched, indeed in verses 31 and 32 Jesus speaks as if it were already completed. As God is glorified in the Messianic work of the Son, so the Son will be glorified in the eternal blessedness of the Father – and this is to happen in the very near future. Jesus speaks of glory, the greatest moment of his displayed glory, as he looks at the cross.

At the beginning of verse 33, Jesus addresses the disciples tenderly as children – perhaps ‘my dear children’ would be a better translation, fulfilling the paschal father role as head of the family, probably because he knows that his teaching will be difficult to accept. He then says that he will be with them only for a little while longer, and then, as he has already said to the Jews (that is Jewish leaders opposed to Jesus), they will look for him and will not be able to follow him (John 7:33–34; 8:21). He does not add, as he did to the Jews on the first occasion, “you will not find me,” and this may be significant. The words puzzled the Jews when they were spoken to them and they puzzle the disciples now – see verse 36. This saying is noteworthy in that it is the only saying I have found in this Gospel that is repeated exactly in three different places. This phrase clearly refers to both the death and ascension of Jesus and he is saying that the disciples, at least as they are, will not accompany him either to death or glory, although they can know him and find him. The Jews can neither follow him nor know him.

In verse 34 Jesus commands the disciples to love one another within the community of believers, he contextualizes this command with the added phrase “as I have loved you”. Love is an old commandment (Leviticus 19:18), what is new is the love Christians have for one another on account of and to an extent matching Christ’s great love for them. The Latin Vulgate rendition of ‘new commandment’ ‘mandatum novum’ is probably where our term Maundy Thursday originates. This love, this self sacrificial love, is to be the distinguishing mark of the disciples – we would all do well to bear that in mind. This is the only time that John records Jesus as using the word “new”. I like Bruce Corley’s statement in his article “Biblical Theology of the New Testament” in the hermeneutics book *Foundations For Biblical Interpretation*: “Christ’s people are characterized by the ethic of love, whereby the ‘is-ness’ of grace is linked to the ‘ought-ness’ of love through the work of the Spirit. The standard of love is very high. It was exemplified by Jesus in the foot washing which pointed the way to his sacrificial death on the cross.

In verse 35 Jesus says that this love will enable all to distinguish who are the true disciples – not works, even miraculous works but love will mark out the true followers of Jesus.

Jesus then predicts Peter’s coming denial of him, a prophecy we shall see fulfilled later – see verses 36-38:

“Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times!” (John 13:36-38 NIV)

Peter’s readiness to die for Jesus is not quite what Peter thinks it is. His use of the sword in the garden at Gethsemane shows that he was ready in certain circumstances to face death boldly. There was truth as well as error in his words. But he was not ready to stand for Jesus when all seemed lost. That demanded a different brand of courage and devotion which he did not yet possess – although Jesus does tell Peter that he will follow later. Furthermore, only Jesus, the Lamb of God, can offer the necessary sacrifice for the sins of the world. Jesus’ prophecy that Peter would disown him apparently subdued Peter, for we shall not hear from him again until chapter 18.

## **Chapter 14 – Jesus Continues His Teaching**

Jesus now looks beyond the trouble the disciples are about to experience and reassures them. They need not be troubled in heart: he is going to prepare a place in heaven for them.

Further, he is the means of bringing them to the Father – see verses 1-7

““Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”” (John 14:1-7 NIV).

The opening words might be better translated “stop being worried”. Jesus is speaking to people who are already upset and concerned. On the very night when the disciples should have been reassuring Jesus and offering him encouragement it was Jesus who reassured them.

Although the chapter division separates this from Jesus' prediction of Peter's forthcoming denial, there is clearly a strong connection here. If Peter was going to deny Jesus didn't that mean that some great trial was imminent? Moreover Jesus had told the disciples – men who had left everything to follow him – that he was about to depart from them. That must have been shattering. Jesus tells them that they must trust in God and also in him.

The words "My Father's house" in verse 2 clearly refer to heaven. The idea of "rooms" is less clear – I think this could be better translated "separate and permanent residences". It certainly doesn't mean mansions as the KJV had it and indeed it doesn't imply lavish dwellings at all. I think Jesus is really saying that there will be plenty of room in heaven, or perhaps more properly the intersection of heaven and earth we find in Revelation chapter 21, for all the redeemed. He isn't saying that he's going to construct apartments for us, his going via the cross and resurrection is the preparation. The "I will come back" of verse 3 clearly refers to the second coming.

The most important statement in these verses comes next – Jesus tells us that we know the way to the place prepared for us. Thomas objects that the disciples do not know where Jesus is going so they cannot know the way. Jesus responds that he *is* the way – he redeems us. If we simply have faith in Jesus as our Lord and master and seek to follow him we will find our place in heaven. Jesus is both the life and the source of life to those of us who believe in him. In verse six Jesus has joined together three powerful ideas of "way," "truth," and "life" to produce a memorable and often quoted statement concerning the significance of Jesus in providing salvation – "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." Here we also encounter the exclusiveness of the Gospel, Jesus tells us that he is the only way. I think the meditation of Thomas à Kempis about Jesus expresses it quite well:

Follow thou me. I am the way and the truth and the life. Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living. I am the way which thou must follow; the truth which thou must believe; the life for which thou must hope. I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth, the never-ending life. I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

The conditional construction of verse 7 implies that the disciples do not yet know Jesus, but implies that they are about to really come to know him. As a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus the whole situation will be changed and the disciples will really come to know him.

I'm going to skip over the majority of verses 8-14, just remarking in passing that they reiterate the statements of the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father which John makes in the opening verses of his Gospel. However, I do want to comment on verse 11: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves." (John 14:11 NIV)

Note that Jesus asks that we "believe him" not merely that we believe in him. Yes we do need a personal relationship with Jesus, but as I said at the beginning our faith also needs to have an intellectual dimension.

In verses 15-17 Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept

him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17 NIV).

Little has been said about the Holy Spirit in the first part of John’s Gospel, but he is now referred to in each of chapters 14, 15 and 16. The important point Jesus makes is that when he goes the disciples will not be left alone or without resource. The Holy Spirit – another Counselor – will be with them and with them forever. Note the strong connection John makes between love for Christ and obedience to Christ. The spirit is then described as the “spirit of truth”. This is significant as “truth” is very closely associated with the Godhead. Jesus has just described himself as “the truth” (verse 6) and in chapter 4 John told us that we must worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Finally, Jesus tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit will be in them even though the world will not recognise his existence.

In verses 18-24 Jesus explains how he will manifest himself to the disciples and to others who seek to follow him:

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?” Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.” (John 14:18-24 NIV).

Arising out of the thought that the Spirit will be within the disciples though the world does not even recognize his existence, Jesus goes on to speak of the way he will manifest himself to the disciples but not to the world. The relationship of Jesus to his followers is one that the worldly cannot appreciate. Christians “know” Christ with the fullest meaning that that word will take. But the world has no knowledge of him at all.

Previously Jesus has spoken of ‘coming back’ in the sense of his second coming, but now he speaks of a return which will meet the disciples immediate need. He is surely speaking of his resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances. The crucifixion will separate him from the disciples, but this will only be for a little while. He also tells them that his forthcoming resurrection has great significance for them – they will live because he lives!

In verse 21, Jesus makes it clear that his teaching is not just for the disciples, but for all who obey his commands – which means fully integrating these commands into our way of life. Not only will Jesus love such people and make his home with them, but by implication they will also benefit from eternal life. Here I just want to make the point that benefits are not available to us on the basis of the merits of our obedience. Love calls to love – Christ’s love for us shown on the cross should call us into obedience and our love for Christ will call him to dwell with us.

Judas (not the traitor Judas Iscariot), who is only mentioned here in this Gospel, then raises the question as to why Jesus will manifest himself to the disciples but not to the world. Like the Jews in general he expects the Messiah to stand forth in all his glory before all the people. The way he puts it seems to imply that he now thinks that something has happened to disrupt Jesus’ planned program. The answer is the love which is calling Jesus to the cross and he answers in the negative. But, John does not speak of love just as an emotion; it is an

intensely practical thing involving obedience. Those who do not love Jesus will not obey his teachings. Jesus underlines the seriousness of all this by saying that these words are those of the Father. There can be no higher authority.

I'm going to largely skip over verses 25-31 which end this chapter 14. They largely repeat Jesus' statements about going away and the consequences for the disciples – the receipt of the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus also adds that his peace will remain with the disciples.

It is interesting to note that here the spirit of God is referred to as the “Holy” Spirit for the first time. Nowhere does the Gospel talk about the greatness or power of the Spirit, his most important characteristic was holiness.

The chapter ends with the words “let us leave”, perhaps better translated “let us advance to meet the enemy” – a very appropriate phrase as Jesus prepares to face the Prince of this World as he has just asserted. I believe this marks the point at which the disciples left the upper room and began the journey to Gethsemane, although John does not otherwise make this clear and it is quite possible to interpret the text so that their departure was delayed until the end of chapter 16 whilst Jesus continued to teach. Like Westcott, I believe that the material takes on a new richness if we suppose that the group moved to the Temple courts, or possibly the Temple steps, where the golden vine of the Temple gives extra meaning to the next chapter and the idea of Jesus as the new high priest is especially appropriate. In any event Jesus continues his teaching in chapters 15 and 16.

## **Chapter 15 – The True Vine Verses 1-16**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.” (John 15:1-16 NIV)

The allegory, the symbolic passage, of the vine brings before us the importance of fruitfulness in the Christian life and the truth that this is the result, not of human achievement, but of abiding in Christ. There is a stern side to this. Branches that are not fruitful are cut out. Jesus is not simply issuing some comforting advice here. He is outlining the difficult

but important way of service. There seems little doubt that he has in mind passages in the Old Testament that regard Israel as a vine (Psalms 80:8–16; Isaiah 5:1–7; Isaiah 27:2–6; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15; 19:10; Hosea 10:1). Indeed, in time the vine became a symbol of Israel, it is found, for example, on coins of the Maccabees from the time of revolt against the Romans and Josephus reports that the Temple was adorned with a golden bunch of grapes.

Interestingly, all the Old Testament passages that use this symbol appear to regard Israel as faithless or as the object of severe punishment – the vine is burned with fire (Psalm 80:16). Here, Jesus’ description of himself as the “true” vine is to be seen against this background (although, unlike faithless Israel, there is no implication that Jesus as the “vine” merits judgement). Jesus supersedes the Temple, the Jewish feasts and indeed Israel as the chosen people as the very locus of the people of God. The true vine is not the apostate people of Israel, but Jesus himself and the believers who are incorporated in him.

The passage is John’s counterpart to Paul’s view of the church as the body of Christ and of believers as “in” Christ. Both are ways of bringing out the vital connection that exists between Christ and his own, between Christ and those who seek to follow him. The first part of this passage speaks of remaining in Jesus, whilst the second speaks of remaining in Jesus’ love.

Some commentators have seen this allegory as a reference to the Eucharist, but I can see no justification for this. There is no hint of believers drinking the wine and no connection with the blood of Christ.

In verse 1 Jesus is saying that *he* is the vine. The church is not the vine, but merely the branches *in* the vine. Indeed Jesus says that he is the *true* vine, replacing the old degenerate vine of Israel (Jeremiah 2:21). As the true vine Jesus is working together with the Father who is the gardener working with the vine.

In verse 2 the Father takes action to ensure fruitfulness. I don’t think we should see this verse as evidence that true believers can lose their salvation, the word translated “prunes” by the NIV and many other modern Bible versions ought really to be translated “cleans” (or ‘purges’ as the old KJV would have it). Everything is removed which diverts the branches from the production of fruit, the emphasis is on bearing fruit, and the strong emphasis is that all true Christians will be fruitful. Fruitfulness is not only desirable, it is imperative, even if ensuring it may be a painful process. There is no point in growing a vine other than for its yield of grapes and for maximum fruitfulness pruning is essential. This is a suggestive figure for the Christian life – the vine gives its life blood. The fruit of Christian service is never the result of allowing the natural energies and inclinations to run riot.

In verse 3 Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that he is not singling them out for criticism, they are already “clean” because of the message they have received from Jesus, rather Jesus is making it clear to them how they (and we) can continue to grow spiritually.

But, they (and we) must make sure that we continue to remain in Jesus, so that he will continue to remain in them – see verse 4. Unless we remain in Jesus we cannot bear fruit – no branch can bear fruit by itself, it is Christ’s work through us. A branch is not a self-contained entity and neither is a Christian disciple. Being attached to Jesus is essential for Christians.

In verses 5 and 6 the essential thoughts of verses 1 to 4 are repeated and emphasised, but without reference the gardener or to pruning. The consequences of union with and loss of

union with Christ are placed in the sharpest contrast. In verse 5 Jesus emphasizes that he is our rootstock, our foundation. Without Jesus we are helpless, if we remain rooted in him we will be fruitful. This fruit will be everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus' name, such as obedience to his commands, experience of his joy, love for one another and witness to the world.

Verse 6 takes this sense of helplessness apart from Jesus even further. Without Jesus we shall wither and die and be burnt up. Unlike olive wood the cuttings from the vineyard are good for nothing except burning. God's anger is often linked to fire (Deuteronomy 32:22) and fire is also a symbol of judgement, both in the OT (e.g. Jeremiah 4:4) and in the NT (Matthew 3:12; 5:22 etc). But, I don't think John has the judgement of the last day in mind here, because the application is immediate, I think he is speaking of judgement more generally, as for example Ezekiel spoke of judgement on Jerusalem using vine imagery (Ezekiel 15:1-6). Here are strong words that emphasize the absolute necessity of remaining firmly rooted in Christ. This is a severe warning.

In verse 7 Jesus moves on from fruitfulness to prayer. The passage emphasizes the necessity of remaining or abiding in Christ somewhat differently. Jesus has previously spoken of his followers abiding in him, now he speaks of his words abiding in them. When this happens our prayers will be in line with God's will and are effective. When we pray in line with God's will our prayers will be answered. Prayer is crucial to the effective mission of the people of God. In the work of mission, the church advances on its knees.

This fruit bearing of which we have spoken is primarily the winning of lost souls for the kingdom. But it is not exclusively that. As Paul says (Galatians 5:22) the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We had already heard that God was glorified in the work of the Son, but now we hear that God is also glorified in the work of believers who abide in the Son. So your (and my) obedience to Christ glorifies God – see verse 8. The fruitfulness of believers is part of the way that Jesus glorifies the Father. This verse makes it clear that our discipleship is not a static thing, but a growing and developing way of life.

Jesus then turns from the obligations on the disciples to speak again of his love for them. He tells them how great this love is – like the Father's love for him and tells them to remain in this love – see verse 9. It is possible for people to live without being mindful of Christ's love for them and so break the closeness of the fellowship. Jesus commands us not to do this.

In verse 10 the obligations resting on the disciples intertwine with the blessings there are in Christ. This is not so much a mystical experience as simple obedience. It is when we keep Christ's commandments that we abide in his love. In verses 9 and 10 we are given the example of Christ's love for the Father as the example of the way in which we should love Christ.

Jesus then tells them that he has told them these things so that they may be joyful, so that his joy may be in them, so that they may be fulfilled and complete – see verse 11. Our joy will not be complete, indeed it will be shallow and incomplete, until our existence is overtaken by a love of God in Christ Jesus. It is an inspiring thought that Jesus calls his followers into *joy*. John has only mentioned "joy" once before (John 3:29), but here in the "upper room" we find it seven times. We see that the Christian life is not some shallow, insipid following of a

traditional pattern. It is a life characterized by “unexhausted (and inexhaustible) power for fresh creation and the pleasure of completing that creative work. But, don’t misunderstand this joy. It’s not pleasure, it’s creative joy like that of an artist, it arises from finished work.

Jesus then refers to the greatest love of all – see verse 13. There is no love greater than that of one who lays down his life for others. Anything else must be less. This is the supreme test of love. Clearly this is a reference to the love of Jesus shown on the cross. There he laid down his life on behalf of his friends. As Barrett said “The eternal divine love reached its complete and unsurpassable expression in the death of Christ, which was at the same time the death of a man for his friends”. Some have raised the question whether the love that dies for enemies is not greater than that which is concerned for friends, but that is not the point here. In this passage Jesus is not comparing the love that sacrifices for enemies with that which sacrifices for friends. He is in the midst of friends and is speaking only of friends. With respect to them he is saying that one cannot have greater love than to die for them. When it is a question of enemies Jesus did in fact die for them also. He died for each and every one of us.

In verse 14, obedience is once again the test of discipleship. The friends of Jesus are those who habitually obey him. Obedience doesn’t *make* us disciples, rather it is what characterises us *as* disciples.

In verse 15 Jesus tells the disciples that they are no longer servants, although slaves might be a better translation. A slave or even a servant is no more than an instrument, he does not know his masters business, but simply does what he is told. This is no longer the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, he has told them everything, although as we shall see in chapter 16 verse 12 their knowledge is not yet exhaustive.

We always tend to feel that the initiative is with us. In verse 16, Jesus now assures his followers that this is not the case. It was not they who chose him, as was normally the case when disciples attached themselves to a particular rabbi of their choosing. Students the world over delight to seek out the teacher of their choice and attach themselves to him or her. But Jesus’ disciples did not hold the initiative. On the contrary, it was he who chose them. And not only did he choose them, but he appointed them to their task. Furthermore the fruit we are appointed to bear, primarily bringing new converts to Christ, will be fruit that will last. But, the fact that Christ has chosen us is precisely what ensures the stability of our relationship with him.

In verse 17 Jesus rounds off his teaching, or according to some commentators begins a new line of teaching, by renewing his command to love.

## **Chapter 15 – Verses 18-25 – Persecution**

In verses 18-21 the teaching is of suffering for Christ’s sake:

““If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.” (John 15:18-21 NIV)

It is precisely because of what the Christian life is that it attracts the persecution of the world. Jesus points out first that the world will hate his followers as it has hated him (verses 18–20), then that it will hate them because it hated him (verses 21–25). He reminds them that there is a sharp distinction between themselves and the world. And because they are identified with him, his followers will be treated by the world in much the same way as it treated him. The world does not know God. Therefore the world ill-treats the people of God.

The apparent conditionality of verse 18 should not be read as implying that there is any doubt here. Rather the reverse. The world will certainly hate the disciples. When that happens it is not surprising for the world hated Christ first.

In verse 19 we see that the disciples are not the recipients of the world's love, for the world loves only that which conforms to its pattern; whereas the disciples do not belong to the world for Jesus has chosen them out of it. This is another example of divine election – an important theme of John's Gospel.

In verse 20 Jesus recalls an earlier saying of his (John 13:16). Unusually John quotes the earlier saying in exactly the same words, which may emphasise its importance. This saying reminds them (and us) that the treatment given to the Master determines that accorded to the servant. They persecuted Jesus – the word used here means to pursue as hunters pursue a wild animal – thus Jesus' followers will be similarly pursued or persecuted. They will keep the word or the teaching of the disciples only so far as they have kept to the word or the teaching of Jesus. Nevertheless some *did* accept Jesus' teaching so some would accept that of the disciples. In the same way, some will accept our teaching.

Faced with Jesus' teaching and the contemporary reality of the persecution of Christians in China and elsewhere, those who profess Christ's name in the comfortable West need to hear the words of Yugoslavian evangelical leader Peter Kusmic. 'So much popular Western evangelical religiosity is so shallow and selfish. It promises so much and demands so little. It offers success, personal happiness, peace of mind, material prosperity; but it hardly speaks of repentance, sacrifice, self-denial, holy lifestyle and willingness to die for Christ.'

Jesus now explains that the root cause of this persecution is lack of knowledge of God – see verse 21.

In verses 22-25 Christ reveals people's sin:

“If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them what no-one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’” (John 15:22-25 NIV)

The measure of the greatness of Christ's revelation is a measure of the extent of the guilt of those who rejected him. The seriousness of rejecting Christ is brought out in verse 22 – and these words are not intended to apply solely to the Jews. Of course, Jesus does not mean that the Jews would have been sinless had he not appeared. But he does mean that the sin of rejecting God as he really is would not have been imputed to them had they not had the revelation of God that was made through him. But now, as things are, they have no excuse. There is no way of covering up their sin.

In verse 23 hating Jesus is equated with hating the Father and the themes of verses 22 and 23 are elaborated in verse 24. The Jews had an obligation to take note of the great ‘works’ – including but not limited to miracles – performed amongst them, instead they disregarded them and rejected both Jesus and the Father.

Verse 25 implies that the conduct of the Jews is unexpected, the opposite of what might reasonably have been anticipated. The quotation “they hated me without reason” probably derives from the Messianic Psalm 69 verse 4. This is ironic, the Jews saw themselves as the upholders of the Law, but in their zeal for the Law they incurred the condemnation of the Law by rejecting the Christ to whom the Law bore its witness. This hatred doesn’t jeopardise God’s redemptive plan, rather it fulfils it.

### **Chapter 15 – Verses 26-27 – The Witness of the Holy Spirit**

““When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26-27 NIV)

Earlier Jesus said that the Father would send the Spirit in response to his prayer (14:16), and that the Father would send him in Christ’s name (14:26), but now he says that he himself will send him from the Father. It is plain the Spirit is regarded as connected in the most intimate fashion with both the Father and the Son. The sending of the Spirit is an activity that concerns them both.

The apostles are linked closely with the Spirit in this activity of witness (see Acts 4:33). Their witness is linked with that of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Christ to whom they bear witness, and it is the same salvation of which they bear witness. At the same time it is *their* witness. They cannot simply relax and leave it all to the Spirit. They have a particular function in bearing witness in that they were with Jesus from the very beginning. There is a responsibility resting on all Christians to bear witness to the facts of saving grace. We cannot evade this. But the really significant witness is that of the Holy Spirit, for he alone can bring home to people’s hearts the truth and the significance of the truth.

### **Chapter 16**

In the first four verses of Chapter 16, Jesus warns the disciples of persecution to come: ““All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. I did not tell you this at first because I was with you.” (John 16:1-4 NIV)

Jesus makes it quite plain that the disciples are facing a hard and difficult road, he is preparing them for the severe trials they will undergo. As Temple reminds us, “it is hard to believe that a cause is truly God’s when it seems to meet with no success, and all power is on the other side.” But Jesus prepares them so that they will not be taken by surprise and overcome in the collapse of a starry-eyed optimism. Indeed, because Jesus has warned them, the trials will strengthen their faith.

Jesus is not talking about a possibility here – in verse 3 he says “they will do such things”. He is warning his followers of what will inevitable happen – they will suffer for their faith.

This often remains the case for followers of Christ today. The persecution Jesus is speaking of is not persecution by a secular state, but persecution by the religious authorities – and that is generally the case today. There is evidence that in Jesus' time some rabbinic authorities held that slaying heretics could be an act of divine worship and the "Curse on the Heretics" was inserted into the daily Jewish prayers known as "The Eighteen Benedictions". Prior to his conversion, Paul certainly thought it was right, and indeed his duty, to persecute the church. It is the tragedy of religious people that they so often regard persecution as in line with the will of God.

Jesus then tells them that he didn't warn them of what was to come earlier because he was with them and able to protect them. Indeed the venom of the enemy would be directed against him rather than the disciples. But, his removal will transform the situation and hostility will be directed at the disciples.

The next part of the chapter reverts to a consideration of the witness and work of the Holy Spirit – see verses 5-15:

"Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." (John 16:5-15 NIV)

Having warned the disciples of persecution, Jesus now teaches them about the resources that will be available to them – the Holy Spirit who will supply their needs abundantly. We have already had the thought of the Spirit as a Helper and Advocate (John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26–27). Now we have the additional thought that he is a Prosecutor, convicting sinful people of being in the wrong.

A change is imminent, Jesus is about to go to the Father – referred to as "him who sent me". At first sight Jesus' statement that nobody asks, "Where are you going?" appears incorrect in the light of Simon Peter's earlier question, "Lord, where are you going?" (verse 13:36). But that question had not really been a serious inquiry as to Jesus' destination. Peter had been diverted immediately, and he made no real attempt to find out where Jesus was going. He had been concerned with the thought of parting from Jesus, not with that of the Master's destination. He had in mind only the consequences for himself and for his companions. Neither he nor they had as yet made serious inquiry as to what was to become of Jesus. That's how self interest blinds us!

In verse 6 Jesus says they are filled with grief. The pain of parting will be very real until supplanted by resurrection joy.

Then Jesus tells them that although for them his departure seems disastrous, it is actually for their good. That is because the Holy Spirit will not be given unless and until Jesus departs.

The reason for this is not given here, but earlier (John 7:39) we are told that the spirit has not been given as Jesus has not yet been glorified. Thus the giving of the Spirit is tied to the cross. The giving of the Spirit is part of Christ's atoning work of salvation – the atonement he brought and bought through the cross. Again, we are not told why that should be. Perhaps it is because the Holy Spirit cannot dwell within us until we are justified and given Christ's righteousness.

In verse 8 we are told that when the Spirit comes he will “convict the world.” Different commentators argue about the precise meaning of the word translated “convict” by the NIV. John's intended meaning is probably wider than any single English word, but I think that convict is probably the best one word choice. This is the only place in Scripture where the Spirit is spoken of as performing a work in “the world.” The many other references to the work of the Spirit speak of what he will do in believers. This is an important passage, for here “we see that the Spirit is not the domesticated auxiliary of the Church; he is the powerful advocate who goes before the Church to bring the world under conviction” (Newbigin). The word for the Spirit in verse 7 normally translated “Counsellor” or “Advocate” is a word with legal implications. Normally it denotes a person whose activities are in favour of the defendant, but here the meaning is that the Spirit will act as prosecutor and bring about the world's conviction of their sin with a view of calling all to repentance. This involves a threefold activity that is further developed in the succeeding verses. Apart from the Holy Spirit people do not really know the truth about sin or righteousness or judgment.

According to the NIV translation, verse 9 tells us that the world is sinful because it does not believe in Jesus, although the Greek could also be read so as to mean that the world does not believe because it is sinful. Probably John intended his words in both senses. The Spirit secures a verdict of “Guilty” against the world, and also the Spirit brings the world's guilt home to itself. That is, the Spirit convicts the individual sinner's conscience. Otherwise people would never come to see themselves as sinners and repent.

The righteousness of verse 10 is precisely the righteousness that requires the work of the Holy Spirit for people to be convinced about it. The Spirit shows people (and only the Spirit can show them) that true righteousness is not the acquiring of merit by their own efforts that they think it is. Righteousness before God depends not on their own efforts but on Christ's atoning work for them. The words, “You can see me no longer”, may refer to what happened at the cross, when Jesus was removed from them, but more likely look through the cross to the ascension when his bodily form was finally taken away from them. As always we should see the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension as inextricably linked, as a compound event

The “Judgment” of verse 11 is not the favourable declaration that the world thinks it will attain before God; it is the just condemnation and overthrow of Satan himself. The works of the Holy Spirit of conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment that come before us in these verses are all to be interpreted and understood because of the way they relate to Christ.

Jesus now turns from the work of the Holy Spirit in the world to the work of the Holy Spirit in believers, picturing the Spirit as a guide. Firstly, Jesus speaks of having more to say than the disciples can now bear. There are vistas of truth, especially about the coming atonement, that they cannot yet see, but which they will know when the Spirit comes. Certainly I don't think we should take this passage as implying that there is going to be any major addition to the basic message of salvation by means of Christ's atonement. But, I do think this phrase

also signifies that, until they are empowered by the Spirit, the disciples are unable to live out the implications of Jesus' revelations. The Spirit is now referred to as the "Spirit of truth" for his work is to guide the followers of Jesus into "all truth". The words "what is yet to come" in verse 13 are a bit puzzling as the Holy Spirit does not usually reveal the future to us. Probably the phrase means that he will tell us what is needed as it is needed, or perhaps it refers to the future Christian faith. That second view is supported by verses 14 and 15 where we are told that the Spirit will take from what is Christ's and make it known to us. This also supports what I said a moment ago about the limitation on further revelation.

Jesus now proceeds to deal with some of the perplexity the disciples are feeling, see verses 16-18:

"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." Some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying." (John 16:16-18 NIV)

It's not surprising that the opening words of Jesus puzzled the disciples, indeed they have been puzzling Christians ever since! Does he mean that he will come again in the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Or is he referring to the post-resurrection appearances? Or to the ascension? Or to the coming of the Holy Spirit? Or even to the second coming? I think John deliberately intended there to be ambiguity here, and in this ambiguity he implies that the death and resurrection of Jesus are in themselves intimately linked to and prefiguring the end time events and also (as we have already seen) the sending of the Holy Spirit. On the face of it though, the use of the phrase "a little while" points to the main references being to Jesus being taken from the disciples at the crucifixion and then appearing to them, following his resurrection.

Whatever the words mean, given that the disciples stood on the other side of the cross, it is not surprising that they were puzzled.

Jesus then speaks to the disciples of their coming joy – see verses 19-24:

"Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." (John 16:19-24 NIV)

Jesus responds to the real need of the disciples rather than their actual question. He points out that there may be anguish that is purposeful (like that of a woman giving birth) as he goes to the cross and is laid in a tomb. It must be gone through, but when that is done and the day of resurrection comes, the person forgets the pain for the joy of the result. So the disciples must go through a time of deep sorrow, but out of it will emerge an abounding joy.

Jesus makes it clear that his followers will have a difficult time while their enemies triumph, but he does not explain this in detail, his words are enigmatic, although he is clearly referring to the cross. But, Jesus does not end on a note of sorrow, the disciples grief will become joy.

The images of childbirth are very interesting. Elsewhere in Scripture the image of the woman in childbirth is often used to bring out such thoughts as the suddenness and the inevitability of the birth when the time has come. Here the image is rather the contrast between the state of mind of the mother before and after the birth. During childbirth she is in great distress, but when the child is born the distress is forgotten. What matters then is only that “a child is born into the world.” The background to these ideas is found in Old Testament passages (like Isaiah 26:17ff., which combines the thoughts of childbirth and resurrection; Hosea 13:13–15; and perhaps Isaiah 66:7–14). Such passages point to an anguish like that of childbirth from which the new Israel would emerge. This leads to the well-known thought of the birth pangs that would precede the coming of the Messiah. Such images are important for a real understanding of the present passage, although here the suffering is to be born by the Messiah himself.

The message of verse 22 is that after the disciples have come to understand the significance of the cross they will be possessed by a deep-seated joy, a joy independent of the world, the text could well be rendered ‘and your heart will rejoice’. The world did not give this joy and the world cannot take it away.

The “in that day” of verse 23 surely refers to the time after the resurrection, Jesus is saying that the disciples will no longer need to be taught by him – the Holy Spirit will guide them into all truth. I think the first asking of verse 23 is an asking for information, but the second asking is different. This speaks of making requests to the Father. They will pray to the Father in the name of Jesus and when they pray in line with Jesus’ teaching, the Father will grant their prayers because of the atoning work of the Son. This is a new state of affairs. Until now the disciples have asked of the Father or they have asked of the physical person of Jesus, but henceforth they are to ask of the Father in the name of Jesus. Jesus tells them to “keep on asking” (which is the sense of the Greek) and assures them that they will receive. We must ask in prayer as this is the only way our joy can be made complete.

The disciples now make a new statement of faith in Jesus – see verses 25-30:  
““Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”  
Then Jesus’ disciples said, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.”” (John 16:25-30 NIV).

Jesus further explains his going away. He is to leave the world and go to the Father. The disciples find this plain speaking, and it brings out of them a statement of faith—they believe now that Jesus came from God.

In verse 25 Jesus says that until now he has been speaking figuratively, using clever sayings and parables, but that now he (or perhaps the Spirit speaking for him) will speak plainly. Certainly the obscure things about Jesus became clear to the disciples after the resurrection.

There is a marked difference in the apostles when we come to the book of Acts. Then there is a sureness of touch, a certainty, a conviction, that could not take place until after the events narrated in the Gospels, especially the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

In verse 26, asking in Jesus' name is not a way of enlisting his support. It is rather a pleading of his person and of his work for sinners. It is praying on the basis of all that he is and has done for our salvation. There is no contradiction with passages that speak of his perpetual intercession for his people (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25), nor with that in which John calls him "an advocate with the Father" (1 John 2:1). In all four passages there is one basic underlying thought, namely, that our approach to the Father rests firmly on Christ's priestly work for us. That work is itself a perpetual intercession. It does not need to be supplemented by further intervention on our behalf. There is also a firm exclusion of the thought that the disciples should enlist Christ's prayers for them as though he were more merciful and more ready to hear than is the Father. Rather the passage insists on the unity of the Son with the Father. The Son does not persuade the Father to be gracious. The whole of the work of the Son rests on the loving care of the Father who sent him.

In verse 27, the reason that Christ will not intercede for the disciples is now given. There will be no need. The Father *himself* loves them. He does not need to be persuaded to be gracious. In this case the ground of acceptance is the relationship in which they stand to Jesus. Of course, the Father also has a pre-existing love for all mankind, indeed the giving of the Son by the Father is an expression of that pre-existing love, but here we speak of a special acceptance of those who love the Son. They have loved him and will continue to love him. Verses 26 and 27 don't in any way reduce the work of Christ in making intercession for us with the Father (see Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25), rather we should see them as emphasising the wonderful post resurrection access we have to the Father, because the Father loves those who have believed in his Son.

In verse 28, Christ's heavenly origin is important, else he would not be our Saviour. But his heavenly destination is also important, for his resurrection and ascension witness to the Father's seal on the Son's saving work.

In verse 29 John is probably being a little ironic. If the disciples had *really* understood the nature of what was before Jesus they would have reacted very differently when the crisis actually came.

The disciples now bring their words to a close with an expression of trust. They are convinced that he knows all things and this assures them of his divine origin.

Jesus' final words to the disciples are peace – see verses 31-33:

"You believe at last!" Jesus answered. "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:31-33 NIV)

Jesus shows that he is not deceived by the disciples' confidence. He knows that there are limitations to their faith, and that these limitations will speedily be shown up. But his final word to them is one of peace. The opposition of the world is real. But Jesus has overcome it.

Verse 32 really shows the limitations of the disciple's faith in that they will shortly abandon Jesus – following the prophecy of Zechariah 13:7 that when the shepherd is struck the sheep will be scattered. They have professed faith, but in the immediate future they will be unable to withstand the test. Even Peter and John who alone among the disciples found the courage to be present at the questioning of Jesus after his arrest (John alone appears to have attended the crucifixion) were shaken in their faith since, as we shall see in Chapter 21, they later returned to their work on fishing boats.

Verse 33 contrasts the life in the world with a life in Christ. All must live in the world and thus have trouble, but people may also live in Christ, and when they do they have peace. Finally see how Jesus bids the disciples to “take heart” and states that he had “overcome the world” - the perfect tense denoting an abiding victory. This statement, spoken as it is in the shadow of the cross, is audacious. The cross would seem to the outsider to be Jesus' total defeat. He sees it as his complete victory over all that the world is and can do to him. He goes to the cross not in fear or in gloom, but as a conqueror.

## **Chapter 17 – Jesus' Prayer**

Jesus' teaching of and discourse with the disciples is followed by his final prayer in Chapter 17 – at least in this Gospel. John does not record Jesus' final prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he does give us this wonderful prayer which is not recorded in the Synoptics. Commentators often try and characterise it as the ‘great high priestly prayer’, or a ‘prayer of consecration’, or a ‘Farewell Prayer’, but it actually deals with a lot of issues that were on Jesus' mind at this time and doesn't fit neatly into any single category. It is the longest of Jesus' recorded prayers. Although it's in a separate chapter, it's not a separate free standing item – it's intimately connected with the thoughts and ideas of the discourses with the disciples in the four preceding chapters.

This prayer is often thought of as rather gloomy, but it is not. It is uttered by One who has just affirmed that he has overcome the world (John 16:33), and it starts from this conviction. Jesus is looking forward to the cross, but in a mood of hope and joy, not one of despondency. The prayer marks the end of Jesus' earthly ministry prior to the crucifixion, but it looks forward to the ongoing work that would now be the responsibility first of the immediate disciples and then of those who would later believe through them – including us here today. Jesus prays for them all.

The prayer is difficult to subdivide, for it is essentially a unity, but it is possible to discern a movement. At the beginning Jesus prays about his own glorification (vv. 1–5), then he goes on to the main part of the prayer, which concerns the circle of the disciples (vv. 6–19), and he concludes by praying for those who will believe through their ministry (vv. 20–26). Common to all three sections is the desire that the Father's will be done.

Let's start with Jesus' prayer for his glorification in verses 1-5:

“After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:1-5 NIV)

The opening words “After Jesus said this ...” indicate the unity with the previous discourses I just mentioned. Lifting up one’s eyes to heaven was the accepted attitude for prayer in those times – some of you may remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, where the tax collector would not lift up his eyes to heaven because he felt unworthy (see Luke 18:13). Clearly the prayer was spoken out loud, and although a real prayer communing with the Father, it was also an important part of Jesus’ lesson to the disciples. The form of address is a simple “Father” (which is actually used six times in the whole prayer) and shows the closeness and familiarity between Jesus and the Father. Now the cross is in immediate prospect and Jesus can say “the time has come” – this is what the whole ministry of Jesus has been leading up to. Jesus prays that God would glorify him. From the human viewpoint, the cross was an instrument of shame. To Christ it was the means of true glory. The prayer also makes it clear that the glory of the Son and the glory of the Father are closely connected. To glorify the Son is to glorify the Father. The two are one, united within the Trinity.

In verse 2 the thought of glory continues. The giving of eternal life will be the result and outworking of the glory which Jesus seeks. His authority is God-given, and it is an authority over the whole human race (see John 5:27; Matthew 11:27; 28:18). This does not mean that he exercises sovereignty over the people like the sovereignty of earthly kings. It is an authority given for the express purpose of conferring eternal life (see John 3:15; 10:28). The cross was not to be defeat but victory. Jesus exercised authority in bringing people life even as he hung, apparently helpless, on the cross. But, though life is his gift, he does not confer it on all indiscriminately; the concept of divine predestination is introduced. Life is given “to all those you have given him.” In a manner we do not completely understand this eternal life is somehow available to all (John 3:16) and yet at the same time to those who are predestined – given to Christ by the Father – (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:5). This is one of the mysteries of the Christian faith.

In verse 3 we have something of a definition of eternal life. Really to know God means more than knowing the way *to* life. It *is* life. In this world we are familiar with the truth that it is a blessing and an inspiration to know certain people. How much more is that the case when we know God – in all the persons of the Trinity. To know him transforms us and introduces us to a different quality of living – the emphasis here is on the quality rather than the quantity of life. This resurrection life is endless, but that is not its most important feature. In this chapter the emphasis is on knowing rather than on believing, but it is quite clear that we must know God through the one he has sent – Jesus Christ.

In verse 4 Jesus makes it clear that the cross will be the culmination and completion of the work he has been sent to do. “I have brought you glory” indicates a finished task and he then goes on to say that this is “by completing the work” he has been given. The statement is also applicable to the disciples, sent into the world in mission – and also to Christians today. We too are to bring glory to the one who has called us, and in the same way, by doing his work in the world.

The text clarifies several aspects of Christian service. Firstly, it identifies our *supreme motivation*, the glorifying of God, as Calvin said ‘It is for God above all things, and not for ourselves, that we were created’. If our chief end is ‘to glorify God and enjoy him for ever’ then here is a means to that end, the service of his mission in the world. This truth also eliminates any polarising of worship and witness. A worship which does not lead to witness is sterile, and less than truly glorifying to God. Witness is itself a form of worship, a genuine

honouring of the Father and Son. Further, if the motive in mission is God's honour then mission undertaken to promote human organizations or to inflate human egos, whether covertly or overtly, stands self-condemned. We must go for his glory, not our own.

This text also speaks of a *specific limitation*, "the work you gave me to do". From many points of view limitations were placed upon the scope of Jesus' activities. Geographically his whole career was confined within the boundaries of central Palestine. He never saw Rome, or Athens, or Alexandria, to say nothing of the further flung lands of the globe. His ministry was circumscribed also in terms of his life experience. He never knew the intimacies of marriage, the struggles of parenthood, the challenges of middle age, or the limitations of aging. Even within the sphere of his teaching and healing ministry, there were multitudes of his needy contemporaries in Palestine to whom he never ministered, whether in word or deed. Yet his ministry was perfect and whole, because he did, with complete and single-minded dedication, 'all that he was given to do'. So at the end he could truly say, 'I have finished the work'; or more profoundly in his final moments on the cross, 'It is finished.' A similar limitation rests upon us and indeed on every disciple. We are not called to reach the whole world or to minister to every need. There is a specific work for us to do, and in finding and doing that specific thing to the limits of our powers lies our fulfilment, and our peace.

Finally, this text speaks of a *necessary completion*. The honour of God is bound up not only with the enthusiastic commencement of a project but with the faithful completion of it. Paul's testimony that he had 'finished the race' is to be coveted by every servant of Christ. For Jesus the finishing was to be infinitely costly, yet in that final carrying through of the Father's will there lay his own glory and the Father's through him, and indeed our whole redemption.

In verse 5 Jesus prays that he will be restored to the pre-incarnate glory he had with the Father before the world began. This implies that 'becoming flesh' entailed a forfeiture of glory on the part of Jesus (see Philippians 2:5-8) and indeed it would appear that the incarnation was, at least to some extent, irreversible. The costliness of Jesus' mission reaches back into his pre-incarnate life.

Jesus then prays for the disciples in verses 6-19:

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." (John 17:6-19 NIV)

The main part of the prayer is concerned with the disciples. They had depended very heavily on the visible presence of their Master, a presence that was about to be taken from them. Though Jesus has already promised them that the Holy Spirit will come, and has even assured them that this will be better for them than his continuing bodily presence, yet he knows that the coming hours will be a great shock to them. Despite everything they are not ready for the stunning impact of Calvary. Tenderly he now commits them to the care of the heavenly Father.

In verse 6 Jesus makes it clear that he has revealed the Father to the disciples who have been drawn out of the world and will form the nucleus of an expanding messianic community – the church. They are fit for this task because they have obeyed God’s word conveyed to them through Christ. Of course, this does not imply their perfect obedience or sinlessness, but rather that they have the desire to obey. The priority and pre-eminence of the Father is implied in this verse – Jesus says that the believers belonged to the Father and have been given to him by the Father.

The “Now that they know everything” of verse 7 appears to refer to knowledge of Jesus’ mission and its divine nature. See the importance placed on divine revelation in verse 8, the emphasis on the words given to Jesus by the Father. Jesus also acknowledges that the attitude of the disciples is basically correct, they have grasped the fundamental truth that Jesus can be understood only in terms of the Father who sent him and that in trusting Jesus’ words we come to a sure knowledge of the Father.

In verse 9 Jesus prays very simply for the little band of disciples, setting them apart from “the world”. This does not mean that the world at large is beyond God’s love and care – in the Synoptic Gospels we learn that Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44 and did this himself (Luke 23:34)) and a little later in this chapter Jesus prays that the disciples may do certain things “so that the world may believe ..” (verse 21). Here Jesus knows that the world will be reached through the disciples and so he prays specifically for them. Again Jesus acknowledges that the disciples have been given to him by the Father.

In verse 10 the unity between the Father and the Son is once again emphasized – what belongs to one belongs to the other. This verse also tells us that Glory has come to Jesus through the disciples and by implication will come through future believers. This is a very encouraging statement if we bear in mind the disciples limited achievements up to this point and their less than perfect nature. But, we can also see it as an obligation on us to honour Jesus as he honoured the Father. Seen in that way it’s an awesome responsibility.

Verse 11 emphasizes the imminence of Jesus’ death – his departure is referred to in the present tense. The use of the words “Holy Father” here is unique – in those times the holiness and majesty of God were generally taken for granted. The words “by the power of your name” point to the whole revealed character of God. At the end of this verse Jesus prays for a unity amongst the disciples, a unity of abiding in him and having him abide in them. Here he means that they may continually “be” one, rather than that they may “become” one. It is the Divine unity of love that is referred to, all wills bowing in the same direction, all affections burning with the same flame, all aims directed to the same end – one blessed harmony of love. Ecumenical Christians often assert that the answer to Jesus’ prayer would lie in the re-unification of the church. It is true that unity of organization can be an impressive witness to unity of spirit, yet as such it is merely outward. I believe it is not this

outward unity that is in mind here, but something much more difficult, a unity of heart and mind and will. It is also a unity in mission to an unbelieving world, as this is a major focus of Jesus' prayer. It is good that we work to bring the separated denominations together. But, it is better to look for a grander unity than that, and it is this grander unity for which Jesus prays here.

In verse 12, our concern turns away from the internal to the external, to the hostile world. Jesus says he protected the disciples "in" the name God gave him, by the revelation of God through Jesus. In this verse, the words "the one doomed to destruction" are often misunderstood. They point to character rather than destiny. The expression means that Judas was characterized by "lostness," not that he was predestined to be "lost". Yet this was the Father's will, because scripture was fulfilled. This does not mean that Judas was a robot. He was a responsible person and acted freely. But God used that man's evil act – which God foreknew – to bring about his own purpose. There is a combination of the human and the divine here, but in this passage it is the divine aspect rather than the human that receives emphasis.

In verse 14 we again see the emphasis placed on God's revelation. Jesus' supreme gift is God's word – the entire message he has revealed. During the time they had been with Jesus they had been given over to learning of God. This inevitably meant that the world opposed them. The disciples and the world were ranged on opposite sides. Now it can be said "they are not of the world". This doesn't mean to say that Christians are to be different for the sake of being different – God's intention is that we should be like Jesus.

Since the disciples are not "of the world" it might be thought that the prayer would be made that they should be removed from the world. But in verse 15 Jesus makes it plain that he has nothing of the sort in mind. The disciples place is still in the world, for they have a mission to fulfil. It would be bad for them and disastrous for the world if they were taken out of the world. Moses and Elijah and Jonah all prayed that they be taken out of the world (see Numbers 11:15; 1 Kings 19:4; Jonah 4:3, 8), but in no case was the request granted. The place for the people of God is 'in the world', though, of course, they must not be 'of the world'. The church has often sought to contract out, to become a kind of holy club. But, this is not the prayer of the Master. Rather he prays that the disciples would be kept from evil, actually, "from the evil one" – Satan - for the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Jesus recognizes the power of Satan and prays for his own to be kept from him. We would do well to remember the emphasis Jesus puts on protection from Satan as opposed to material problems in our own prayers.

In verse 17 "sanctify" means to make holy or separate. Jesus says that the disciples will be sanctified by the truth of God's word. We can also be sanctified through immersion in the scriptures which are God's word to us and through the action of the Holy Spirit within us.

In verse 18 we see that the mission of Christ forms the pattern for the mission of the apostles. Earlier (John 10:36) John says that the Father sanctified Jesus and sent him into the world. Jesus has just prayed that the Father would sanctify the disciples and now he sends them into the world. The parallel is impressive. The disciples' lives are not to be aimless. They are given a definite commission by their Lord. Their task is to discharge it, even as he discharged his commission from God. Indeed their mission is to continue the mission of Jesus to the world – to be the light of the world.

In verse 19 Jesus sanctifies himself, that is he sets himself apart for doing the Father's will – going to his death on the cross. Further, this is so “that they too may be truly sanctified.” It is purposeful. Jesus dies with a view to the disciples being sanctified, being set apart for God. It is only on the basis of what he will do for them on the cross that his prayer for their being sanctified may be answered.

Jesus now extends his prayer beyond the disciples to all those who believe – see verses 20-26:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:20-26 NIV)

This is a prayer for all believers including us here today. The dominant concern is for unity and for the divine glory.

Again Jesus prays for unity – see verse 21 –we addressed this issue a few moments ago and those comments are again relevant here. Here the unity is composed of four parts (i) the Father in Jesus, (ii) Jesus in the Father, (iii) the believers in Jesus and the Father, (iv) in order that the world may believe that Jesus was sent by the Father. Indwelling is the secret here, Christ indwells the Father and the Father indwells Christ, so are the believers to indwell and be indwelled – which takes us back to the allegory of the vine from John chapter 15. This four part theme is repeated in verse 23. We are not being told that the unity between believers and God is the same as that between Jesus and the Father, but we are being taught that there is an analogy. Without losing our identity we are to be in the Father and the Son and this will have the consequence that the world may believe. Our unity will have an evangelical purpose.

Verse 22 speaks of believers being given glory, but we need to remember that the ultimate glory given to Jesus was the cross. Believers are being called to a life of service and sacrifice which will bring them much glory in heaven.

Jesus' final petition in verse 24 is for believers to be with him in heaven. Jesus prayed for you and I that we might be with him eternity – what a privilege, what an honour.

The very last words of the prayer refer to Christ's continuing presence in his followers. Whatever the future holds he will be with them, just as he will be with us.

## **Chapters 18 and 19 – the Crucifixion**

We now come to the climax of the Gospel of John. As with the other Gospels, it is the events of the crucifixion which form the climax. John stresses the divine overruling and Jesus' mastery of events.

We start with Jesus' arrest – see verses 1-12:

“When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was an olive grove, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." "I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him” (John 18:1-12 NIV)

As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is arrested in the Garden. But there are important differences. A striking omission is the agony in Gethsemane. Many conjectures have been put forward to account for this, but none is universally accepted. I believe that here, as in many other places, John was not giving a complete account of all that happened, but painting a picture. This agony did not suit his purpose, particularly Jesus' mastery of events, so he omitted it (though such words as those of verse 11 show that he has the essential teaching of the incident). John makes it clear, as the Synoptic Gospels do not, that the Garden was a frequent resort of Jesus and his followers (although Luke does imply this - see Luke 22:39). John also uses a technical term for the band of soldiers sent to arrest Jesus. Above all, John stresses the majesty of Jesus by telling us that he spoke and acted in such a way as to strike awe into the soldiers who came to arrest him, so that they “drew back and fell to the ground” (verse 6).

At first sight the opening words of this chapter count against the statement I made earlier that the previous teaching was probably given at the Temple on the way to Gethsemane from the upper room of the Last Supper, but I believe they mean that Jesus left the city (rather than the upper room) at this point. In any event this tells us that Gethsemane (not named by John) was on the far side of the Kidron valley.

In verse 2 we are told that Judas knew where to find Jesus, because this was a place Jesus had “often” been with the disciples. In verse 3 a detachment or cohort of Roman soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus. The word John uses ‘speira’ could refer to 200 to 600 men, in this case the smaller number is more probable. The Jewish authorities had no doubt involved the Romans firstly because their own Temple guards had failed to arrest Jesus on a previous occasion (John 7:44) and secondly because they knew they would eventually have to involve the Romans if they wanted to execute Jesus. The Romans would probably not have been reluctant to get involved as they were always concerned about riots and troubles during the great Jewish feasts when many people were in Jerusalem. The men come bearing torches and lanterns to arrest the light of the world.

Jesus' complete knowledge of the situation and confident mastery of it dictates his actions – see verses 4 and 5. He doesn't attempt to escape, but boldly identifies himself, indeed he identifies himself in the language of deity "I am". The soldiers are apparently taken aback by all this and fall to the ground – something of Jesus' divine majesty seems to have broken through at this moment. John indicates that Judas was there – the betrayal seems to have made a deep impression on the disciples – but does not mention the incident of identifying Jesus with a kiss which is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. Probably John was focussing on the idea that Jesus submitted voluntarily to arrest.

In verses 7 and 8 Jesus repeats his identification of himself and tells the soldiers to let the other disciples go. The Good Shepherd takes thought for his sheep at the very hour in which he faces arrest, trial, and death. It may be that this is behind his request for them to repeat that it is "Jesus of Nazareth" that they are looking for. Out of their own mouth he leads them to declare twice that their business is with him, which means that it is not with the disciples. John adds an interesting expression. It is common to find it said that something happened "in order that the scripture might be fulfilled." Here (and later in verse 32) the same formula is used of words of Jesus: "so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled." To John it was inconceivable that a saying of Jesus would fail of fulfilment. Here John puts Jesus' words into the same category as Scripture.

Peter then intervenes with his sword to protect Jesus and cuts off the ear of the High Priest's servant, Malchus. Jesus immediately tells him that this is forbidden and that he must drink the 'cup' which the Father has given him. There are references to the 'cup' in the other Gospels (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42), though in them it occurs in the prayer in Gethsemane. This is the only passage which assigns the origin of the 'cup' to the Father. In the Old Testament 'cup' often has associations of suffering and of the wrath of God (Psalms 75:8; Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15; Ezekiel 23:31–33, etc.) and I believe that is certainly the sense of the term here. Jesus fully realized the horror of what was to come – His taking our sins on His shoulders – because he well knew that these sins merited and would receive the full wrath of God. Jesus' rejection of resistance leads to his immediate arrest – see verse 12. The Synoptic Gospels tell us that all the disciples fled at the arrest of Jesus, but John does not include this.

We then move on to the trials before the Jewish authorities and Peter's denials of Jesus – see verses 13-27:

"and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it would be good if one man died for the people. Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." It was cold, and the servants and officials stood round a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. "I have spoken openly to the world," Jesus replied. "I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said." When Jesus said this, one of the officials near by struck him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded. "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" Then Annas sent him, still bound, to

Caiaphas the high priest. As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not." One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a cock began to crow." (John 18:13-27 NIV)

The Jewish authorities seem to have been the primary arresting officers as Jesus was taken for questioning by the Jews – presumably the Roman soldiers were there just to prevent any possible public rebellion. The Synoptic Gospels do not mention the questioning by Annas, but this is not at all unlikely. Annas had previously been the High Priest until he was forced to step down by the Romans some years previously for carrying out capital punishment without permission from the Roman authorities. However, the Jews did not regard this deposition of Annas by the Romans as lawful since High Priests held office for life under Mosaic Law – thus Annas still carried a great deal of prestige in the Jewish community – in fact Caiaphas was probably something of a puppet figure. In any event this was not an official trial, firstly because Annas was not the official High Priest, and secondly because it was not lawful either for prisoners to be interrogated (it was witnesses who were to be questioned), or for them to be tried at night for capital crimes under Jewish Law.

John then turns to Peter's first denial of Jesus – see verses 15-18. It's not clear why Peter had followed Jesus; presumably he just wanted to see what the outcome of the arrest would be. Peter was not initially allowed into the High Priest's courtyard, but on the intervention of another un-named disciple (probably John) is admitted. The slave girl doorkeeper then asks a leading question "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" and Peter takes the opportunity to say that he is not – thus completing his first denial of Jesus.

Meanwhile Annas questioned Jesus about his teaching and disciples – see verses 19-24. After a little unproductive questioning, Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas.

After this initial examination of Jesus, John moves to Peter's second and third denials – see verses 25-27. For the second denial, Peter is again asked a leading question about not being a disciple and again makes the easy denial. The third and last questioner was different, and his question looks for an affirmative answer. John (and only John) tells us that he was related to Malchus and therefore would have had a peculiar interest in the man who had struck out with a sword. But it had been done in an uncertain light, and probably the relative could not be absolutely sure that it was Peter that he had seen. All the more would this be so in that he was now seeing that apostle in a very dim light indeed. A charcoal fire glows red, but it does not emit bright flames. The fire is an interesting eyewitness detail; Jerusalem is half a mile above sea level and cold on spring nights. But the relative was more confident than the earlier questioners, as his words show. He refers to the incident, and asks whether he did not see Peter in the garden. For the third time Peter denies any connection with Jesus. John does not give his exact words this time, but simply says, "Again Peter denied it." He records the fact that a rooster crowed at that moment (see Jesus' prophecy in John 13:38), but he says nothing of its effect on Peter. Throughout chapters 18 and 19 John makes no mention of emotions. We know from the Synoptic Gospels that Peter was devastated, but God was able to use this as a learning experience for Peter and bring him to a place of restoration and recommissioning – as we shall see in chapter 21.

John then moves to Jesus' trial, or examination, by the Roman authorities, which takes up the remainder of chapter 18 and the first part of chapter 19. John gives virtually no detail of

Jesus trial or examination by Caiaphas. I believe this was probably a further, more official, questioning rather than a trial as (i) under Jewish Law a man could not be sentenced on the same day as his trial, and (ii) Annas, Caiaphas' father in law, had been dismissed from office by the Roman's for unlawfully imposing capital punishment (which was only lawful for the Roman authorities to impose, except (possibly) for desecrating the Temple) – thus there would be little point in an official trial when the Jews wanted the death penalty for Jesus. Furthermore, Matthews's account of the Sanhedrin proceedings implies that much of them took place at night which would have been against Jewish Law in relation to a capital crime. I believe that my suggestion can harmonise with the Synoptic accounts on the basis that they misunderstood the official questioning before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to be a trial. John does include a lot of detail of Jesus' trial by the Romans – indeed it is John's account which gives us most of our knowledge of the proceedings before the Romans. That makes a lot of sense if the proceedings before the Sanhedrin were in the nature of an examination rather than a trial. John is concerned to show that Pilate bore testimony to Jesus' innocence and tried very hard to save him from a death sentence. I think that in the Sanhedrin's desire to convict Jesus we can see a rejection of Jesus and his message by the whole Jewish nation.

As regards the trial by the Romans, John tells us that the Jews took Jesus before Pilate – see verses 28-32:

“Then the Jews led Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness the Jews did not enter the palace; they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," the Jews objected. This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled.” (John 18:28-32 NIV)

The Praetorium was the official residence of the Roman governor and this is where Jesus was taken – see verse 28 – most likely this was the Herodian palace rather than the fortress of Antonia. It was early (the NIV has inserted the word “morning” which is not in the Greek). Under Jewish Law the dwelling places of Gentiles were unclean, hence the Jews reluctance to enter the Palace and so be unable to partake of the Passover feast. However, they had no scruples about being involved in killing an innocent man. In their zeal to eat the Passover feast, they hastened the sacrifice of God's real Pascal Lamb – Jesus. A similar tragedy is re-enacted whenever people depend upon fulfilment of ritual observances to alleviate their consciences before God. Receiving baptism (by whatever mode), taking communion (in whatever church), attending worship (with whatever regularity), offering prayers (of whatever length), giving money (of whatever amount), are all good and beneficial, but in themselves, do not, have not, will not, and cannot, of themselves, save us from our sins and their inevitable judgment.

Pilate accommodates the Jews by coming out to meet them and asks what charges are being made against Jesus – verse 29. This gives the Jews some problems as there are no charges which would stand up in a Roman court – and they knew it. So they didn't answer Pilate's question, but tried to make a general assertion that Jesus was a criminal – see verse 30. They imply that Pilate should simply trust them. Pilate wants no part in this, if there is no offence against Roman Law, then they should deal with the matter themselves according to their own law. The Romans always allowed conquered peoples considerable flexibility in administration of their own law and the Jews were no exception to this.

Pilate's answer finally brings the matter into the open, they want an execution and no lesser punishment they are able to inflict themselves will satisfy them – see verse 31. Probably an execution by the Roman authorities would suit them particularly well as it would divert away from them any anger from the crowds at the death of Jesus. Again in verse 32 John makes it clear that the words of Jesus must be fulfilled as much as the words of scripture.

Pilate then proceeds to examine Jesus – see verses 33-40:

“Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in a rebellion.” (John 18:33-40 NIV)

In a scene full of dramatic power John pictures for us the lowly majesty of Jesus confronting the proud majesty of Rome's representative. At this moment all the other actors in the passion disappear from the scene—Annas, Caiaphas, even the disciples with impetuous Peter at their head. Perhaps we should understand the Jews in the background to indicate that the power of the state is swayed by unseen forces. But what is basic is the confrontation of Caesar by Christ, with kingship as the topic for discussion. Subtly, but very definitely, John brings out the supreme royalty of Jesus. He will be slain, but this does not detract from his majesty. He has committed no crime. As Caesar's representative inquires into what Jesus has done he soon comes to the conclusion that the prisoner is innocent. But to come to this conclusion and to act on it are two different things. Pilate does try, even if not very resolutely. He begins by attempting simply to release Jesus in accordance with the custom that a prisoner was set free at that feast. But he is met by the demand that a robber be released instead.

In verse 33 Pilate's opening question shows that more had been said by the Jews than is recorded. His "you" is emphatic: "Are *you* the king of the Jews?" Pilate was incredulous. *This* man a king? Presumably the Jewish leadership had charged Jesus with claiming to be a king in opposition to Caesar, using the normal Jewish Messianic expectations to colour Jesus' own Messianic claims. Pilate is not prepared to accept the accusations of the Jewish leaders at face value – see verses 34 and 35. But something lies behind all this. What is it? Jesus has done something to arouse the hostility of the chief priests. Pilate wishes to drag this out into the open in order to see whether it is something that offends against Roman law or not.

The kingship that Jesus reluctantly affirms in verses 36 and 37 has been completely rejected by the Jews and only receives an ironic affirmation from Pilate, but John will not let us miss the fact the Jesus is indeed a king. Jesus goes on to state that although he is a king, his kingdom is not of this world. But, that doesn't mean that it has nothing to do with this world, his purpose in coming into the world was to impart the truth he has given to the disciples and then go to his atoning death and resurrection.

Pilate dismisses Jesus' statements in verse 38. He has learnt what he wants to know – Jesus is not a revolutionary. He can and should be released. However, as a politician, Pilate tries to get the best of all possible worlds. He asks the crowd outside if they would like him to release Jesus as the prisoner to be released for the feast. This will avoid the problem of his having to condemn an innocent man, but at the same time he will not be annoying the Jews by finding him innocent. But Pilate's manoeuvre meets with no success – the crowd want to release another – see verse 40. There is irony in the fact that the chief priests persuaded the people to ask for and secure the release of a man who was guilty of the very crime of which, though he was innocent, they had accused Jesus.

Next Pilate seems to have attempted to make the charge that Jesus was a king ridiculous by ridiculing the man himself – see verses 19:1 – 6a:

“Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" (John 19:1-6a NIV)

Pilate's attempt to free Jesus by way of complying with the custom of release of a prisoner at the feast having failed, he tried another tack. He had Jesus flogged, maltreated, mocked, and paraded before the mob. Although we don't know exactly which type of flogging Jesus was subjected to – the Romans practised three types of flogging of varying severity, the fustigatio, the flagellatio and the most severe the verberatio – or even if Jesus was flogged once or twice, we do know that this was a frightful punishment. But, neither John nor the Synoptics make a great play on it, there is no attempt to appeal to our emotions. I believe Pilate meant the punishment as a visual demonstration of the impossibility of taking the charge against Jesus seriously. This helpless object of violence and derision a king? Impossible! If Pilate was making such an appeal to the people he was guilty of a serious miscalculation. The only effect of it was to provoke the cry, “Crucify him!” – although it is perhaps significant that it's the chief priests who raise that cry rather than the crowd.

Pilate was gradually being pushed into a corner where he would have to render a final judgment – see verses 6b – 16a:

“But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.” (John 19:6b-16a NIV)

Pilate's final abortive attempt to release Jesus was sparked off by the Jews' remark that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God. This apparently struck a chord in the governor's superstitious nature (possibly affected by a dream his wife had had (Matthew 27:19)) and led him to speak further with Jesus. Confirmed in his conviction that there was no case against Jesus he tried again to set him free. But when the Jews raised the ominous issue of "Caesar's friend,"—that is, a veiled threat to let it be known in Rome if he did not sentence the Galilean as they desired—Pilate capitulated. Pilate's capitulation should be seen in the context of the historical circumstances. If Jesus' trial and subsequent crucifixion were in 33 AD (as I strongly believe and have argued in other talks) then they fell just after Aelius Sejanus' attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius who subsequently purged almost all those appointed by Sejanus. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time and so very reluctant to seem disloyal to Rome. Therefore Jesus was delivered over to crucifixion.

John's statement of the timing of Jesus' delivery for crucifixion at "about the sixth hour" is significant. This was the time the Jews commenced their preparations for the Passover, so John is again inviting us to view Jesus as the Passover lamb. Here we shouldn't make too much of the apparent timing conflict with Mark (Mark 15:25), who says this took place at around the third hour, as timing was very approximate in those days.

The final words of the High Priest and Jewish officials are an amusing irony – see verse 15. Pilate asks "shall I crucify your king" and they reply "we have no king but Caesar". On this occasion they spoke with cynical expediency. But in fact they expressed the real truth. Their lives showed that they gave no homage to God. The truth was that they had no king but Caesar, they had broken their covenant with God, even though in their daily prayers they prayed to the Lord "may you be our King, you alone".

John then proceeds to the crucifixion itself – see verses 16b – 22:

"So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews', but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:16b-22 NIV)

John's narrative brings before us some things not recorded in the Synoptics: the information that the title over Jesus' head was in three languages and the Jews' challenge of the wording. It is to John also that we owe the information that Jesus carried his cross during the first part of the journey to Golgotha.

It was quite usual for the condemned person to carry the crossbeam or *patibulum* of his cross to place of execution – see verse 17 – the vertical upright section of the cross was generally left implanted in the ground as a warning to criminals. The Synoptic Gospels inform us that Simon of Cyrene was co-opted to assist Jesus in this task, indeed the Synoptics imply that Jesus may have been so weakened by the scourging that he needed assistance to walk to Golgotha. Jesus was crucified with two bandits, possibly henchmen of Barabbas, one on either side of him. Here John stresses Jesus' identity with sinners in his death.

In verse 18 John simply states the fact of the crucifixion without giving any of the gruesome details. Both we and popular films tend to emphasize the physical anguish of the crucifixion, but the Gospels don't do that, they simply state the fact. Their concern is with Jesus dying for our sins. The physical anguish of the crucifixion must have been terrible, but I believe that the main component of Jesus' anguish was the bearing of our sins and the consequent separation from the Father with whom he had been in communion for all eternity. He who had no sin was made sin for us. He suffered the judgment and punishment that our sins merit. We also need to remember that the fact of the crucifixion supremely affirms Jesus' identity as a man, as fully human. John's phrase "the Word became flesh" is supremely vindicated. In contrast with every other major religion we Christians have a God who enters into our sufferings and shares them with us.

In verse 19 we are told that Pilate had a notice affixed to the cross proclaiming Jesus as the King of the Jews – it was normal custom for a sign stating the crimes of a person condemned to crucifixion to be attached that person or their cross and such notices were often multilingual. This was an ironic piece of revenge against the Jews by Pilate and John stresses the kingly royalty of Jesus right to the end.

In verse 20 John adds a piece of information not included in the Synoptics, the sign affixed to the cross was written in the three principal languages of the time and was read by many people. For me this emphasizes the universality of the kingship of Jesus. Incidentally, the fact that the inscription was in three languages will sufficiently account for the fact that divergent accounts are given of its content in the four Gospels.

In verses 21 and 22 we learn that the Jews objected to the wording of the notice affixed to the cross, but Pilate will not hear of this, with an air of finality he refuses to alter what he has written. John wants this finality to symbolize the fact that nothing can change the kingship which Jesus exercises.

John then tells us the Jesus' clothing was divided between the soldiers supervising his crucifixion – see verses 23 and 24:

“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, "They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." So this is what the soldiers did.”  
(John 19:23-24 NIV)

It was customary for the soldiers who performed a crucifixion to take the clothing of the executed man; this was a recognized perquisite of their office. In accordance with this custom the soldiers who crucified Jesus divided his clothing into four, one part for each soldier – which tells us that there were four soldiers in the execution squad, which was normal for crucifixions. Jesus' "undergarment," instead of being made out of separate pieces of cloth sewn together, was woven in one piece, without a seam, so it was quite valuable. Thus the soldiers decided not to divide it, but to give it to one of their number and they cast lots to decide who should receive it. This was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Psalm 22:18 and John emphasises that. It is also worthy of note that the garment of the High Priest was made in the same way (although this High Priestly garment was not an undergarment), and Jesus is, of course, our supreme High Priest.

Even at the time of his suffering, Jesus was concerned to provide for his mother – see verses 25-27:

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:25-27 NIV)

We see that Jesus was not entirely forsaken in the hour of his death; some women and John stood by his cross. It is not certain how many there were, as John’s description is not absolutely clear, but he probably lists four, the first two described, the third and fourth named. Four believing women stood by the cross in counterpart to the four unbelieving soldiers who crucified him.

Jesus’ mother is mentioned first, unnamed as always in this Gospel. It is probable that “his mother’s sister” is to be equated with Salome (Mark 15:40), and that she was “the mother of Zebedee’s sons” (Matt. 27:56), who was standing at a distance with the other women when Jesus died. If so, and if as I believe the beloved disciple is John the son of Zebedee, a reason for the omission of her name appears. John never names himself or his brother or any of his family, so it would be quite in keeping that he should not name his mother. Clopas is only mentioned here in the New Testament. Mary Magdalene (the woman the Synoptics tell us had seven demons cast out of her) is mentioned here for the first time in this Gospel, but in the next chapter John tells us of Jesus’ appearance to her after the resurrection.

Even at the time of his greatest anguish Jesus was thoughtful enough to provide for his mother and asks John, the beloved disciple, to take care of her (as her husband Joseph had probably been dead for some time (Mark 6:3)). John fulfilled this request and took her into his home. It is not quite clear why Jesus puts John rather than his brothers in this role, perhaps it was because they were not yet believers, although their conversion seems to have been brought about as a result of the crucifixion and resurrection.

John then records Jesus’ death – see verses 28-30:

“Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (John 19:28-30 NIV)

The “wine vinegar” mentioned here signifies cheap, sour wine of the kind which would have been used by the masses and this appears to have been specially provided for the crucifixion as John uses the phrase “was set there” – a better translation of the Greek than the NIV “was there”. Jesus drank some, presumably because he wished to be able to make his final statement “it is finished” clearly. He then bowed his head – surely a detail from an eyewitness – and died. There seems to be a voluntary element here, at least as regards the timing. Jesus was in command to the very end and now placed himself in the hands of the Father.

John then recounts the piercing of Jesus’ side – see verses 31-37:

“Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to

have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced." (John 19:31-37 NIV)

John is the only one who recounts this incident, which again has the touch of an eyewitness.

The Preparation" (the words "day of" are not in the Greek but inserted by the NIV) had become a technical term for "the Preparation for the Sabbath," that is, Friday. According to Jewish law the dead body of an executed criminal was not to remain all night "on the tree," but was to be buried that same day, because "You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance" (Deut. 21:23). Thus a body should be removed from a cross on the day of execution before evening. This was especially the case when the next day was the Sabbath and even more so when that Sabbath was a "special Sabbath" such as Passover. The Jews were thus insistent that the legs of the crucified should be broken – a normal part of crucifixion called *crurifagium* and a process which hastened death by making breathing more difficult – and the bodies removed. The Roman custom was to leave the bodies of the crucified on their crosses after death as a warning to others, so the Jews applied to Pilate for permission to remove them.

John's account tells us that Jesus died more quickly than the two bandits crucified with him as he was already dead when the soldiers came to break their legs. However, the soldiers were not content just to pass him by, one of them thrust a spear into his side – perhaps to make absolutely sure he was really dead. A flow of blood and water ensued. Whatever the spiritual significance of this (we can clearly see a link to the prophecy of Isaiah 53:5 and to the Passover sacrifice whose bones must not be broken Exodus 12:46 and finally to Zechariah 12:10) or the possible medical confirmation that this was to be expected given the manner of death, it certainly tells us that the body of Jesus was a real human corpse.

In verse 35 John tells us that there is eyewitness evidence of all this, and I think it is likely that the eyewitness was John himself. Certainly no other disciple is mentioned as having been present.

John proceeds to tell us of Jesus' burial – see verses 38-42:

"Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no-one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there." (John 19:38-42 NIV)

John suddenly introduces Joseph of Arimathea who appears in scripture in relation just to this incident. He was apparently wealthy and a member of the Sanhedrin and a secret believer.

Although he had previously remained in the background, he was obviously deeply affected by the death of Jesus as he now approaches Pilate and asks for the body. That was a very courageous act. Jews of this time regarded a proper burial as extremely important, many would go out of their way to ensure such even for fellow Jews to whom they were not closely related. However, the Romans did not normally give such permission in the case of people executed for sedition who were usually buried in a common grave with other criminals. That Pilate gave it may be a further indication that he did not think that Jesus was guilty. This incident seems to be a clear fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth." (Isaiah 53:9 NIV)

The Synoptic Gospels do not mention the involvement of Nicodemus, who must also have become a secret believer since his original encounter with Jesus. The anointing of the body with spices was a completely normal part of burial, although the amount of spices involved seems to have been large and indeed seventy five pounds was the amount usually used for Kings.

There was need for haste, for clearly it would be getting near to sundown when the Sabbath would start. It was necessary therefore to get the burial completed before then, so because this tomb (which Matthew (Matthew 27:60) tells us was Joseph's own tomb) was near, they buried Jesus there.

## **Chapter 20 – The Resurrection**

All four Gospels come to their climax in the resurrection narratives, but each does it in its own way. They all agree that when the women came to the tomb early on Sunday it was empty, but after that the accounts are very different. John, for example, has none of the stories that the others have. His account is peculiar to himself throughout. He agrees on the fact of the resurrection, and he speaks of the empty tomb as do the others, but he lacks the stories the others tell, and he tells stories that they do not. It is not easy to arrange the details given by the four Evangelists into a connected narrative. But, it is not impossible, and Westcott, for example, has drawn up an approximate timetable of the events on that first Easter Day with everything arranged in sequence. John Wenham has also published a reconciliation of the Gospel accounts. We cannot be sure that these accounts are correct, but they are certainly possible and it shows that the Gospel accounts can be reconciled – we looked at this in more detail in my teaching day on Jesus' Life and Work – which can be downloaded from my website. Today I'm mainly going to content myself with saying that the differences between the Gospels are reconcilable and amount to no more than a demonstration that in them we have the spontaneous evidence of different witnesses, not the stereotyped repetition of an official story.

Let's start by looking at John's account of the empty tomb see verses 1-10:

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded

up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to their homes,” (John 20:1-10 NIV)

We don't really know why Mary Magdalene went to the tomb so early, whilst it was still dark. Possibly it was to mourn – Jewish custom dictated intense mourning during the first three days during which the spirit was believed to remain attached to the body – or perhaps she thought that the burial had been hurried on the Friday and wanted to complete it in a more seemly manner. John only mentions Mary Magdalene, but this does not exclude the possibility that the other women mentioned in the Synoptics were there as well. In any event, it is surely significant that all the Gospels assert that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. That would hardly be made up, as women were not acceptable witnesses at all under Jewish Law. We would probably have chosen an official, or one or more of the disciples. However, God's ways are not ours.

It's worth noting that all the Gospels put some emphasis on the empty tomb. There were many post resurrection appearances of Jesus which also testify to the fact of the resurrection – indeed these were emphasised more than the empty tomb by the early church – but there is no doubt that the empty tomb does attest more fully to the completely physical nature of the resurrection. This was not just a spiritual event but a physical reality. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is very important both because it points the way for a bodily resurrection for us and also because it testifies to the redemption of the whole of creation. It's also significant that the truth of the empty tomb was never challenged by the Jewish or Roman authorities. If it had been a fraud, the Christian community could hardly have become established in Jerusalem.

When Mary arrived at the tomb she found the stone rolled away and saw that the tomb was empty and immediately went running to fetch the disciples. She has no thought of a resurrection, but says that the body has been taken and we don't know where. The “we” is probably significant here as it implies that other women were with Mary. The disciples waste no time, but set off for the tomb in haste.

On arrival John tells us that they found the grave clothes with the face cloth folded up separate from the rest. Many have taken this to mean that the body rose through the grave clothes without disturbing them. That is possible, although John's text doesn't require it and indeed the folded up face cloth argues against it. In any event John is describing an orderly scene, not what would be expected if grave robbers had been at work. It is worth noting at this point that events here contrast with the resurrection of Lazarus where Lazarus had to be freed from the grave clothes. Jesus somehow moved to a new order of existence. John then enters the tomb and believes in Jesus' resurrection, but apparently did not yet appreciate all that this signified. They had not yet appreciated the OT scriptures which foretold the death and resurrection of the Messiah (Isaiah 53:10-12, Psalm 16:10, Hosea 6:2, Jonah 1:17 etc). The important point is that the disciples believed in the resurrection before they understood the scripture. They did not manufacture the resurrection to fit their interpretation of the OT, rather they came to understand the fact of the resurrection in the light of OT scripture.

John now moves on to recount some of the post resurrection appearances of Jesus (others are recorded in the Synoptics), starting with his appearance to Mary – see verses 11-18:

“but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. “Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.” (John 20:11-18 NIV)

The depth of Mary’s grief about the loss of the body is possibly due to the importance Jews placed on a correct burial which I mentioned earlier. The angels John mentioned say nothing to Mary, but turning around she sees Jesus, although initially she mistakes him for the caretaker. There seems to have been something subtly different about the risen Jesus as the disciples don’t recognise him on the road to Emmaus even during a long conversation with him. When Jesus calls to Mary she instantly recognises him – the sheep recognise the call of the good shepherd. However, Mary clearly did not fully recognise the person of Jesus since she addresses him as “teacher”.

Jesus then tells Mary what the NIV translates as “Do not hold on to me” which is better than the KJV “Do not touch me”, but the Greek is probably better rendered as “Stop clinging to me”. Perhaps the thought here is that Jesus is telling Mary he is not simply returning to his former life. Mary then goes to tell the disciples of this encounter.

John then tells us of Jesus’ appearance to ten of the disciples – see verses 19-23: “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”” (John 20:19-23 NIV)

This appears to be a meeting of all the disciples other than Thomas behind locked doors in Jerusalem after the appearance on the road to Emmaus and is also mentioned by Luke (Luke 24:36ff). These are clearly accounts of the same event, although John does not mention Jesus eating fish, or the disciples fear of him. Whilst Luke does not include John’s account of Jesus breathing the Spirit into the disciples, or his statement about forgiving sins.

We can take it that Jesus did not enter the room in normal fashion, so either his resurrection body was endowed with abnormal powers or his deity was re-asserting itself. Yet his body clearly retained many elements of his human body since the nail marks in his hands and the spear mark in his side were apparently visible and were shown to the disciples as additional proof that this was their resurrected Lord.

Jesus then commissions the disciples – see verse 21 – and equips them for their mission by giving them the Holy Spirit. This filling with the Spirit appears to be quite different from

Pentecost and apparently the mission of the disciples did not really get underway until the second filling with the Spirit at Pentecost, and I don't think we should read too much into this verse.

In any event, following this gift of the Spirit, Jesus now authorises and empowers the disciples (and by implication the church) to forgive sins. This should not be understood as a mechanical process, but as something taking place as the Spirit directs in the context of our fulfilment of the mission given to us by Christ. I believe it is simply the result of the true, clear and effective preaching of the Gospel, which either brings people to repent as they hear of the ready and costly forgiveness of God, or leaves them unresponsive to the offer of forgiveness, which is the Gospel, and so they are left in their sins. This verse gives wonderful life giving power to believing witnesses.

John ends his account of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus with the appearance to Thomas – see verses 24-29:

“Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."” (John 20:24-29 NIV)

This incident is only recorded by John, but is nevertheless important. The idea of a resurrected Jesus was not something built up over a long period by the disciples, indeed most of the post-resurrection appearances which convinced the disciples, took place on the first day and all of them within 40 days of the resurrection. Nor was the resurrection something the disciples easily accepted as this incident makes clear.

Thomas (called “Didymus” or “twin”) had not been with the disciples when Jesus first appeared to them, now Jesus appears again a week later and Thomas declares that only the plainest of evidence will convince him. At the sight of Jesus’ hands and side all Thomas’ doubts vanish and he believes. Note that John doesn’t say that Thomas actually put his fingers into the nail prints or his hand into Jesus’ side – he seems to have believed just at the sight of Jesus and the sound of his voice. If, as many scholars think, chapter 21 is a later addition to John’s Gospel then Thomas’ affirmation of belief “My Lord and my God” are the last words spoken by the disciples in the original Gospel. Thomas has seen what his belief in a resurrected Jesus implies. Ordinary men do not rise from the dead in this fashion. In a sense these words are a fitting end as they echo the opening words “.... The Word was God” and this Gospel comes full circle.

Jesus gives a gentle rebuke, rather grudging approval to Thomas, but it is an approval that goes far beyond Thomas to all who will believe in him without such convincing proof. There is a special beatitude or declaration of blessing for those possessed of a faith that can trust absolutely and that does not need to “see” at every turn.

John concludes chapter 20 with a statement of the purpose of his Gospel – see verses 30 and 31:

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31 NIV)

Here John makes it clear that he has been selective, he has not written all that he knows about Jesus. There were other miracles done in the presence of the disciples. Finally he makes it clear that the purpose of his writing is “that people may believe”, it is evangelistic. Although, the Greek here could possibly be interpreted: “so that you may continue to believe”; in which case his purpose would be to strengthen belief. I believe that John had both purposes in mind, a pastoral as well as an evangelistic concern. This faith to which people are brought or in which they are strengthened is faith which brings them to eternal life in Jesus’ name.

Indeed having just looked at the behaviour of the disciples who fled at Jesus’ arrest and then secured themselves behind locked doors and then contrasting that with their behaviour as recorded in the book of Acts where they risked and received beatings and arrest and frequently braved death I don’t see how we can doubt that the death and resurrection of Jesus were objective facts to which the disciples were eyewitness. No other explanation makes sense.

This appears to bring the Gospel to an end, but we go on into Chapter 21.

## **Chapter 21**

Although, as already noted, many scholars think this is a later addition to John’s Gospel, it must have been either original or at least very early since all manuscripts known to us include it. The only reason for thinking it an addition is that the final words of chapter 20 sound very like the end of the book. One theory is that John himself added chapter 21 later mainly to correct the erroneous idea that was circulating to the effect that Jesus would return before his death. Clearly harm would come to the church if this was believed and then John died prior to the second coming.

The chapter starts with a further appearance of Jesus to some of the disciples and a further miracle – see verses 1-14:

“Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I’m going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We’ll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven’t you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the

same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.” (John 21:1-14 NIV)

The story is largely self explanatory and I’m just going to briefly mention a couple of points. Firstly, success in the Christian life will only come when we obey Christ’s words, the disciples are only blessed with a miraculous catch of fish when they are in complete obedience to Jesus and obey his word. Secondly, the disciples are only able to recognise Jesus when they are in obedience to him, so John only recognised Jesus after the nets had been cast in accordance with Jesus instructions. This revelation of Christ to the believer is at the will and control of God and comes more quickly to some than others – so that John recognised Jesus before the other disciples – although with persistence it is available to us all. Thirdly, the events here parallel those of Luke 5:4-9 when Peter was first called as a disciple. I believe that this was no accident and that Jesus was giving advance notice to Peter that he was about to be recommissioned – and he probably wanted to remind Peter of his humble response on that earlier occasion “Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man”. Finally, we note that the disciples were reluctant to begin eating and said nothing to Jesus during breakfast. No doubt they were all - and especially Peter - still feeling disappointed with themselves for their cowardice and abandonment of Jesus in his hour of need.

As soon as breakfast was over at the beginning of verse 15 Jesus turned to what I believe was the whole reason for this particular encounter with the disciples. The rebuilding of the relationship between Peter and Jesus and Peter’s restoration and recommissioning in service to the kingdom following his triple denial of Jesus following Jesus’ arrest that we saw earlier – see verses 15-19:

“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"” (John 21:15-19 NIV)

Against the majority of modern commentators, I believe that a great deal of the significance of this incident is lost in most English translations. Of course, Jesus and Peter would have been conversing in Aramaic, but in the Greek of John’s Gospel, there are four words for love rather than just one – although commentators aren’t completely in accord about their meaning. I think the meaning of these four words is best expressed as follows, firstly ‘Eros’ which relates to romantic or sexual love, secondly, ‘storge’ which is really just affection, thirdly ‘phileo’ which is a friendly reciprocal love such as might exist between close friends or family members and fourthly ‘agapeo’ which is a completely unselfish unconditional love such as God has for mankind. Agapeo love is thus very special. It was by this agapeo love that Jesus said the world would know that the disciples were his followers in John 13:35. Although Jesus was speaking in Aramaic, I think we can take it that John’s rendering in Greek conveys the force of Jesus’ original words. The NIV takes up this point and also the varying forms of Jesus’ three commissioning mandates to Peter indicates to me that there was something different about the three questions..

So returning to verse 15 Jesus is asking Peter solemnly, using Peter's full name, if he agapeo loves him more than the other disciples. The NIV renders this 'truly love'. Duly chastened from his recent experience of his three-fold denial, Peter replies that Jesus knows that he phileo loves Jesus (the NIV renders this 'love') and makes no mention of any comparison with the love born by the other disciples – a strong contrast with Peter's usual boastful impulsive ways! Before his recent experiences, I am sure Peter would have been quick to affirm his agapeo love and to boast that it was greater than that of all the other disciples! Also, Peter does not call on the other disciples to witness for him or think his own word might be accepted – this latter had already been discredited. No, Peter calls on Christ himself to be his witness.

Jesus makes no adverse comment on Peter's lesser affirmation of his love for him. On the contrary he commissions Peter to service to him saying "feed my lambs" or young Christians. This task of feeding and nurturing to which Peter has been called is clearly one of the most important duties in ministry. Jesus can confidently commission Peter and restore him to service in the kingdom because Peter has matured through his awful humbling experience and now has a more realistic idea of his abilities.

In verse 16, Jesus again asks Peter if Peter agapeo loves Jesus, but this time without asking if this love is more than the love of the other disciples. Again Peter simply replies that he phileo loves Jesus. Here Jesus is not only recapitulating the second of Peter's denials by making him offer a second affirmation of love, but is making sure that Peter has truly recognised where he is in his Christian development. It is far better for each one of us to be completely honest with God about our love for him and our commitment to him. After all he sees the truth in our hearts! Again, Jesus simply accepts Peter's lesser expression of his love and commissions him for the second time saying "take care of my sheep". Having first asked him to care for new Christians Jesus now asks Peter to take care of the sheep, the mature Christians. It is clear that as Peter makes it clearer and clearer that he has really learnt the folly of his over-emphatic and over-enthusiastic commitments, Jesus increases his trust and reliance on him. Again, let that be a lesson to us to be completely realistic in our commitments to Jesus and to service in his kingdom.

Finally, in verse 17 Jesus asks Peter for the third time if he loves him, completing the recapitulation of Peter's earlier three-fold denial of Jesus. However, this time Jesus lowers the target for Peter. He asks Peter not if he agapeo loves him, but if he phileo loves him, thus coming down to the level of Peter's previous affirmations. Now Peter is grieved. He is grieved not only because Jesus has continued to question him, but because his Lord has had to reduce the required affirmation to his, Peter's, level. This has highlighted his limitation in loving His Saviour who did so much and who suffered so much for him. But, it was an awakening experience, one that was of particular value to Peter and which would later give birth to greater degrees of spiritual growth and service. In any event, Peter was not so grieved that he was unable to repeat his affirmation of his phileo love for Jesus for the third time. Jesus then commissions him for the third time at the end of verse 17 – "feed my sheep". Now Peter is being told to feed not new Christians but mature Christians. A high calling indeed. I would suggest that this is an indication of Jesus' confidence in Peter's new found Christian maturity.

In verse 18 Jesus then goes on to tell Peter that although he was not ready to follow Jesus unto death at the time of Jesus' own crucifixion, he will now continue to grow in his

commitment and faith and will one day be ready to follow Jesus to death on a cross. I believe it was necessary for Peter first to be humbled, so that he could arrive in that place where he was ready to look at himself and his abilities honestly and admit his limitations and failings, before our Father, through the infusing of His Holy Spirit, could build on a now solid foundation to make Peter an extremely important and influential leader in the early church.

I think there are four important lessons in this incident. Firstly, that Christ will always forgive us our sins if we just accept him where we are as our Lord and saviour. Secondly, that we need to have our own personal encounter with Jesus, just like Peter did in the events we've been looking at, in order for that forgiveness and the subsequent recommissioning to be worked out. Thirdly, we must be completely honest with Jesus recognising fully our own awful limitations and sinfulness, before God can take us and use us in His service in spite of our weakness and failure. Only in our acknowledgement of our weakness can we be made strong in God's own strength. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10 "For when I am weak, then I am strong". Finally, we have to understand that love is the basic qualification for Christian service. Other qualities are desirable, but love is indispensable.

Jesus concludes the recommissioning by telling Peter the kind of death by which he will glorify God – crucifixion. Of course, but the time John wrote these words, it is likely that this event had already taken place, but I don't think we should allow this fact to detract from the authenticity of John's recollection of Jesus' words. Jesus then gives Peter that basic command which applies to us all – to continuously and steadfastly "follow me".

John now turns to what I theorised might have been the reason for John producing chapter 21 – a discussion of John's role – see verses 20-23:

"Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumour spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:20-23 NIV)

Happy in his own position, Peter now turned his thoughts to John and enquires about him in a very general way "But this man what?" Jesus declines to satisfy Peter's curiosity and repeats his command to Peter "follow me". John then proceeds to deal with an error that had arisen. A report had gone out among the brothers that John would never die. He would live right through until the day when Jesus would return again. We can see how such an interpretation would arise. But John wants his readers to be clear that it was an interpretation. It was not what Jesus had said. He did not say, "He will not die." He only asked what it mattered to Peter if in fact this man were to remain alive until the return of Christ. John wants us to be clear on what Jesus said and what he did not say. In fact he is so anxious to do that that he repeats the words of Jesus again in verse 23.

John then closes his Gospel with an authentication – verses 24 and 25:

"This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." (John 21:24-25 NIV)

John asserts his own testimony to what he has written and asserts that some other unnamed persons attest to this. Finally he reminds us that his Gospel is selected and that he has not recorded all the doings and sayings of Jesus. Although I fully encourage you to study the scriptures, we would do well to remember the significance of these final words. Our knowledge of the truth is at best partial. The person who appreciates the significance of these final words is kept humble. BUT (and it's a very big but) we can know and be sure of the essentials of our Christian faith.

Many have attempted to conclude the ministry of Jesus at the beginning of Holy Week, eliminate the resurrection and permit no significance to the cross beyond its being an outstanding example of self-giving love. I trust that today has made it absolutely clear that the eyewitness account of one of the disciples closest to Jesus makes such a view impossible.

We've seen Jesus giving up the glory he had with the Father and accepting the limitations of the incarnation. We've seen that he was always resolute to follow the Father's plan and to do his will – even though he fully understood that this would lead to his death on the cross. We've seen how he taught the disciples and prepared them to spread the good news of the gospel throughout the world. Finally we've seen that he went to his death on the cross, taking upon himself the sins of the whole world and the consequent wrath of God and that on that glorious first Easter Sunday he rose from the tomb. After a number of appearances to the disciples and others he then returned to a position of glory with the Father – although note that he did that in his resurrection body. I believe that the incarnation had and has permanent consequences.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I pray that as today we have looked at the final teachings and death and resurrection of your Son, we have been enabled to see more clearly who he is, his majesty and deity, and how his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection have brought us redemption and forgiveness from our sins. May this increased knowledge of Jesus draw us closer to him and develop and renew our saving faith as John intended when he wrote all those years ago. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ Our Saviour and for His greater glory. Amen.