

# The Death of Jesus

Dr. Margaret Nutting Ralph

Walk in to any Catholic Church and you will see a crucifix. Walk into many Catholic homes and you will also see crucifixes. Watch a Catholic pray, and you will see that person sign him or her self with the sign of the cross. For Catholics, indeed for all Christians, the mystery of the cross is at the center of our faith. The cross reminds us of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection—events core to our faith.

During the Easter Triduum—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday—the whole Church enters deeply into the mystery of the cross. Throughout the Triduum we ponder God's gift of self to us through Jesus Christ and the saving power of Jesus' self-sacrifice. As we meditate on these truths we will grow in our understanding of just how much we are loved, and how much God wants us to love one another.

Why did Jesus have to be crucified? Why does any innocent person have to suffer? In some ways the answers to these questions are still a mystery to us, although we can come to some understanding by reading the Gospels.

As we examine the Gospels we will notice that the synoptic Gospel accounts—those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are similar, while John's is very different. In fact, Matthew, Mark and Luke's accounts are so much alike that they are often referred to as the *Synoptic Gospels* because they can be seen as one: *syn-optic*.

As we notice differences between John's account and the accounts in the synoptic Gospels, we will seek to understand the reasons for the differences. We will try to understand what each Gospel writer is teaching by the way in which he chooses to tell the good news of Jesus Christ.

In all three synoptic Gospels, the authors make it clear that Jesus did not want to die because he says so in his prayer immediately before his arrest: "And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'" (Mark 14:35-36).

The synoptic Gospels tell us that when Jesus said this prayer he had a very clear idea of the death that awaited him. In fact, on three different occasions Jesus warns the apostles about his coming death. In the Gospel according to Luke we read not only all three warnings, but the Apostles' reaction to Jesus' repeated warnings:

Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and

insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:31-34).

The disciples certainly did not understand why Jesus had to die by crucifixion.

Luke 24:13:25 indicates that when Jesus was crucified they were downcast because their hopes had been dashed. Confronted with their lack of understanding, the risen Jesus, who appears to them to be just an ordinary fellow traveler, says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah\* should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26).

We, too, may feel a bit like the disciples, not really understanding Jesus' suffering and death. But, like the Apostles, we will gradually come to understand the mystery of the cross through prayerful reflection of the Gospels and our lived experiences of faith.

## Not My Will . . .

In many ways, we are very much like Jesus' first disciples. It is very hard to understand why Jesus' path to glory, or anyone else's, has to be through suffering.

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22: 42). One conclusion we can draw from Jesus' prayer on the night before his crucifixion is that doing the Father's will is what is most important to him. Indeed, all four Gospels consistently picture Jesus as devoted entirely to doing his Father's will. In fact, Luke demonstrates this point in his Gospel by having the first words of Jesus be an expression of his desire to do his Father's will.

You are probably familiar with the story in Luke 2:41-52 in which Jesus, at the age of twelve, is separated from his parents for three days. The whole family had gone on a trip to Jerusalem as part of the pilgrimage feast of Passover. On their return home, after one day's travel, Jesus' parents realize that he is not with them. They return to Jerusalem, and it is two more days before they find Jesus in the Temple, ". . . sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (Luke 2:46).

After finding her son Mary says to Jesus, "'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house'" (Luke 2:48-49)? Many people who read this story think that Jesus' response to his parents is rude. However, Jesus' parents do not react as though Jesus has been rude. They react as people who are confronted with mystery: "But they did not understand what he said to them" (Luke 2:50).

Luke's point in telling this story is to introduce Jesus, from the very beginning, as a person who is entirely centered on doing the will of his Father. Luke did not intend to picture Jesus as

disrespectful at all. In fact, Luke tells us that Jesus “went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Rather, Luke is beginning a series of statements in which Jesus says what he “must” do. Jesus must do these things because they are the will of the Father.

Jesus uses this language as he begins his public ministry: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4: 3). He uses it again in the first prediction of his coming death: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Luke 9:22). Jesus must do these things because if he fails to do them, he fails to fulfill the will of God the Father.

By telling the story of Jesus lost in the Temple for three days while his parents look for him with great anxiety, Luke foreshadows the only other trip to Jerusalem that Jesus will take in Luke’s Gospel.

That trip—like the first—will be to celebrate Passover. On Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem, he will be lost from his loved ones for three days. Like Jesus’ parents, his disciples will be full of anxiety until they are reunited with Jesus. Both times Jesus is lost it is because his actions were necessary in order to fulfill the will of the Father.

## John’s Account of the Passion

Although the story of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection in the Gospel according to John is very different than that in the synoptic Gospels, John, too, constantly stresses that Jesus’ greatest desire is to do the will of his Father.

We can see John’s unique way of teaching his particular by looking carefully at his account of Jesus’ actions just before and during his arrest and comparing them to the account that we have read in the synoptic Gospels.

In John, there is no agony in the garden. Nor does Jesus pray to be relieved of his suffering. In fact, when Peter tries to protect Jesus by cutting off the ear of the high priest’s slave, Jesus says, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (John 18:11). Because the Father wills it, Jesus also wills to embrace his suffering and death.

## Jesus Enters Into His Glory

We have already noted that in Luke’s Gospel the risen Christ tells his disciples that it was necessary that the messiah suffer these things and enter into his glory (see Luke 24:26). In the Gospels the word *glory* is used to refer to Jesus’ divinity. As John begins his Gospel he tells us that:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14).

John tells the story of Jesus' passion and death in such a way that Jesus' glory always shines through. John does this because he is writing to an expectant and somewhat disappointed audience who is disappointed that the Son of Man has not yet returned. John wants to help his audience see that the risen Christ is in their midst. Christ is in the Church and in communal celebrations that later became known as the sacraments. So, as John tells the story of Jesus' life on earth, he lets the glory of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us be visible at all times.

That is why John does not picture Jesus being in agony in the garden. Instead of being in agony, Jesus is in charge. This is John's description of Jesus' arrest in the garden:

"Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he',\* they stepped back and fell to the ground" (John 18:4-6).

Notice that Jesus knows everything that is going to happen to him. John consistently pictures Jesus as all knowing, a quality that only God possesses.

Then, when Jesus identifies himself to his enemies, he says, "I am he." This is a reference to the story of God revealing God's name to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses says to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

John tries to make it clear to us that Jesus' response identifies him as God by having those who have come to arrest Jesus react as though they have suddenly seen Jesus' glory: ". . . they stepped back and fell to the ground" (John 18:6). Throughout John's story of Jesus' suffering we never lose sight of Jesus' identity as the Word made flesh who has come to dwell with God's people.

## Jesus' Last Meal

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his death is the Passover meal. This meal is of paramount importance to all Christians because it describes Jesus reinterpreting the Passover celebration and instituting a new celebration, the Eucharist.

Luke tells us that on the night before he died Jesus "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup

that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”(Luke 22:19-20). With these words Jesus became what John calls “the bread of life,” our spiritual nourishment (see John 6:22-59). Jesus also explains that his death is for all his disciples, including us.

## New Life in Christ

What did Jesus accomplish for his followers by accepting death on a cross? Paul tries to explain this mystery in his letter to the Romans. Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. . . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3-4, 11).

The Gospel according to John also emphasizes the new life we have in Christ. In John, Christ says that he is the good shepherd who “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We see that it was for love all people that the Word became flesh: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

## Why the Cross?

Why did Jesus have to be crucified?” What God willed for his son, Jesus, was the revelation that God is love and that God loves us. Jesus was crucified because God wanted us to know that Jesus, the Word, became flesh to dwell among us, to know our pain, and to save us from our sins. Jesus suffered crucifixion because human beings are sinful and did not recognize Jesus, nor the truth that Jesus taught.

John begins his Gospel by teaching this truth: “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:10-11).

Nevertheless, God freely chose, willed, to become a human being and to suffer in order to reveal God’s love for us and to free us from sin. It is no wonder we call the ritual that Jesus initiated at his last Passover meal *Eucharist*, a word that means *thanksgiving*. For we give thanks for the gift of Jesus and his saving actions.

## A Model for Living

John does not picture Jesus instituting Eucharist at his last meal with the disciples. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus’ last meal with the disciples is not the night of Passover, but the night before Passover. (See John 18:28.) Thus Jesus is killed at the same time that the lambs were being slaughtered for the Passover celebration.

In this way John teaches that Jesus is the new lamb of God who gives life. The Passover lamb at the time of the exodus gave extended life on earth. (See Exodus 12:21-28.) Jesus, the new Passover lamb, gives eternal life.

While John does not use the last supper to teach about Eucharist, he does use this last meal to teach about the ramifications of the Eucharist, about what is required of those who are baptized into Christ's body and who are nourished by Christ's sacramental presence in Eucharist.

In Gospel according to John, during Jesus' last meal with his disciples he washes their feet. After performing this act of service Jesus explains the meaning of his action: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:12b-15).

Jesus taught the Apostles to model themselves after him. Just as Jesus laid down his life in loving service for his disciples, they do the same for others. Just as Jesus did not let fear of suffering and death stop him from doing God's will, so must the disciples overcome fear and accept suffering, even death, in order to fulfill the will of God.

We, too, are disciples. We, too, are called to model ourselves on Jesus. Just as Jesus loved God with his whole heart, being, strength, and mind, and his neighbor as himself, so must we. (See Luke 10:27.) As disciples we are called to follow Jesus in life, through death, to eternal life.

-----

*This article was originally published as part of the People of Faith series from Harcourt Religion Publishers.*

**For Catholic Parishes:** *This article has an imprimatur from the Most Reverend John G. Vlazny, May 12, 2005.*