

Reading Guide Week 6

St. Luke Part 5: Luke 22:1-24:53

The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The passion and death of Jesus are covered in great detail in all four Gospels. Many of the events involved were public and observed by many witnesses. The Evangelists differ in some details, most likely because they depended on secondhand testimony for the portions of the trial that were not public. Also, the tradition circulated orally for about 40 years before it was written down. Clearly, all four accounts relate the same *historical* event. But the Evangelists relate history for the purpose of understanding the significance of the redemptive death of Jesus Christ and his ultimate triumph as the Son of God.

We are familiar with this story from hearing it read from two of the four Gospels every year during Holy Week. Over time the four accounts tend to merge together. That is why it is particularly important to read St Luke's account carefully in order to understand his viewpoint and what was important for his community of believers.

The Passion Narrative

St Luke's Passion Narrative is concise and effective. He reminds us that there is a conspiracy against Jesus by the "chief priests and scribes." They are the religious authorities in control of the Temple and its wealth who collaborate with the Romans. The Temple authorities feel threatened by Jesus. They need to apprehend Jesus when he is not surrounded by a sympathetic crowd. Once Jesus is in their control it will not be possible for his supporters to protect him. (Luke 22:1-6).

Meanwhile Jesus makes plans to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. At this last communal meal Jesus announces the sacrifice he is about to make. This coincides with his institution of the Eucharist. The words over the Bread and Wine are very similar to those used by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians 30 years earlier (compare Luke 22:14-22 with 1Cor 11:23-27). This is one reason why Luke is thought to have been an associate of Paul and obtained some of his material from him.

Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for the ordeal that lies ahead of them. He foretells his betrayal as well as his denial by Peter. Jesus tells them that their future work as his disciples will be challenging. With that they go to an area outside the city on the Mount of Olives that they have used before as a place of prayer and privacy. The prayer of Jesus reiterates his teaching to the disciples: Jesus has come to do his Father's will, regardless of the consequences.

The Garden on the Mount of Olives, at night, provides the opportunity for Judas to betray Jesus into the hands of the religious authorities. When they confront him, Jesus allows himself to be taken prisoner recognizing that this is "the time for the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53). Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest where he is beaten while

preparations are made to legally dispose of him. Peter, attempting to find out what is happening to Jesus, is challenged and denies being a follower of Jesus.

The next day the Sanhedrin, a committee made up of chief priests and scribes, which served as the religious authority for Jerusalem, puts Jesus on trial. The Roman governor, Pilate, allowed the Sanhedrin to deal with non-political religious issues. The Sanhedrin quickly rejects Jesus's messianic claims and his claims to divine authority. They perceive both as threats to their authority.

Finding Jesus guilty, the Sanhedrin brings Jesus to Pilate for punishment. Apparently the Romans did not allow the religious leaders the power of capital punishment. Jesus is presented to Pilate as a political threat to Roman authority. Pilate does not see Jesus as a threat but hearing that Jesus has caused problems in Galilee, is willing to turn him over to Herod, who happens to be in town. (This is not Herod the Great of the Infancy Narratives but his son, Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and Perea.) Herod gets no response from Jesus and returns him to Pilate who again tells the religious leaders that he does not find Jesus guilty. But after some back and forth with the Jewish authorities, Pilate gives in to their demands and agrees to crucify Jesus. What are we to make of this whole process? Who was responsible for Jesus's death?

All accounts suggest that the Jewish authorities were the instigators of the actions taken against Jesus and desired his death. It is important to recognize that the "Jewish authorities" were a small part of the population and that the Jewish people as a whole were not responsible. The Gospel indicates that "the people" (Luke 23:13) shouted for Jesus's death. They are the supporters that the authorities brought along, not a public crowd. The Jewish authorities in charge of the Temple and responsible for maintaining the good behavior of the Jewish people in Jerusalem rejected the claims of Jesus and saw him as a threat to their livelihood.

St Luke makes the point repeatedly that Jesus is a peaceful messiah and not a political threat to the Romans. That is one of Luke's themes throughout the Gospel. But the reader is left wondering how Pilate goes from repeatedly finding Jesus innocent to condemning him to a brutal death reserved for rebels and common criminals. In other sources outside the Bible, Pilate is presented as a cruel and insensitive overlord. It is unlikely that Pilate would worry about killing a Jew, especially when requested to do so by the Jewish religious authorities. Whether Jesus was a threat or not his death would serve as a warning to real troublemakers.

Jesus is crucified. None of the evangelists goes into much detail because their readers were familiar with this instrument of institutional terrorism used by the Romans. Crucifixion was meant to be painful and humiliating to the victim and frightening to the population. We have been desensitized to its horror by its sanitized and heroic representation in art. It is not surprising that it frightened and discouraged the followers of Jesus.

Jesus's ministry continues even on the cross. St Luke alone preserves the story of the repentant thief crucified with Jesus. While he is sometimes referred to as "the thief who stole heaven," this is unfair. His faith in Jesus redeems him, just as faith was key to those Jesus healed and forgave earlier in his ministry.

The best way to approach the crucifixion and its meaning is to participate in the practice of two devotional exercises during Lent. One is the Stations of the Cross and the other is meditation on the Seven Words of Christ on the Cross. Both devotions combine traditions recorded in the four gospels. Both traditions help us appreciate the suffering that is the basis of our redemption.

St Luke records the darkness that came over the land as the light of the world dies on the cross. But there remains a spark of faith that will not go out. It manifests itself in tiny acts of courageous charity. Joseph of Arimathea takes a risk by asking for the body of Jesus and placing it in a tomb. Women who were followers from Galilee prepare spices for the body and return to the tomb on Sunday morning. (Among the women, all four Gospels mention Mary Magdalene.) They are the first to hear the message of the resurrection: "He is not here, but he has been raised." The women announce the news to the disciples but are not believed.

In another story recorded only by St Luke, two discouraged followers encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus without recognizing him. Jesus explains the necessity that the Messiah should suffer from the words of Moses and the prophets in Scripture. The travelers finally recognize Jesus in the blessing and breaking of bread. They rush back to tell the disciples and find that Jesus has also appeared to Simon Peter.

Luke's gospel ends with a report of Jesus appearing to the disciples as a group. Jesus again emphasizes that the extraordinary events they have just experienced are a necessary fulfillment of Scripture:

"Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

(Luke 24:46-47)

With the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples will begin to preach the "good news" of Jesus Christ to all nations. The Gospel ends with the Ascension of Jesus to the Father.

Note: The Gospels differ in their Resurrection accounts more than in their accounts of the Passion. This has led some skeptics to suggest that these stories developed in time as fabrications of the Church. A corrective to this view is provided by St. Paul in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians written about 15 years before the first Gospel:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that, he

appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. (I Cor. 15:3-8)

The Resurrection appearances were well established in oral tradition. The Evangelists recorded the stories associated with their sources and took for granted the reliability of their witnesses.

The Gospel of St Luke and the Scandal of the Cross

After reading the Passion Narrative of the Gospel of St Luke we can understand the major problem that the first Christians faced: the scandal of the cross. St Paul talks about the problem in the 1st chapter of his 1st Letter to the Corinthians:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

How do you convince anyone to believe in a man brutally executed as a common criminal?

St Luke captures the dilemma of the original followers of Jesus in the story of the travelers on the road to Emmaus. They simply cannot understand what they had just witnessed. How could this happen? Why did this happen? They thought for sure Jesus “would be the one to redeem Israel.” Jesus himself provides the answer: if you understand Moses and the Prophets (Sacred Scripture) you will understand that the Messiah had to suffer.

St Luke wrote his gospel to provide a comprehensive response to the scandal of the cross. In the infancy narratives he introduces Jesus with reference to what the prophets told us about the Messiah and where he would come from. Luke shows us that the deeds of Jesus in Galilee are signs of the Messiah fulfilling the prophecies of Scripture. Luke presents the teaching of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem as the authoritative teaching of the Messiah. The message of Jesus in Jerusalem announces the salvation that the Messiah will bring to all nations, from Jerusalem. Finally, the rejection and death of the Messiah is the final, necessary act of salvation building on the rejection and death of the prophets before him.

The scandal of the cross wakes us up. God’s ways are not our ways. Moses and the Prophets prepare us for Christ. God has indeed sent us a Messiah, but one who frees us from sin, one who reconciles us to the Father. Jesus in his words and actions has provided us with an example of radical obedience to God, even though it meant his death on the cross. But God has raised him up. Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Jesus teaches us to turn away from the ways of the world to the ways of God. St Luke helps us to understand the radical and challenging message of Jesus.

Questions for reflection

1. St Peter denied Jesus. Is it possible that my actions, at times, also deny Jesus?
2. Why were women the messengers of Jesus's resurrection? Why weren't they believed?
3. How important is it for us to recognize the cross as a scandal?
4. Has reading the Gospel of St Luke given me a better understanding of Jesus?
5. Why is it important for me to know more about the Old Testament?

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