

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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*Forward and Introduction*

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**FOREWORD**

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus gave his two friends a Scripture lesson. He took the Bible as though it were a loaf of bread and broke it open to feed their hearts, minds, feelings, and souls. He explained how the prophets, wisdom speakers, psalm singers, storytellers, and patriarchs sang and spoke of the essential link between the sufferings of the Messiah and his glory. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and so enter his glory?" (Luke 24:6).

Luke does not give us the details of that remarkable Scripture lesson, other than to say the listeners were so moved that their hearts burned within them. Jesus gave them an experience of Scripture that caused a personal spiritual and moral conversion. The Christian interpretation of Scripture ever since has drawn two essential guidelines from that scene. First, all of Scripture illumines the meaning and purpose of Jesus Christ's work of salvation. Second, the biblical words call each of us to a faith conversion to Jesus Christ.

No interpreter of Scripture ever understood these principles better than St. Augustine. For him the soul was the home of all the feelings in the body. Since Christians were members of Christ's Body, they could get in touch with the inner life of Jesus, his soul if you will. As Augustine scanned the pages of Scripture, he found in the psalms the record of the feelings of Jesus. The psalms and the gospels were more than two books written in different periods of history, they were the seamless garment of the love story between God and people, one text illuminating the other.

The Christ of Augustine's sermons on the gospels possesses the quiet majesty of classic art. But in his commentaries on the psalms, Augustine comes upon a flood of emotions and applies them to Jesus. The figure of the passionate King David supplies the vision of the emotions of Jesus. Hence it is Christ's voice that is heard in the psalms, "a voice singing happily, a voice rejoicing in hope, a voice sighing in its present state. We should know his voice, feel it intimately, make it our own" (*Commentary on Psalms*, 42,1).

At the same time, Augustine wanted to do more than stir up feeling in the listeners to his Scripture sermons.

He wanted to break bread and feed the multitude. As a boy, he had stolen fruit to share with his comrades. As a bishop, he raided the fields of Scripture to feed his parishioners to whom he ministered for forty years. "I go to feed so I can give you to eat. I lay before you that from which I draw my life" (*Fragments*, 2,4). He was interested in converting his listeners to Jesus ever more deeply through the Scriptures.

He wrote to Jerome that he could never be a disinterested Bible scholar. "If I gain any new knowledge of Scripture, I pay it out immediately to God's people" (*Letter*, 73,2).

Pope John Paul II stressed these same principles about Scripture interpretation in an address to the members of the Biblical Commission. He noted with satisfaction the progress being made in modern Catholic biblical scholarship since the encyclical *Providentissimus* written by Pope Leo XIII in 1893. He cited the many forms of scientific analysis of Scripture which have developed, such as the study of literary forms, semiotics, and narrative analysis. He dwelt on the "limitations" of the new methods and asked his listeners to avoid the excesses of the swings of fashion in Scripture interpretation, for example, one school totally preoccupied with history and another one forgetting history altogether. He also advised his audience to observe the one-sidedness of some interpreters of Scripture such as those who cite Vatican II's document on Scripture (*Dei Verbum*) in support of the use of scientific methods, but seem to forget the other teaching of the council that interpreters should never forget the divine authorship of the Bible.

His next words deserve to be quoted in full:

The Bible has certainly been written in human language. Its interpretation requires the methodical use of the science of language. But it is also God's Word. Exegesis (Scripture interpretation) would be seriously incomplete if it did not shed light on the theological significance of Scripture.

We must not forget that Christian exegesis is a theological discipline, a deepening of the faith. This entails an interior tension between historical research founded on verifiable facts and research in the spiritual order based on faith in Christ. There is a great temptation to eliminate this inner tension by renouncing one or another of these two orientations ... to be content with a subjective interpretation which is wrongly called "spiritual," or a scientific interpretation which makes the texts "sterile."

—English Edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 22, 1991

This commentary/meditation which you are about to read was written with this total vision in mind. You will not find it heavily scientific because it was not meant to be a popularization of the scientific methods of interpretation. At the same time, it is meant to reflect the beneficial results of scientific studies.

You will discover it is aimed at opening up the person, message, and work of Jesus Christ whose work of salvation in union with the Father and the Holy Spirit is presented. Therefore, Jesus centered and faith growth envisioned.

It is my hope that these reflections will draw you to love the Bible, and in so doing, love Christ, yourself, and others. We are thus loving more than a book or sacred texts, we are in a total love affair. Perhaps Chaim Potok's description of the "Dance of the Torah" has something to say to us here. The scene is a Hasidic Synagogue in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. A religious festival is in progress and the participants have reached a part of the ceremony where scrolls of the Torah are passed around and certain privileged members are allowed to dance with it. We pick up the scene as the principal character, who has been agonizing about his faith and its relation to life, is handed the scroll.

I held the scroll as something precious to me, a living being with whose soul I was forever bound, this Sacred Scroll, this Word, this Fire of God, this Source for my own creation, this velvet encased Fountain of All Life which I now clasped in a passionate embrace. I danced with the Torah for a long time, following the line of dancers through the steamy air of the synagogue and out into the chill tumultuous street and back into the synagogue and then reluctantly yielding the scroll to a huge dark-bearded man who hungrily scooped it up and swept away with it in his arms.

—*The Gift of Asher Lev*, paperback, p. 351

Should not our encounter with Scripture be a dance with the Holy Word?

There was an old folk custom, now lost in the mists of history, in which a child was formally introduced to the sweetness of the Word of God. A page of the Bible was given to the child. Upon the page was spread some honey and the child was asked to taste it. Hence from earliest youth, the child would be introduced to a positive experience of Scripture, the sweetness of the Word of God.

What else need be said?

*"How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth."*

—Psalm 119:103, RSV

## **INTRODUCTION**

In April 1991, I made a pilgrimage to Lvov, Ukraine to be present at the first Catholic Easter liturgy to be celebrated in St. Yuri's cathedral in 43 years. On Holy Saturday at fifteen minutes before midnight, we lit our candles and left the cathedral. We went in procession around the building under the light of a new moon. Returned to the front, we found the door was closed. The deacon sang the Easter Gospel. When he came to the words, "Why look you for the living among the dead? He is risen! He is not here!" the celebrant sang out in a loud voice in Slavic, "Christos Voskrese!" (Christ is risen). We responded with equal vigor, "Voistinu Voskrese!" (He is risen indeed).

The doors opened and the huge crowd flowed into the cathedral for a joyous celebration of Easter. It was the first time in my life that I was at a liturgy where history and liturgy so perfectly coincided. Liturgically, we celebrated the resurrection of the Body of Jesus. Historically, we rejoiced in the resurrection of millions of members of the Body of Christ who had risen from the tomb of oppression and were now free to profess their faith openly. History and mystery touched each other. Amid the candles, incense, music, and palpable faith of the people there was a foretaste of heaven.

Such is the kind of feeling we will have as we enter the "cathedral" of John's gospel. The mystery of Easter permeates every page of his loving memoir of Jesus. In his pages we will encounter the Christ of glory.

I met a priest in Russia who had spent a year at the Zagorsk monastery. I asked him how he learned to be a spiritual man. He said, "I met a group of monks who practice the resurrection spirituality of John's gospel." For St. John, the light of Easter illumines the ministry of the earthly Jesus, revealing the hidden glory of the Word become flesh. It is like taking a journey going in an easterly direction at sunrise. The light of the sun reveals where we have been in our walk through the night.

This perspective enables us to see the spiritual purpose of the words and deeds of Jesus. Here the miracles are called signs. They are still events of kindness and compassion, but their threefold spiritual meaning is emphasized.

- (1). They are signs that help us experience the glory-presence of Jesus the Word become flesh.
- (2). They are invitations to a faith relationship with Jesus.
- (3). They are powerful images of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist where such a relationship can occur.

The Wine miracle at Cana is more than a solution for the embarrassment of a young couple at a village wedding. The Bread miracle on the mountain transcends the satisfaction of a temporary hunger. These are signs that reveal how the risen Jesus ministers to us in the Eucharistic celebration.

Similarly, the words of Jesus here are mostly dialogues in which Jesus lovingly engages himself with others to bring them lasting happiness. He approaches people with sympathy and love and asks for personal union with them. With sure sensitivity he brings the Woman at the Well out of her loneliness and into a spiritual relationship with him that fills her with exuberant joy. With a similar empathy, he involves himself with Nicodemus, sowing the first seeds of faith-courage in him and sealing a relationship that matures at Calvary. The fearful Nicodemus becomes a public disciple of Jesus and assists in the burial.

Along the way, in these dialogues, we learn how the risen Jesus serves us in the Sacrament of Baptism. That is the point of the discussions about being born again of water and the Spirit, of water as an earthly sign of eternal life and love, of faith as a form of loving union with Jesus. Just as effectively, Jesus used the dialogue method in the Bread of Life discourse and his Last Supper conversations to show how he relates dynamically to us in our Eucharistic celebration.

Jesus is very personal and alive in this gospel. He insistently links his divine glory to his earthly identity and ministry. Thus he expresses his remarkable ability to reach out, not just to those in Capernaum, Galilee and Jerusalem, but to all of us in our present circumstances. Constantly, he uses the expression, I AM. God revealed himself as I AM to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus repeatedly applies the expression to himself in this gospel. It encompasses the seamless union of the Son of God and the son of Mary.

The I AM statements link Jesus with Light, Life, Way, Truth, Shepherd, and Living Bread. He personalizes all these terms. His teaching is never abstract or disengaged from his listeners. He is the living embodiment of which he speaks. He shares himself with people, not because he has a need to talk about himself, but in order to give people the love, freedom, joy, truth, life, and forgiveness for which their hearts hunger.

Another term which illustrates Christ's enthusiastic yearning to have a personal impact on those he meets is "glory." In the Old Testament the glory was described as a pillar of fire or a shimmering cloud which rested on the Ark of the Covenant. Glory was like a sunrise in the morning or a fire in the sky at night. The Hebrews experienced God's presence in the glory of the pillar of fire that led them through the desert and the shining cloud over the Ark. The essential point was presence, God's wish to be intimate with his people.

This gospel says that Christ's miracle-signs manifested his glory. Jesus wanted to be as personally present to people as was possible. His presence included his human identity which was evident to them. But his love for them impelled him to share the fullness of his identity as the Word become flesh. Those who would behold him in faith would be in touch with the glory-presence of his divinity. That is why he kept pushing their awarenesses, their horizons to see more than their first impressions gave them. He did not do this out of any need to absorb their attention in him, so much as to accomplish his purpose of helping them to see what wonders he could fulfill in them. Just as the sun helps us to see what is in the world, the Word become flesh is our spiritual sunlight, enabling us to see what is possible within ourselves.

A word must be said here about this gospel and our Jewish brothers and sisters. Wrongly, some Christians have used some of its texts to justify anti-semitism. Vatican II has opposed anti-semitism and any attempt to use the Scripture to justify it.

"Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (see Jn. 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with crimes committed during his passion.... Remembering her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deploras all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews" ("Non-Christian Religions," 4)\*.

We will find in this gospel that Christ's attitude is always in the best interests of others. He reaches out to Judas to help him change. He argues with religious leaders, not just to score debating points, but to bring them to light and love. He looks at the denying Peter with such compassion that the apostle weeps for his sins. He presses Pilate to discover his own inner hunger for truth. On the cross he says he thirsts for all people to accept his love and forgiveness. Never does he incite revenge, hatred, discrimination, or vindictiveness.

Easter is the best perspective for meditating on this gospel. The glory of the Risen Jesus, the Word become flesh, is the presence we will feel in its pages. Tradition says that St. John wrote this gospel at Ephesus and that Mary the mother of Jesus lived with him there. Her faith from the Annunciation to Ephesus was an arc of light, a rainbow. Her final years at Ephesus were a contemplative time. Jesus had said to her, "Behold, your son." From her contemplative depth, she could behold John composing this extraordinary gospel. Her motherly affection and her incomparable prayer touched her spiritual son. Since she is our mother too, she, who was present at the creation of this text, should be invoked for our own meditations.

*Seat of Wisdom,  
Pray for us.*