



HANDING OVER the SPIRIT

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains John's version of Jesus's death as his handing over the Spirit at the heart of the universe to all beloved disciples.

Jesus as king. A seamless garment. The cry: "I am thirsty." The mother of Jesus, the women and the Beloved Disciple "near the cross." The piercing of the side from which blood and water flowed. Jesus entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple. All these details, found only in John, have influenced Christian spirituality and art profoundly. Scriptural quotations and allusions, imagery and symbolism, irony and double meanings abound. This is an interpretation

of the death-resurrection of Jesus refracted through the prism of John's theological responses to the struggles of communities in a particular time and place. Often obscured or overlooked in the Christian tradition are three interconnected strands which are critical to hearing both the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor: creation and re-creation, the last words of Jesus and the handing over the Spirit. I will explore these against the background realities of Roman power at the time.

Three Moves

Palestine had been a Roman colony since 63 BCE. Roman political and economic domination, with the collusion of local leaders, lay heavily

upon the people and the land. In the devastation that followed the public execution of Jesus, disciples in the New Testament writings made three core moves in their understanding. They fused the cross and resurrection into one hopeful symbol – they did not ponder the cross and death of Jesus in isolation from his resurrection. Then, having fused the death, cross and resurrection, they looked back through this strong light at the whole life of Jesus and gave it saving significance. God did not just raise any one. The One raised had been involved totally in a passionate ministry. His words and action gave flesh to the God of mercy who frees slaves, leads exiles home and hears the cry of the poor. As a consequence, Jesus was put to death.

Finally, during the lifetime of Jesus, many disciples saw him as the expected Messiah who would restore their nation from foreign domination.

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RL and RCL: Good Friday John

18:1-19:42

RCL: Holy Saturday (Alternative)

19:42

That hope ended with his death. A shift took place. Disciples saw the death-resurrection of Jesus as a new age of redemption. The narrower political leadership of messiah was rethought to include all people and the whole world. These three moves are very different from later ones such as Anselm's theory of satisfaction which focused on the cross alone as saving. The cross gave God payment for debt and said nothing of the resurrection. Scripture used a different language of being with, accompanying: "I am with you." Redemption means God walking with the people and creation in solidarity even to death. Elizabeth Johnson, in her book, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*, explains that this theology has a double solidarity "of the actual Jesus who lived with all who live, suffer and die, and of the resurrecting God of life with the ministering and crucified Jesus." John's Gospel tells of this in narrative and image.

Jesus Replied: "I am" (Jn 18.8)

There was official Roman interest in the arrest of Jesus in the garden (Jn 18:3, 12). A cohort (one-tenth of a Roman legion) and its tribune were involved alongside Judas and "police from the chief priests and the Pharisees". It was a confrontation rather than an arrest. Jesus was in control. He took the initiative. He spoke the first and last words (Jn 18:4, 11). He was conscious of what lay ahead of him (Jn 18:4). Coming forward, Jesus asked: "Whom are you looking for?" (Jn 18:7; cf. Jn 1:38; 20:15). At his: "I am", armed soldiers behaved unusually before an unarmed man – they fell to the ground (Jn 18:3–8).

At one level, Jesus was simply saying who he is, yet, there were other echoes (Ex 3:14). The disciples' escape was not desertion but highlighted his concern for "his own" (Jn 17:12). Jesus was about "drinking the cup" which was the consequence of his doing the works of God.

No Jewish court ever charged Jesus formally or condemned him. No Jews beat him or mocked him (beyond a single slap in Jn 18:22). Even though the Jewish leadership

instigated his trial and execution, the omission of the Sanhedrin trial – a trial before a Jewish judicial body – meant formal responsibility was with the Roman governor, Pilate. There is more emphasis on the political nature of the charges against Jesus than anywhere else in the New Testament. The Roman trial was dramatic, highly symbolic and structured in seven brief scenes (Jn 18:29–32, 33–38a, 38b–40; 19:1–3, 4–7, 8–11). Two trials took place: the literal trial of Jesus; and the figurative trial of "the Jews", at which Pilate and all humanity choose either the reign of God as revealed by Jesus in the world – or choose the world.

". . . There Was a Garden" (Jn 18:1; 19:42)

The passion and death of Jesus began and ended in a "place" where "there was a garden" (Jn 18:1; 19:42). He rose in a garden. The strands in the prologue (Jn 1:1–18), which inserted Jesus into God's creation and re-creation, continued in his passion, death-resurrection and his absence and presence in the Spirit. God "planted a garden in Eden, in the east" (Gen 2:8). Like a gardener, God cultivated it (Gen 2:9) and walked in it (Gen 3:8). Elsewhere, God was described explicitly as a gardener (Num 24:6; 4 Macc 1:29). As God is central to biblical creation so, too, Jesus is inserted in God's creation.


"It Is finished" (Jn 19:30)

The works of God were to be finished by Jesus. This was especially so as his death approached "Jesus knew that all was *finished*" (Jn 19:28). His last words were: "It is *finished*" (Jn 19:30). His food was to *finish* the works of God (Jn 4:34). God gave him works to *finish* (Jn 5:36). Echoed here is Genesis where "God rested from all the work that God had done in creation" (Jn 2:2). Jesus spoke of God doing works through him (Jn 14:10) and those who believed in him "will do the works that I do and, in fact, greater works than I do" (Jn 14:12).

Jesus "Handed Over the Spirit" (Jn 19:30)

It is commonly understood that Jesus's death was being described

when he "gave up his spirit" (NRSV). Nowhere in the ancient world was death described like that. The word in Jn 19:30 means to "hand over" and was used for the betrayal action of Judas in the other Gospels. The Greek has no "his". So, a more accurate translation would be: "handed over the spirit". James Swetman observes that "at the deeper level the climax of the Passion of the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is not the death of Jesus, but a bestowal of the Spirit". The Spirit was promised previously (Jn 7:39; 14:16–17). So, Jesus handed over the Spirit to his mother, the women and the Beloved Disciple near the cross.

And who is the Beloved Disciple? Sandra Schneiders suggests *each reader/hearer* is a Beloved Disciple to whom Jesus hands over the Spirit. Why? To finish the work of God's ongoing creation and re-creation (salvation). In this work the "Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways" (*Laudate Si'* par 238). 

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