

Portraits of Jesus – The Passion

The Gospel of Luke

Luke 22-23

From the very beginning of the gospel, Luke has informed his readers that he is presenting an “orderly” account of the events that have happened among them in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. While it is not exactly clear what is “orderly” about his account, it is fairly clear that for Luke God is the central character of his-story and that Jesus is the manifestation of God’s plan of salvation for all of creation. Luke unfolds the story of Jesus amid the broader story of God’s interaction with God’s people Israel and moves the story of salvation beyond Israel and into the world-at-large. This unfolding of a plan is central to Luke’s portrait of Jesus, who is the center and fulfillment of God’s work of creation’s salvation.

Luke captures the unfolding in a variety of ways. From his quotation of Old Testament passages to show how Jesus fulfills those expectations (see in particular Luke 24, where Jesus unpacks the Old Testament to demonstrate to the disciples on the Emmaus road that he is the expected one) to the use of one little Greek word that is often translated “it is/was necessary”, Luke portrays Jesus as the one anticipated and sent for God’s work of saving creation.

One of the places we see this most clearly is in the description of the Passion in Luke as compared to Mark (as well as Matthew). Instead of the “suffering servant” portrait of Jesus that we find in Mark, Luke focuses less on the suffering and more on Jesus living into God’s plan. From the beginning of that passion week where Jesus’ preparation for the last supper goes exactly as Jesus plans it (22:7-13) to Jesus’ last words on the cross, the story is one focused on purpose and fulfillment not on agony, suffering and death.

Perhaps this ordered and purposed account can best be seen in Luke’s description of the final moments of Jesus’ life on the cross. For Mark, the suffering of Jesus forms the focus of his portrait as Jesus’ final words are the plaintive and shocking cry of “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. These words are not found in Luke’s gospel, where Jesus does not seem to be suffering as much on the cross as holding court. On the cross Jesus appears in total control of the situation and his surroundings and completes God’s vision of salvation, which we learned in Advent turns the world upside down. Instead of an agonized cry, Jesus gently speaks words of forgiveness for those who do not know what they are doing, offering the gift of forgiveness even as he nears his own death. Jesus calmly offers compassion that Luke has shown to be the hallmark of Jesus’ life fulfilling the purpose for which he had been sent. Still calm, in control, and holding court, he converses with those crucified with him offering the promise of paradise to one of his companions. Again, a strong compassion and control replace the agony that one would expect from the cross.

Finally, instead of the pained cry of anguish that splits the temple curtain in two, Jesus simply completes his mission and work on earth by handing his spirit back to God, “Father into your hands, I commend my Spirit.” It is only after Jesus finishes his work and hands his life back to God that the temple curtain is torn in two in Luke’s telling of the story. Tearing the curtain in two is a powerful metaphor for the revelation of God to the world. For Mark, it occurs right as Jesus is dying in anguish – Mark saying in some sense, “Look. This is God. Not in victorious power but suffering love.” Luke, however, says that the temple curtain is torn before Jesus dies suggesting that his last calm words of commendation show

and reveal God most clearly. This is part of an “ordered” plan that Luke informs us describes the life of Jesus.

For Luke, God has a plan to save creation and that plan focuses on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the passion week, we see this plan unfold and Jesus participates in the plan that has been in place long before his incarnation and will continue long after his resurrection. Luke wants us to know that from the dawn of time God has been at work through Christ to redeem the world, and Jesus’ time among us is the clearest point where we see God’s plan in action.

Key Texts

22:8-13 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover meal for us that we may eat it." They asked him, "Where do you want us to make preparations for it?" "Listen," he said to them, "when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks you, "Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" He will show you a large room upstairs, already furnished. Make preparations for us there." So, they went and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

23:44-46 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

Questions

1. Suffering – Compassion
These two words might be used to describe the portrait of Jesus’ passion painted by the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Luke. How do you understand these two images of Jesus in your own life? Is one easier for you to relate to than the other? Why?
2. What one word would you use to describe Jesus’ purpose on earth? What is the source for your understanding of Jesus’ purpose in his life and in his death – your experience of God, scripture, historical interpretation...?

Notes

