

*Crossways International Handout for Gospel Readings—
May 2, 9, 13 (Ascension Day), 16, 23, and 30 (2010)*

May 2, Easter 5: John 13:31-35

Introductory comments, 13:27-30: It is important to understand that Jesus' ministry constituted a non-stop battle with demonic powers. The last thing that Satan wanted was that Jesus walk the way of a Servant-without-limit and go to His cross. He wanted to sidetrack Him—and used Judas in an attempt to manipulate Jesus into declaring Himself a political zealot, or some such thing. However, Jesus will go to His cross—and in giving up His life will conquer Satan; see 12:31, 13:2, 16:11, 17:15. And now the hour of Satan, the great adversary, is at hand. The night of Satan and sin is closing in on Jesus the Light—but only with Jesus' permission.

Jesus' command to Judas, at this late stage in John's narrative, shows that Jesus is in control of His own destiny. The reference to "heel" in v. 18 reflects the reference in Genesis 3:15 to the serpent bruising the heel of the woman's seed. John may be pointing to an element of the titanic struggle between the Savior and the serpent that began with humanity's fall into sin at the beginning of time. And Jesus is about to emerge the Victor!

Vv. 31-33 (The Path to Glory): Glory belongs to God; it reflects His very being. Since the Father and the Son are one, the glory of the one Person is the glory of the other Person. Jesus manifested His glory by walking the way of a Servant-without-limit all the way to the cross. He is now about to return to the divine majesty, honor, and power that He has had with the Father from all eternity (see 17:4). However, it is already clear that His path to glory is totally different from that which humanity applauds. Jesus must walk a lonely path—and walk it in a way that is out of step with the world at large. He must be lifted up to the Father on the cross (see 12:23,32,33; 17:1). Even so, He will return to life. After His resurrection, He will be with His disciples for only a little while, and then the time will come when the disciples will no longer be able to see Him, (7:33,34; 12:35).

Vv. 34,35 (Love One Another): Jesus' perfect love will not cease with His death (13:1). After death will come resurrection. His relationship with His people will continue. Although after His ascension Jesus will no longer be visibly present with His followers, He will remain with them invisibly—and that presence will be loving and inspiring. It will produce a community of loving, serving people. The world will see that these Christians are different people because of their love for each other. Jesus' followers will embrace the "Jesus' way" of life.

The love command here, and in 15:12,17, is called "new," not because God's love is something new, but because the whole life of Jesus' disciples will be controlled, not by rules, but by loving service for those around them. What Jesus promises in v. 35 was certainly true in the early church. A Roman emperor in the second century who opposed Christianity (Marcus Aurelius) still held Christians up to his subjects as glowing examples of love.

POINTS TO PONDER

A: THE ROMAN IMPERIAL SYSTEM

1. Nero ruled the Roman Empire A.D. 54-68. While in power, he slaughtered political opponents, even his own mother.
2. He erected the Colossus of Nero near the Coliseum in Rome—a 100 foot bronze statue of himself as divine ruler of the world—as part of the emperor cult.
3. The emperor cult began with Julius Caesar who ruled Rome 49-44 B.C. After his

assassination, the Roman senate declared him *Divus Julius* (God Julius), a Roman deity. His heir, Caesar Augustus, ruled Rome 27 B.C.–A.D. 14. As (an adopted) son of Julius Caesar, he was declared *Divi Filius* (“**son of God**”), and—at death—a **god** worthy of worship. From then on, all Roman emperors were seen as divine.

4. Roman leaders declared, “The birthday of the **god** Augustus was the **beginning** of the **good news** for the world.”
5. About A.D. 65, Nero was described as “the **good god** of the inhabited world, the **beginning** of all **good things**.”
6. The Jewish historian Josephus describes the rejoicing that took place when Vespasian was declared Emperor in A.D. 69. He “was greeted by the **good news** from Rome—the whole empire being now ... **saved**” (Wars 4:656-657).

Note the terminology of the emperor cult given in the above declarations and proclamations: **Son of God, Savior, God, Beginning, Good News**. Scholars believe that Mark mimicked the highlighted terms numerous times in his Gospel.

B: MARK’S “GOOD NEWS”

Mark’s opening words (1:1) state: “The **beginning** of the **good news** of Jesus Christ (better: *Jesus the Messiah*), the **Son of God**.”

Mark is making a strong, clear statement about his ultimate allegiance—right under the emperor’s nose! But he does not stop there. In 1:14,15, Jesus’ first words challenge imperial authority: “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the **good news** of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** has come; repent, and believe in the **good news**.’”

Mark is proclaiming, “The emperor is not the good news. Jesus is! The good news comes by entering the Kingdom of God revealed in the message, life, and ministry of Jesus, the *forgiving Savior* and *Servant Messiah*! Change your mind! Change your heart! Change your whole way of life! Believe, trust, and follow Jesus—not the emperor!”

In the closing section of his Gospel (15:39), Mark refers to a striking confession by a *Roman centurion* standing near Jesus’ cross, “Truly, this man was the **Son of God!**” What irony!

C: TERMS USED IN THE GOSPELS

Son of Man: Matthew 30, Mark 14, Luke 25, John 13 (82 times)

Kingdom: Matthew 54, Mark 20, Luke 43, John 5 (122 times)

Kingdom of God: Matthew 5, Mark 14, Luke 32, John 2 (53 times)

Good News (Gospel, *euaggelion*): Not used in Luke or John. Used in **Matthew** 4 times; linked to “the kingdom of God” three times.

4:23: Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*.

9:35: Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and *proclaiming the good news of the kingdom*.

24:14: “And this *good news of the kingdom* will be proclaimed throughout the world.”

26:13: “Truly I tell you, wherever this *good news* is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done (a woman had anointed Jesus’ head with costly ointment) will be told in remembrance of her.”

Mark: 8 times; linked to “the kingdom of God” in 1:14,15.

1:1: The beginning of *the good news* of Jesus *the Messiah*, the Son of God.

1:14,15: Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming *the good news* of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and *the kingdom of God has come.*”

8:35: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of *the Gospel*, will save it.”

10:29: “...for My sake, and for the sake of *the good news...*”

13:10: “And *the good news* must first be proclaimed to all nations.”

14:9: “Truly I tell you, wherever *the good news* is proclaimed to the whole world....”

16:15: And He said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim *the good news* to the whole creation.”

Jesus radically reinterpreted Jewish hopes in relation to the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jewish leaders were waiting for a political leader from the line of David *who would give them dominion over the nations of the world forever*. Jesus came to form a worldwide community *that would devote life to serving humanity and the nations of the world forever*.

May 9, Easter 6: (John 14:23-29); John 5:1-9 (and 5:10-18)

In what follows we shall probe the larger narrative that relates to Jesus’ healing of a sick man in the vicinity of the Pool of Bethzatha or Bethesda (meaning, House of Mercy).

5:1-4 (Waiting in Hope): With the third sign in John’s Gospel, we are back in Jerusalem. Jesus returns for a festival—perhaps the Feast of Tabernacles, or Pentecost (the Jewish Harvest Festival). These festivals, like the Passover, involved the Temple, so it is quite natural that Jesus should visit the Pool of Bethzatha/Bethesda. It lay just outside the northern wall of the Temple, opposite the Sheep Gate. During the 20th century, archaeologists uncovered its ruins—ruins that indicate John’s description is quite accurate. The five porches can still be located, even the steps by which the people went down into the water. Many sick people used to lie around the pool. The ancients also knew that certain waters, especially mineral springs, had healing properties. The stirring of the waters referred to here was probably caused by the flow of new spring water which occasionally bubbled up to the surface.

(Verse 4 is omitted from some translations. It is not found in the oldest manuscripts of John, and is probably a later addition meant to explain the bubbling in the water as something caused directly by God.)

5:5-9a (Hope Fulfilled): When Jesus works a sign it is truly miraculous: water becomes wine

(2:1-11); a boy is brought back from death's door (4:46-54). In John 5, attention is centered on a man who has been paralyzed for 38 years—not a slight or recent sickness. Jesus' question sounds a little odd: "Do you want to be made well?" Perhaps Jesus wants to re-awaken a hope that has long since begun to die; the man has repeatedly missed out on getting to the bubbling water in time for healing (v. 7). Perhaps Jesus wants to attract the man's attention, to awaken the first spark of faith. Whatever the case, Jesus speaks the same simple but astonishing command as in Mark 2:9,11: "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." The Word speaks His word, and that word brings about healing (see John 1:1-3).

5:9b-13 (Law, Not Mercy): There are some people who care less about for people than for things like possessions, ideas, rules, institutions, and so forth. Some even seem to get pleasure out of being wet blankets, denying others happiness! One would expect that the Jews (probably the Pharisees) would have been delighted to see this crippled person walking again. But no, like the Pharisees in 9:14-16 who hound the man to whom Jesus has given sight, they are more concerned about preserving the law of the Sabbath (See Nehemiah 13:19; Jeremiah 17:21). They forget that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Actually, these Jews want to attack Jesus rather than the healed man. This becomes clear later when they accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath because He has healed on this Holy Day (v. 16; 7:23; 9:16). Note how both the healed man and the Pharisees refer to Jesus as "the man" in vv. 11 and 12. Even the previously crippled man does not yet know the true identity of Jesus.

9:14-16 (Sin No More): Jesus reveals Himself to the man in the Temple—who perhaps has gone there to thank God for the miracle. Before Jesus healed the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12, He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (v. 5). Here Jesus says, "Sin no more." He is not suggesting that the man's sickness has come upon him because of some special sin committed in the past. This all too simple connection between guilt and suffering is rejected by Jesus in John 9:1-3 and Luke 13:1-5. Rather, what Jesus means is this: His healing hand is the sign of the more important healing of forgiveness. He has come to take away the sin of the world (1:29), not just to make crooked arms and legs straight. Of course, the man could not be expected to live a perfect life; but Jesus asks him to go into a new life of faith and praise to God. This is the life of true obedience. He now knows God because he knows Jesus—unlike the Jews who persecute Jesus in the name of God's Law!

9:17,18 (Equal with God): The Jews seem to think that they have God on their side in their desire to get rid of Jesus. (1) He broke God's Sabbath laws. (2) He made Himself equal with God. After all, did not the creed of the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:4 say: "The Lord our God is *one* Lord"? How could God be Jesus' Father if Jesus broke His Father's own laws? And how could He say, "My Father is working still" when Genesis 2:8 clearly says that God rested after creating the world?

Jesus claims to act with the same creative power with which His Father once acted and still acts. The trouble with these Jews is that their God is too small, too inactive. They think the resting of God from His first creation activity means that God is now on a long holiday. In the rest of the chapter, Jesus shows how He and His Father are still active. God never rests from showing mercy, even on the Sabbath that He created!

The Jewish rabbis realized that God could not have ceased His maintenance of the universe on the Sabbath. They admitted that God continued to work on the Sabbath in giving life and rewarding good and punishing evil. Jesus' answer refers to this belief. The clear implication that Jesus is equal to God is not lost on the Jews—who accuse Jesus of appropriating divine authority and power to Himself.

May 13, Ascension Day: Luke 24:44-53

In Luke's resurrection and ascension narrative, we read the following:

24:1-12: The women go to the tomb to finish embalming Jesus' body. When they see that the stone has been rolled away, they enter the tomb where they meet two men dressed in dazzling white clothes. After these men tell the women that Jesus is risen, they leave the tomb and share the message with the eleven disciples—who respond in disbelief. However, Peter runs to the tomb, looks in, sees the linen cloths by themselves, returns home, and is amazed at what has taken place.

24:13-35: Jesus joins two unnamed disciples on the way to Emmaus, eventually reveals His identity to them during the course of a meal, and then disappears from their sight. The disciples rush back to Jerusalem and share their experience with the eleven.

24:36-43: Jesus then appears in the midst of the group, invites them to inspect the marks in His hands and feet, and eats in their presence.

24:44-49: Luke summarizes the source and extent of apostolic power and the basic truths that the disciples are to proclaim. Salvation in the Lord Jesus fulfills and crowns the Old Testament's preparatory narrative. To understand and appreciate what Jesus taught and accomplished, it is essential to return to the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus must first open the minds of the disciples so that they might experience not merely historical knowledge but redeeming. The Gospels focus on:

- * the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
- * the call to repentance and remission of sins in Jesus' name,
- * the witnessing of the apostles through the Spirit of Pentecost.

Salvation in the name of Jesus confesses a faith in His being equal with God His Father. His name, in its dignity and power, is now invoked in situations where the Jewish people called upon the God who revealed Himself to Moses at Sinai. The theme of the acts of the Apostles is stated in the phrase, "in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." It is significant that although the Jewish people believed that the day would come when the nations would flock to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews, Jesus sends His brothers and sisters from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth to witness to the people of all nations.

The life of God's new spiritual family will formally begin with Pentecost. The disciples are to stay in Jerusalem until they have been clothed with power from on high. In v. 49, Luke states in relation to the Spirit, "I am sending (present tense) upon you what My Father promised."

24:50-53: Luke's narrative gives the impression that Jesus' ascension occurred on Easter evening. Apparently, Luke wants to show the connection between the mysteries of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension and the events of Pentecost.

Jesus takes the disciples to the vicinity of Bethany near the summit of the Mount of Olives, lifts up His hands, and blesses the disciples. While blessing them, He is carried up into the heavens. The ascension marks the end of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

The disciples worship Jesus, return to Jerusalem with great joy, and continually bless God within the precincts of the Temple. The apostles feel great joy because Jesus is more intimately present and clearly understood through the Spirit whom Jesus sent into their hearts than He had been prior to His crucifixion. Jesus' blessing of His disciples empowered them to devote the whole of life to blessing the God who sent Him to redeem humanity. Jesus' apostles and followers now become His Temple, and Jesus reigns as the royal divine presence in their midst.

Luke's Gospel opens and closes in the Temple. The little group of poor and lowly ones who in the infancy narrative welcome the Savior of Israel live on in the people of faith who listen to the words

of Jesus. This word, sown in Jerusalem, spreads to the entire world. Luke's Gospel therefore does not end at 24:53, but continues on into his second work, The Acts of the Apostles. This writing begins with an idyllic picture of the early Christians worshiping in the Temple. It then proceeds to tell us how St. Paul, like Jesus, was rejected by the Temple authorities after he visits Jerusalem. St. Paul eventually appeals to Caesar—with the result that he carries the gospel of salvation to the capital of the Gentile world.

The end of Luke's narrative is only a beginning. In a very real sense, in every age of the world Jesus is born again, and angels continue to proclaim their song of peace on earth. The Heavenly Child remains a sign of contradiction. His followers have to deal with persecution—but death is their exodus to the glory of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

May 16, Easter 7: John 17:20-26

When we listen to a person in prayer, we gain insights into his or her relationship to God. In John 17, traditionally called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, we listen in as the Son talks with His Father. We see that their relationship is nothing less than perfect, and sense that the Lord wants our relationship with Him and His Heavenly Father to be nothing less than perfect. Jesus' prayer is not a private prayer, and certainly not a once-in-a-while prayer.

What Jesus says has immediate meaning for that moment of time when He is about to die and leave the disciples. At the same time, it is a prayer that spans the ages, that stands over the Christian community as long as it exists in this world. It is a prayer for God's people to ponder deeply.

In 17:1-5, Jesus prays for Himself. In 17:6-19, He prays for His disciples—then and now. In 17:20-26, He prays for those to whom His disciples will bear witness.

17:20-23 (Perfectly One): In this section of His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prays for Christians of all times, and not merely for His first disciples. Many others are still to be brought to faith; other sheep will be added to His fold; see 10:16. One thing that is vital for the church's mission in the world is its unity. And that is where a sad story begins! We see only divided churches and divided denominations. Even so, beyond human disunity there is a God-given unity.

The unity of the Father and the Son (vv. 11, 21-23; 10:30-38) is not only a model for what the church should be, but of what the true church is. Jesus prays not that believers should become one, but that they should remain what they are: one in Him as He is one with the Father. Our oneness with Jesus is given to us when we are baptized, 1 Corinthians 12:13.

What Jesus asks from His Father is that believers may be "perfected in their oneness" (which is how v. 23 should be translated) so that unbelievers may see that Christians are on a divine mission—not merely on some human errand.

17:24-26 (Heading for Glory): The disciples have to stay in the world to do Jesus' work. In faith they will see His glory, v. 22; 1:14. They will preach and teach His Word to others so that they also gain a glimpse of that glory. Jesus, however, wants His disciples and followers to see not merely a *reflection* of His eternal glory which He had from the beginning of the world, but the *full brightness* of the Son; see 1 Corinthians 13:12; Revelation 21:22-26. All the joy and love that Christians receive from the Lord and share with each other in this life will finally be perfected in heaven.

May 23, Pentecost: John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Insights for both Pentecost and Trinity Sunday

In Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration (9:28-36), Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about His coming "exodus" (not "departure") which He will "complete" (not "accomplish") in Jerusalem.

According to Jewish rabbis, the events at Mt. Sinai took place 50 days after the Exodus from Egypt. The Pentecost described in Acts 2 took place 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

As God formed a covenant community at and around Sinai, the Holy Spirit forms God's *new* covenant community at the Pentecost observance described in Acts 2. He points to Jesus' continuing presence and what it means to live in and around that presence.

The Spirit does not speak with an audible voice from the heavens above us. He speaks to us through God's *audible* Word (the Scriptures), God's *adopting* Word (Holy Baptism), and God's *edible* Word, the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

God's people need not pray for the Spirit to "come." The Spirit is constantly among and beside us. The need is not for the Spirit to come, but for us to listen to what the Spirit wishes to make known. After all, God had sent us a rather detailed email, the Holy Scriptures, and His one desire is that we read and ponder and embrace its message. God does not call His people merely to sit, stand, sing, speak, and scatter *on a Sunday morning*. He calls them to search, stoop, serve, sweat, and sanctify *throughout life*.

In John 7:39, we read: "Now Jesus said this about the Spirit, which believers in Him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified." Most likely the message is, "Although the Spirit has always existed, the Spirit will 'take over' only after Jesus' resurrection."

The exiles taken to Babylon eventually adopted Aramaic as their language. When they returned from exile, they had to deal with a problem. Their Scriptures were written in Hebrew and had to be read in Hebrew. Furthermore, the rabbi doing the teaching and preaching had to do so in Hebrew. So, they made use of an *interpreter* (in Aramaic, a *methurgeman*) who translated the Hebrew reading into Aramaic, and who summarized the sermon in Aramaic. The *methurgeman* stood beside the rabbi when doing the translating and interpreting—to hear his reading and message. Likewise, the Holy Spirit stands beside Jesus (as it were) to hear what He has to say so that He might enable hearers to understand and embrace Jesus' message.

Vv. 8-11 (How to See God): God once said to Moses, "You cannot see My face, for man shall not see me and live," Exodus 33:20. The New Testament repeats the truth that no person has ever seen the invisible God—or can see Him, John 1:18, 1 Timothy 6:16. God's holiness and glory can be seen only in reflections—as in the bright light on Mt. Sinai, or in the Temple in Isaiah's vision (Exodus 19:16-19; Isaiah 6:1-5).

God's glory is like bare sunlight; one cannot look into it directly. It has to be filtered or reflected to be seen. While we cannot yet see God, we Christians can say that we know Him because we know His Son; we can, in a real sense, say that we have seen God. The first disciples saw the man Jesus who was the true Son of God. Because we see His glory reflected in the Word of His Gospel, we can also confess, "We have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (1:14). Father and Son are one (10:30, 38). To see the Son is to see the Father.

Vv. 12-14 (Greater Works): "Believe in God," "believe in Me," Jesus has said, vv.1, 11. He appeals to His works as proof that He has come from the Father, and that His mission is to lead believers back to the Father.

Jesus now makes a tremendous promise: Those who believe in Him will be given power to do greater works than He has done! In one sense, the work of the Son was unique and will never be surpassed. No greater deed could follow the saving death and resurrection of the Lord. On the other hand, the confused and doubting disciples would soon be sent on their world mission. They would see a great miracle—the birth of the New Testament Church and its growth as thousands heard and believed their preaching.

In their mission, the disciples were to ask anything of the Father, and He would give it. Of course, that is not meant to be a blank check for satisfying human desire and greed. Disciples of Jesus always ask “in His Name.” This means that disciples are to align their own will with the will of the Father. They ask God to glorify the Son by adding believers and followers to the church. They ask that the miracle of faith may take place again and again around Planet Earth.

Vv. 15-17 (The Spirit of Truth): Those who truly love Jesus will always try to obey Him. To abide in His love is to abide in His commandments—and that also means abiding in Him. Christian love is a sign of Jesus’ presence in the world, even though the Lord Himself can no longer be seen.

Jesus is always present with us in another way. He has been a counselor, comforter, and advocate (or counsel for the defense) for His disciples; see 1 John 2:1. Now He promises to send another Counselor, Comforter, and Advocate—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will take the place of Jesus; better, He will be the guarantee of the continuing personal presence of Jesus when He leaves this earth to return to His Father. Jesus, who is the truth (v. 6), will be fully represented by the Spirit of truth. Obviously, the disciples already know who the Spirit is; they know that Jesus has the Spirit (1:32,33). But the time will come when the Spirit will not only be *with* them, but also *in* them.

Vv. 25-27 (The Teaching Spirit): The disciples have frequently misunderstood Jesus’ words. It is only after Easter that they remember and understand; see 2:22; 12:16. Jesus here promises that the Spirit whom the Father will send in His name will remind them of what He has said, and lead them to understand the meaning of His words; see 7:39. The Spirit will lead them into all truth (16:13). He will not be an independent agent, but the interpreter of all that Jesus has taught. The Holy Spirit’s great task is to point people to Jesus the Messiah, and to link them in faith to the Lord.

Peace means not being troubled (17:1), not feeling desolate or deserted (v. 18). It means feeling whole again, because one is united with the Lord. Peace is what the risen Lord gave His frightened disciples when they again saw Him after Easter (20:19,226). Peace is the lasting gift the Lord gives to all believers. It means lack of fear, even though the Lord who makes that possible cannot be seen. It means being safe and secure in Jesus’ love.

May 30, Trinity Sunday: John 16:12-15

Jesus has just said, “I will send the Spirit” (v. 7). The Holy Spirit is as much the Spirit of Jesus as He is the Spirit of the Father; see 1 Corinthians 3:17,18. The Spirit is not a freelancer, working on His own. Everything the Spirit does points to Jesus and His glory. The Spirit of truth leads to Jesus who is the truth (14:6,17). This is the chain of authority: The Father assigns to the Son His servant task and saving mission, and the Son tells the Spirit what to speak on His behalf. Any claim to possess the Spirit which does not glorify Jesus is a fake claim; see 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1-3.

When dealing with the theology of the Trinity, it is important to focus on the *function* of each Person rather than on the *fractions* of each Person, namely: “Is each person a *third* of God or is each *fully* God?”

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