Homilies for the Three Hours
Bristol 2015

First Homily: John 18:1-11

The four Gospels are like four portraits of the same man, each painted by a different artist. Each author has sought to capture the truth about the sitter. But each has done it in his own way.

By receiving all four of the Gospels as inspired, the Church is warning us, I think, against the attempt to flatten the story of Jesus, to homogenise it into one consistent and accessible narrative.

The truth about Jesus's life, and the truth about Jesus's death, is mysterious and multifaceted. It cannot be captured in the work of an individual author, any more than the whole truth about a person can be expressed in a single image.

John was clearly conscious of this. He writes, at the end of his gospel, 'There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.'

John knew, in other words, that his Gospel was not an exhaustive account: there was far more to Jesus than even a close friend such as he could convey.

And since, in God's providence, the story of Jesus has been passed down to us in four distinct narratives, the peculiarities of each Gospel must be significant. For the God of Wisdom does nothing carelessly.

We should therefore attend to these peculiarities, if we are to receive God's word in all its richness. To overlook the distinctiveness of each Gospel account is to bypass the detail in God's self-disclosure. And that way lies fundamentalism.

For many centuries, the Church has directed our attention, on Good Friday, to the Gospel of John.

But as we listen to John's account of the Passion, the solemn cadences of his majestic Prologue should be at the back of our minds. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

The Prologue provides John's reader with the key to understanding Jesus's life. And it tells us that, in Jesus, the divine Word has taken flesh and dwelt among us.

But the Prologue also provides the key to Jesus's death.

'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.'

For John, in other words, the Passion is the climax of a cosmic encounter between light and darkness. It marks the decisive rejection of Jesus both by the world, and by his own people.

But the Passion is also, paradoxically, the supreme manifestation of God's glory.

As Judas Iscariot had scuttled off into the night, his mind abuzz with thoughts of betrayal, Jesus said this to those who remained: 'Now has the Son of Man been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.' These words connect the Passion with another sentence in his Prologue: 'We have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.'

For John, in other words, the Passion displays the divine glory of Jesus, quite as much as the miracle at Cana in Galilee. And that's because, for John, the most glorious miracle of all, is when the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. And that is what happens on Good Friday.

But the divine glory of Jesus shines out of John's Passion narrative from the very moment of the initial arrest.

Judas returns with a large band of soldiers. John tells us they are carrying 'lanterns and torches and weapons.' The weapons are mentioned in the other Gospels: but only John mentions the lights. They are there to make a point.

These men approach through the night, their lamps bobbing and flickering in the darkness. But the one they have come to arrest is, as the Prologue tells us, the 'The true light, which enlightens everyone.' Jesus is 'the Light of the World.' So if these men wish to see, it is to Jesus they should look.

But that is not their intention. As a result, though carrying their torches, they remain blinded by the darkness. As Jesus put it, earlier in the Gospel: 'those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.'

From the outset, Jesus takes the initiative. In the other Gospels, it is Judas who makes the first move: he approaches Jesus to kiss him.

Not so in John. ‘Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him came forward and asked them ‘For whom are you looking?’’

Jesus is not the passive victim of another’s plot. The Word was with God in the beginning and all things come into being through him. So nothing takes place, in this world or the next, that is not initiated by him. Least of all his Passion.

The soldiers answer that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus replies ‘I am he.’ In the Greek, though, his words lack the pronoun: so Jesus actually says ‘I am’.

Now, ‘I am’ is a phrase that has often been on Jesus’s lips in John’s Gospel. ‘I am the bread of life;’ ‘I am the good shepherd;’ ‘I am the true vine;’ ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’

Behind these phrases lies the sacred name of God that was first disclosed to Moses. ‘God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I am has sent me to you.”’

That is why John tells us that the soldiers immediately stepped back and fell to the ground. For Jesus is the great ‘I am.’ He is the Lord of Hosts, who led Israel dry-shod through the sea. All should therefore bow before him.

The little garden in the Kidron Valley thus becomes the new Mount Horeb: a place of epiphany.

This time, however, there is no bush that burns and is not consumed: there is simply a man prepared to die, so that his friends might live. ‘I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.’

Such is God’s glory; and such is God’s grace.

Second Homily: John 18:12-27

‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.’

These words from the Prologue to John’s gospel come into their sharpest focus during his telling of the Passion. And the passage we have just heard opens the account of this fateful rejection.

John tells us that when Jesus told Peter to put up his sword, the soldiers immediately seized him and bound him.

Only John mentions that Jesus was bound at this point. It is a reference to the binding of a sacrificial victim. Psalm 118 verse 27 ‘God is the Lord who has showed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, yea even unto the horns of the altar.’

Jesus is the sacrifice. He is the Lamb of God, whose perfect offering will set us free. And by letting himself be bound by these soldiers, he will release humanity from the bonds of sin. So Jeremiah’s words come true: ‘On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will break the yoke from off his neck, and I will burst his bonds.’

John tells us that Jesus was first taken to meet Annas.

Annas does not appear in the other Gospels; and in John, he is effectively a proxy for Caiaphas, the High Priest; for Annas is only described by his relation to Caiaphas, whereas Caiaphas is referred to in his own right.

The encounter between Jesus and Annas therefore stands for Jesus's confrontation with Jewish religious authority, as embodied by the Temple priesthood.

John makes the point that Caiaphas was the High Priest only for that year.

Originally, High Priests had held their office for life. But after Israel's return from Exile, High Priests were usually appointed by the civil authorities. So they held their office at the monarch's pleasure and were frequently removed.

John is drawing a contrast here, between the precarious High Priesthood of Caiaphas, and the eternal High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. For, as Hebrews reminds us, Jesus 'high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.'

The second thing John underlines is that it was Caiaphas who 'advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.'

Caiaphas gave this advice immediately after Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. The chief priests and the Pharisees were worried that, if they allowed Jesus to continue performing miracles, everyone would come to believe in him, and the Roman authorities would destroy Israel as a result.

In response to such concerns, the politique Caiaphas said this: 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed.'

Caiaphas was a sophisticated statesman. And his first response to a miracle was a brutal exercise in damage limitation.

But God can use even wicked men to serve his purposes. And by His providence, Caiaphas's deadly pragmatism, is transformed into a divine prophecy.

Because Jesus will die for God's people: because by his death, he will destroy death: and through his Gospel, he brings life and immortality to light.

John again parts company with the other Gospel-writers, when he describes the interrogation that Jesus received.

In the other gospels, Jesus is asked whether he is the Messiah: Annas merely questions him in general terms about his teaching and his disciples.

But Jesus refuses to gratify his curiosity. 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.'

With these words, Jesus demolishes the suggestion that the Christian faith is an esoteric religious tradition.

It is not. The gospel is proclaimed publicly. God's Kingdom is open to all. It cannot to be reserved for a privileged few. In fact, the suggestion that it can, is a heresy that would later be known as 'Gnosticism.'

Of course, there are not many self-confessed Gnostics in the Church today. But Gnosticism is a risk, whenever a Christian community develops unspoken rules, or harbours customs that exclude newcomers.

There is practical Gnosticism, for example, wherever the liturgy is hard to follow, unless you know what you're doing; wherever some people are clearly insiders in the congregation, but others are not; wherever sermons give the impression that there is a hidden standard of theological truth, which is different from the wider catholic tradition.

And Jesus's response to Annas is a rebuke to all such forms of ecclesiastical corruption. His teaching is public teaching, to which all may have access; and so must be that of his Church.

But even as Jesus takes his stand on his public teaching, Peter is backing away from it.

John underlines this, by bracketing the interview with Annas with the story of Peter's denial.

Peter, you may remember, told Jesus that he would lay down his life for Jesus. But it only takes the word of a little girl - and John deliberately uses the diminutive form to emphasise her littleness – and his resolve crumbles.

And this new sin, like many sins, soon becomes a habit. One denial, to get into the courtyard, turns into a second, and then a third denial. The sun set on a would-be martyr: it rises on a coward.

Peter's pitiful slide into apostasy is a stark warning against any denial of our faith, whether by word or by deed.

Whatever the pressures, personal, political or professional, our primary loyalty to Jesus Christ cannot become negotiable. For as he said, ‘Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’

Third Homily: John 18:28-end

At the beginning of this passage John refers twice to Pontius Pilate's headquarters – the Praetorium. He is underlining the transition from religious and Jewish authority, to Roman and political authority.

For Jesus rejection by his own people is now complemented by the world's rejection. The Jewish people were represented by Annas: the spokesman for the world is the Roman Governor.

Pilate plays a bigger role in John's account of the Passion, than in any of the others. John ruthlessly exposes Pilate's moral weakness and wickedness. In his hands, Pilate becomes a study in political sin, a man so dominated by the anxieties of office, that he would rather crucify an innocent man, than face down public opinion.

The Jewish leaders do not enter the Praetorum, John tells us, 'so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover.' So these devout people are pressing Pilate for the execution of a guiltless man, but they are anxious not to contract uncleanness as they do so.

These men are truly the blind guides that Jesus condemns in Matthew's gospel: they strain at the gnat of ceremonial purity, but swallow the camel of judicial murder.

It's worth recalling Jesus's own teaching about defilement at this point.

‘Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile? It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these things come from within, and they defile a person.’

So the Jewish leaders are defiled by their intentions, though they scruple to cross a Gentile threshold. Jesus will remain the Holy One of God, even though he goes in.

Pilate goes to meet the Jewish delegation, and asks why they have brought Jesus to him. Their answer is a study in equivocation. ‘If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.’

The word translated ‘criminal’ here means, literally, ‘a doer of what is evil’.

The irony continues. For John has already shown his reader what Jesus has done.

Jesus has given wine to celebrating wedding guests, he has given healing to a paralytic, bread to the hungry crowd, sight to a blind man, and life to a dead friend. As Dean Crossman puts it, in his famous hymn: ‘Sweet injuries! Yet they at these themselves displease and ‘gainst him rise.’

At this point, of course, Pilate should simply have ordered Jesus to be released. Roman Law, like English Law , required a concrete accusation to be made before a trial could begin. And there isn’t one.

But Pilate, just like Caiaphas before him, is more attentive to the dictates of political expedience, than to the call of justice. So he attempts to pass the buck. 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.'

Pilate is clearly reluctant to punish an innocent man himself: but he is quite prepared to turn a blind eye while others do it for him. He has forgotten, apparently, that a moral agent is responsible for the evil done by others, if it is done with his knowledge and consent.

In any case, the Jewish spokesmen are having none of it. Caiaphas was clear: Jesus must die. And since the Jewish authorities cannot impose a death sentence: the Romans must do the killing.

So Pilate's first escape route is blocked; and he enters the Praetorium and questions Jesus himself. 'Are you the King of the Jews?'

Although no clear accusation has been brought against Jesus, there has evidently been a vague suggestion of sedition. And that might give the Roman governor something to work with.

The reader of John's gospel will again see irony here; because the question of Jesus's kingship has been raised before. When Jesus fed the Five Thousand, John records that the people tried to take him by force and make him a king. But Jesus withdrew to a mountain rather than assume such authority.

So Jesus has no desire for worldly power. But at the same time, he cannot simply renounce the language of kingship. Because he is the agent of God's Kingdom; He is the herald of that lasting Kingdom, which you cannot see

unless you are born from above, that Kingdom which you cannot enter, unless you are born of water and Spirit.

So Jesus answers carefully. He makes clear that his kingdom is not a matter of political power, and that it has nothing to do with military force. His answer to Pilate thus reinforces his earlier condemnation of Peter's violence, at the moment of his arrest.

Christ's cause cannot be advanced by physical force.

But Pilate is the embodiment of worldly power, and he cannot grasp the concept of a kingdom without coercion. 'So you are a king?'

Once again, neither a straightforward 'yes' nor a straightforward 'no' will do. And Jesus answers by distinguishing between the dominion of violence, and the dominion of truth: 'I came into the world to testify to the truth.' The truth, of course, compels our assent as soon, as it is recognised: and it does so without wielding a sword.

But Pilate can't make sense of this argument. He is a politician, and for him questions of truth and falsehood are always negotiable. So he remarks, with all the counterfeit wisdom of relativism, 'What is truth?'

Jesus doesn't answer his question here. But the reader of John's Gospel knows what the answer is.

'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

In any case, Pilate doesn't wait for an answer. He has hit upon a solution. He will exercise some crowd-pleasing clemency; that way, he can avoid making any decision about Jesus at all. A worldly mind will always evade the question of faith.

But it doesn't work. 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Barabbas, we are told, was a bandit. And this word, too, has been used before.

'All who came before me are thieves and bandits.... The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

Fourth Homily: John 19:1-16

In the second judgement scene, Pilate's wriggling becomes ever more frantic.

Having explored the possibility of some crowd-pleasing clemency; Pilate now tries some crown-pleasing brutality instead, and orders that Jesus should be flogged.

Remember: Pilate knows that Jesus is innocent. He has publicly stated as much. So he has no excuse for doing this; but when truth and falsehood become negotiable, right and wrong soon follow.

But flogging is rather boring. So, with echoes of Abu Ghraib, the Governor's soldiers decide to play a game. They dress Jesus up in a purple robe. They plait a crown of thorns and place it on his head. They salute him and then strike him.

But the soldiers' mockery is actually another glimpse of Christ's glory. They mean to humiliate. But their actions declare him to be a king nonetheless. God's providence therefore brings good out of evil once again, and turns their cruelty into proclamation.

In the Book of Genesis, of course, thorns are the fruit of human sin. When Adam falls, God says this to him: 'Cursed is the ground because of you, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.'

So by wearing the crown of thorns Jesus is taking on the consequence of sin. He is bearing the punishment which sin has brought. He adopts the guilt human sin, and, by doing so, liberates us from it.

Pilate clearly hopes that this striking combination of humiliation and injury will satisfy the restive mob. He goes outside, and proclaims Jesus's innocence for the second time. '
'Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you know I find no case against him'

He then brings Jesus outside and presents him to the people. John underlines that Jesus is presented while still wearing the robe and the crown of thorns. Pilate then says 'Behold the man!'

This expression is unusual: John wants us to notice it.

It carries an echo of the phrase 'Son of Man,' which, in John, Jesus speaks more sparingly than he does in the other Gospels.

In John, the Son of Man is the one upon whom angels will be glimpsed ascending and descending: he is the ladder between heaven and earth. In John, the Son of Man is the one whom the Father has given to have life in Himself, and who has the authority to execute judgement. And in John, the revelation of the Son of Man will disclose the full divinity of the incarnate Word. 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man lifted up, you shall know that I am.'

All these ideas should be in the back of our minds as we hear Pilate's words.

By calling Jesus simply ‘the Man,’ Pilate is underlining that Jesus is the true model of humanity. For the image of God that we have obscured by our sin, shines forth in this bruised and bloody face.

But the divine image elicits no compassion from the crowd. The chief priests and the Temple police lead the merciless chant: ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

For the third time, and echoing the three denials of Peter in chapter 18, Pilate protests ‘I find no case against him.’ But the crowd will not have it: they quote the Jewish Law to murder the God who gave it to them.

Pilate is fearful. He has realised that the situation is beyond his experience. He takes Jesus inside again to question him again, but without success. So he tries to browbeat him into answering. ‘Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you.’

But Pilate’s boast is empty, and Jesus knows it. ‘You would have no power over me, unless it had been given you from above.’

God is in control here. And as the Book of Proverbs makes clear: The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.’ Pilate will therefore sin, just as others have sinned before. But even this sin will advance the redemptive purpose of God.

Once again, Pilate attempts to get out of this situation. But the crowd have his measure now, and they know the move to checkmate. ‘If you release this man, you are no friend of the Emperor.’

So they present the decision about Jesus, as a choice between Pilate's conscience, and Pilate's career. And that is not choice that Pilate finds difficult.

He brings Jesus outside once again. He sits down on the judge's bench: that symbol of Roman justice. And he prostitutes it.

'Here is your king' 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' 'Shall I crucify your king?''We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

Why, Caesar is their onely King, not I:
He clave the stonie rock, when they were drie;
But surely not their hearts, as I well trie:
Was ever grief like mine?

Fifth Homily: John 19:16-27

There is little doubt, I think, that John knew the tradition that it was Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross to Golgotha. But, as we have heard, he deliberately changes the story, and has Jesus carry the cross himself.

For a modern historian, that would be a rather problematic thing to do. As a profession, we pride ourselves on the factual accuracy of our descriptions.

But a 1st Century writer like John the evangelist worked with rather different rules.

For him, the number one priority was not factual accuracy; it was to convey the nature and significance of the Incarnate Word; it was to encourage his reader to believe in Jesus Christ for their salvation. And every detail he includes, and every detail he alters, is included or changed with that purpose in mind.

When he tells us that Jesus carried the cross himself, John is underlining, as the story reaches its climax, that Jesus is in full control of the situation.

Jesus is not a passive victim of injustice: he willingly embraces the cup which the Father has given him. So, just as he stepped forward to greet his captors in the garden, so he bears his own cross to the place of execution.

But there is another reference here as well. In the Book of Genesis, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. When they arrive at Mount

Moriah, Abraham dismisses his servants. He then loads the wood for the burnt offering in his son's back, and Isaac carries it to the place of sacrifice himself.

John is telling us that the story of Isaac foreshadows the story of Jesus.

But there is, of course, a key difference. Isaac escapes: for God provides a ram as a substitute.

But in Jesus's case, there can be no substitute. Only a human can pay for our sins, and only God can bear that price. So the Father permits his beloved Son to die, to ransom the very people who have rejected Him.

In the other Gospels, the crucifixion is a scene of mockery. Passers-by deride Jesus for saying he will destroy the Temple in three days. The chief priests and the scribes challenge him to come down from the cross.

Not so in John. This is a sacred moment for him: nothing is allowed to detract from its significance. For that significance is truly universal.

That is why John has the title on the cross written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. The death of Jesus Christ has bearing upon the whole human race. No one is untouched by it: so no one should be left ignorant of it.

The title on the cross thus foreshadows the worldwide proclamation of the Christian Gospel. Jesus must be proclaimed as king in every nation: because he must be acknowledged as king in every human heart. As Jesus prophesied to the Greeks who sought him out: 'And I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'

All the gospels record that the soldiers cast lots for Jesus's clothing. John alone makes the explicit link with Psalm 22 verse 18: 'They divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothes they cast lots.'

Prophecy has been a factor from the beginning of the Passion narrative. But until now, the prophetic voice has been Jesus's own: his prediction that none of his disciples would be lost; his prediction of the kind of death he was to die.

As the story moves to its climax, however, John calls directly on the Old Testament to explain what is happening. He wants to show us that Jesus's death on the cross was the fulfilment of God's redemptive plan, that it was the consummation of Israel's history and the realisation of her ancient hope.

For John, therefore, nothing that happens to Jesus happens by accident. Every single movement in the Passion reflects God's perfect and unchanging will.

And it is God's will that, from the death of Jesus, a new nation should be born: the new Israel of the Christian Church

That is why John records Jesus's words to his disciple and to his mother. 'Woman, here is your son;' and 'Here is your mother.'

With these words, Jesus has instituted an new set of relationships: a set of relationships that now takes priority over all the ties of family and kin. From now on, Christians are more closely related to their fellow Christians than they are to their blood relatives.

For all those who believe in Jesus have become the children of God. They are therefore brothers and sisters, who have been born, John tells us, ‘not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.’

Christians therefore enjoy a spiritual union with each other, which is deeper and more significant than a physical or worldly relationship. And that relationship comes with a responsibility: the responsibility to offer the hospitality of our homes, and our hearts, to all who bear Christ’s name.

‘Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Sixth Homily: John 19:28-end

In John's Gospel, the last words that Jesus speaks, before he dies, are these: 'It is finished.'

In Greek, this phrase carries a particular weight. Because it does not mean simply: 'It is over' or 'It is ended'. It means: 'It is completed;' 'It is accomplished;' 'It is fulfilled.'

To put it another way, the finality John has is mind here, is not simply a matter of termination; it is a matter of completion and of perfection.

So this is the kind of ending that is also a beginning.

'It is finished' is what a potter might say, as she steps back from her bowl. It is what a composer might say, after writing the final bar of a new symphony. It is what a pregnant woman might say, once her child has been safely delivered.

And the variety of uses for this phrase, underlines another aspect of Jesus's last word in John's Gospel: namely its openness, its ambiguity.

Jesus does not tell us what exactly has been completed. He simply tells us that his death is a moment of completion. And we are left to ponder what kind of completion or he has in mind.

There are, of course, a number of possibilities. And the cryptic nature of Jesus's final utterance underlines the astonishing polyvalence of the cross.

For the death of Jesus accomplishes many different things. There is no one interpretation of Jesus's death that can explain it comprehensively, or exhaust it of significance.

The death of Christ is a mystery: in fact, it is the greatest mystery that the universe contains. The human mind can circle about it with wonder. We can catch glimpses of the truth. But only the infinite mind of God can see the whole picture.

And that is hardly surprising, because this death is the death of the incarnate Word. This death is the death of a man who was also God.

This is therefore a death that shakes Creation to its foundations. Adoration should come more readily here, than explanation. But as rational creatures, we search for understanding. And we cannot encounter God without speaking of him.

So let us explore tentatively, and with reverence, the dimensions of this great finishing. For it is a finishing every bit as marvellous as the completion of the first creation. And no wonder: for it marks the beginning of the second.

The first finishing we can perceive here, is the completion of Christ's sacrifice.

When John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time, he says this: 'Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'

At the moment of Christ's death, John reminds us of that identification, using two significant details.

When Jesus says ‘I am thirsty,’ wine is held to his mouth, we are told, on a branch of hyssop. And hyssop that was the plant, that was used to sprinkle the blood of a slaughtered lamb, on the lintels of Jewish houses for Passover.

Then, as you heard, the Jewish people asked that the bodies of the crucified men should not be left on their crosses, during the Sabbath. So Pilate sent a soldier to break their legs, an injury which would hasten their deaths. But the solider discovers that Jesus is already dead. So, rather than breaking his legs, he thrusts a spear into his side to make sure he’s not faking.

John tells us that this happened to fulfill the scripture: ‘None of his bones shall be broken.’ But you won’t find that verse anywhere in the Prophets.

It is actually an instruction from the Book of Numbers: ‘They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it: according to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it.’

So the fact that Jesus’s legs were not broken is yet another allusion to the Passover Lamb.

With these two references, John is reminding us of what the Baptist said at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

He is reminding us that Jesus is the Lamb of God. He is reminding us that this death is the perfect sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. So, when Jesus says ‘It is finished,’ we know that his work of atonement has been completed.

As Paul wrote, in Colossians, ‘In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.’

‘It is finished’ means that you have been freed from the burden of your sin.

‘It is finished’ means that you can approach God with boldness, for despite all your shortcomings, he delights to hear our prayers.

‘It is finished’ means that, no matter what evil you have done in the past, no matter what evil you may do in the future, God loves you, and forgives you, and longs for you to return to Him.

But since the death of Jesus marks the completion of his sacrifice, it also marks the high point of his disclosure of God.

In the prologue to the gospel, John writes this: ‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.’

And when Jesus dies to take away our sins, he demonstrates, once and for all, that love is the ultimate truth about God. For it is the fact that God became a human being, to die for our salvation, which demonstrates that ‘love’ is indeed the best word for God’s nature.

Without the cross, we may realise that God exists. Without the cross, we may work out that God is infinite, and eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing. The existence of the Universe should get us that far.

But, without the cross, any claim that God is loving, remains without rational foundation. For it is only through the cross of Jesus, that God manifests the ultimate, unconditional, commitment to His creatures, which we call love.

Our redemption through the death of Christ is, therefore, 'the measure and the pledge of love.' Or as John puts it, in words I quoted last night, 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.'

The cross is the apogee of revelation. Everything that went before it is preparation. Everything that follows after it is consequence. For there is no truer or more intimate knowledge of God, than the love which a Christian glimpses at Golgotha.

And since the cross is thus the zenith of divine disclosure, it also marks the fulfilment of the Old Covenent.

All the sacrifices of the Jewish Law point forward to this moment. They were the types and shadows of the sacrifice of Christ.

In the death of Jesus, therefore, their meaning is complete; henceforth, they can be laid aside. For when the Lamb of God has been slain, there is no further need of the Passover lamb that foretold him.

But even as it renders otiose the rites of the Old Covenant, the cross initiates, and empowers the rites of the New.

When the soldier pierces Jesus's side, John tells us that blood and water came out.

This was not simply a physiological phenomenon. The blood and the water are symbolic; they stand for the two sacraments of the New Covenant: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
And John is telling us that the meaning and power of both these sacraments flow directly from the cross.

The Apostle Paul made the same point. In Romans, he writes this: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.' And in I Corinthians, he writes this 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both commemorations, they are both applications, of the death of Jesus Christ. They derive their power to transform humanity from his one perfect sacrifice. They are the life-giving fruit of the tree of glory.

'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever: and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

The vital power of the Christian sacraments points us to the final completion that we can perceive today: the ending of the power of death.

When Jesus dies on the cross, God embraces the absolute extremity of the human condition. Not even death can now exclude his saving presence.

That is why, in John, the grave of Jesus is a place of overpowering fragrance.

Nicodemus, remember, brought a hundred pounds weight of myrrh and aloes, and wrapped it in the shroud with Jesus's body. Such extravagance far exceeds the pound of perfume that Mary used to wash Jesus feet. It must have made Jesus's grave as fragrant as a spice market.

John is telling us, of course, that the death of Jesus has transformed the human grave. A tomb is not a place of decay for Christians, it is a place of hope. It is not a place of regret, it is a place of anticipation.

The heady scent of Jesus's tomb is, therefore, a sign of the resurrection. For, in the death of Jesus Christ, the seeds of eternal life have already been planted.