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The Portrait and Character of Jesus in the Lukan Passion Narrative^①

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Barbara Bowe, RSCJ

The Company We Keep

Conventional wisdom claims that we can learn much about a person from observing the company he or she keeps. To whom do we give time? With whom do we enter into dialogue? For whom do we extend benevolent wishes and from whom do we receive mutual kindness? If this insight of conventional wisdom is correct, and I believe it is, we can discover the particular Lukan portrait of Jesus in the passion story by attending to those characters with whom Jesus interacts, and from that observation we can see his character and attitudes revealed in his interaction with others.

How the Gospel Stories Developed

Many believe that the story of Jesus' life, public ministry, and the circumstances surrounding his death began to take written form "backward," that is, the passion story was perhaps the earliest part to take shape in written form. And Mark^② was the first evangelist^③ to shape this story on which the gospels of Matthew^④ and Luke^⑤ modeled theirs. Even though each of the evangelists wanted to preserve accurately the oral memory of the community, each also had a particular perspective and theological vision that shaped how they told the story and what they each chose to emphasize. That claim explains why we find sometimes different details and unique emphases in the various gospels. It also makes clear our need for the four different gospel portraits of Jesus rather than just one in order to see the full picture of his life and mission.

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The Agony in the Garden, from the Armenian Gospels of Gladzor (p. 160), fourteenth century.

Using this conventional wisdom, then, we look through the lens of the persons with whom Jesus interacts in order to see his attitudes and character developed in his own unique way by Luke. I choose persons with whom Jesus freely interacts and to whom, in some cases, he speaks directly. I leave aside the crowd who arrest him and the interrogators who question him because his encounter with them was not freely chosen but dictated by the circumstances of his situation.

Friends in the Garden

In each of the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Jesus' passion begins with his agonizing prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. These gospels tell us that he brought with him some of his disciples (Luke does not name which ones; perhaps their anonymity is meant to allow all readers to see *themselves* in that role) and asked them to watch and pray with him. This detail, though not unique to Luke, presents a very human desire and need of Jesus—to have human companionship and support in his darkest moments. And when the disciples fail, as we often do as well, we see in Jesus not condemnation and reprimand but instead understanding and encouragement. A similar point marks the uniquely Lukan parable about the Lost Son and the gracious father (Luke 15). Just when we expect the father to scold his son for squandering his inheritance, he instead embraces him and welcomes him back with forgiveness and love, just as Jesus does in the garden toward his sleeping disciples.

Again in the garden he gives them a second chance and pleads with them to watch and pray that they may not come into the time of trial (Luke 22:39-46). This scene in Gethsemane paints a very poignant picture of Jesus begging his disciples just to be with him. How many times have we experienced a similar desire—for companionship in times of distress and anxiety? The humanness of Jesus shines out in this moment, even at the time of the giving over of his life for the world. In keeping company with these fallible disciples Jesus shows us that he will be with us, even if we sometimes fail or drift apart from him.

The Grieving Women

It must have been an alarming spectacle in the streets of Jerusalem for the crowds to see soldiers leading a man—beaten and bleeding profusely—to his death by crucifixion. As they moved through the crowded streets I am sure there was hardly time or occasion to speak to the man. And yet the gospel of Luke alone describes a crowd of women—Jesus calls them “daughters of Jerusalem”—who wept and performed the customary grieving duties proper to women in Palestinian culture. On the social scale [see this issue's article by Carolyn Osiek] they were unimportant. And yet Jesus turned toward them and spoke. Even in the midst of his agony he consid-

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ered these women worthy of his attention. Jesus' words to them shift their focus from this present agony to a future time when, he warns them, they must weep for themselves and their children. By his words Jesus engages the women in theological issues. He respects them and proposes new perspectives for them to consider.

In this exchange with the women we see again the man Jesus stopping in the midst of his own suffering to speak to this group of women a word of warning and counsel. Keeping company with them, even for a brief moment, Jesus, as described by Luke, reveals his attentiveness to human grief and need. By speaking directly to the women he acknowledges their dignity and offers

them a word of guidance. A similar detail in Luke 7:11-17 marks the story of Jesus' raising of the son of the widow of Nain. Again, as with the Jerusalem women, Jesus is moved with compassion at the

woman's grief. "Do not weep," Jesus tells her, just as he will tell the "daughters of Jerusalem." Here is another example of the consistency with which Luke portrays the character and attitudes of Jesus throughout the gospel so that the passion story does not introduce entirely new features of this portrait but continues the portrait of Jesus sketched throughout the gospel.

Luke continues to show Jesus as gracious and forgiving, even in his suffering.

Forgiveness and Consolation to Soldiers and Criminals

With a supreme act of graciousness, Jesus extends forgiveness to those who torture and kill him. Speaking to the One he called "Abba," he begs for forgiveness for them because "they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). He does not speak directly to the soldiers, but begs forgiveness for them nonetheless, thinking of others, even his torturers, to the end. [See the article on Roman soldiers by Laurie Brink.] This detail is unique to Luke's portrait, but it is consistent with the emphasis on forgiveness throughout the gospel, as is clear, for example, from the petition of the Lord's prayer, given to the disciples as a guide for life, "and forgive us our sins." Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is generally judged to be closest to the original and contains a strong emphasis on the forgiveness of sins. A similar emphasis occurs in the again uniquely Lukan story in Luke 7, where Jesus forgives the so-called "sinful woman" who weeps on and anoints his feet at the supper. Therefore attentive readers of the gospel should not be surprised that Jesus extends forgiveness even here at the cross, and even to his own executioners.

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But, to be sure, the most surprising exchange is that between Jesus and his fellow criminals enduring crucifixion as he is. There could be no more despicable characters than the other criminals in their taunting of Jesus to “save yourself” and “come down from the cross” (Luke 23:40). But in a moment of desperation and with a hint of the beginnings of belief in Jesus one criminal begs him: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). And Jesus’ words in reply offer reassurance and hope to the man: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” In this exchange again Jesus reveals a heart of compassion leaning especially toward the outcasts, and even to common criminals.

If we return to the claim of conventional wisdom that we learn a great deal about a person by observing the company he or she keeps, then in the Lukan passion story we see Jesus keeping company with and speaking to

the fallible disciples in the garden, to the women of Jerusalem, in their hearing offering forgiveness to his own torturers, and extending hope to the criminals crucified with him. These are not exactly the social elite of his day. By the

Jesus models for us the way to live our full humanity as intended by God.

standards of social custom they are unimportant people, without social status and yet the object of Jesus’ attention and care. Jesus’ character is carefully sketched by Luke to demonstrate his abundant compassion, his limitless offer of forgiveness, and his deep empathy with the women grieving at his death. The tenderness in each of these examples is striking. All who hear this gospel story receive consolation and hope from this portrait and can be certain of God’s favorable care for them to the end.

The One Constant Companion

Jesus’ final words from the cross, as told uniquely by Luke, speak of the One with whom Jesus kept constant company—his Abba, to whom he serenely speaks from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Just as the passion had started in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus cried out to God to save him, so here at the end there is in Luke’s telling a diminished sense of despair and abandonment. Certainly the picture is not drawn as starkly as in Mark’s gospel, where it seems as if at the moment of his death Jesus experienced the terrifying absence of God. Instead, for Luke there is certainty of God’s abiding presence with Jesus so that even at the last moment Jesus can freely surrender himself into the gracious hands of God, with confidence that he will be received with tenderness and love. Just as Jesus throughout his

public ministry had taken time at important moments to go away and pray to his Father, and just as he had sought out quiet times and spaces in which to be in communion with his Father, so on the cross, Luke is certain, God's intimate presence never left Jesus. By this example of confidence Jesus displays, we too can rest in the certainty that God will never abandon us. We see in Jesus qualities and characteristics we are meant to imitate in our own lives.

In this way the gospels serve at least two separate purposes. They give us the story of Jesus' life and death so that we can be drawn closer into discipleship as followers of Jesus, hearing his teaching and witnessing his extraordinary deeds. But the gospels are real narratives in which many characters interact. As is the case with any good story, readers or hearers of the gospel are naturally drawn to identify with certain characters who are models for their own lives. To the same extent some characters embody those negative characteristics to be avoided, such as the older brother in the parable of the Lost Son who shows no compassion for his brother but selfishly thinks only of himself.

With the character of Jesus, however, we have the perfect model of one who is so at one with God that he radiates the very qualities of God: compassion, forgiveness, graciousness, empathy, care for all people with no exceptions. In human form Jesus shows us how to live our own humanity as God intends. Repeated and careful pondering of the gospels, therefore, provides direction for how to live well as children of God. Through the many characters, good and bad, we see concrete positive and negative examples for our lives.

Barbara E. Bowe, RSCJ, holds a doctorate in New Testament and Christian Origins from Harvard University. She taught for three years at Maryhill School of Theology in Manila, the Philippines, and is currently professor of New Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Her most recent book is *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality* (Sheed & Ward, 2003).

