

Life of Christ, Part 4: Jesus' ministry continues

This is the [fourth in a 12-part series](#) looking at the life of Christ.

Everyday speech describes self-giving in a variety of ways – “He gives 100% to the team,” “She’s totally devoted to her family,” and lots more. But although these expressions and others like them tell us something about the commitment lived out by Jesus Christ, all fall short of expressing its uniqueness in the end.

Jesus didn’t just busy himself with serving others, although he certainly did that. The great cause for which he gave his life was forging a new covenant bonding with humanity and God, with himself as its mediator and content. “To believe in a Christ so understood,” said Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, “means simply to make love the content of faith, so that from this angle one can perfectly well say, love is faith.”

Jesus’ public ministry, reaching its culmination in his crucifixion and death, was how he went about doing that.

The first of his ‘signs’

Returning to Galilee after his baptism and his tempting by Satan, Jesus, accompanied by unnamed disciples, went with his mother to a wedding celebration in Cana, a village near Nazareth. Well into the celebration, the wine ran dry – a potentially serious embarrassment to the newly married couple. Mary, seeing their problem, quietly says to her son, “They have no wine.” Understanding the implied request, he answers, “My hour has not yet come” – it wasn’t yet the time for working miracles.

But Mary, undaunted, tells the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” And Jesus, having decided to oblige his mother, instructs them to fill six stone jars, each holding 20 to 30 gallons, with water. The servants accordingly filled them “up to the brim.”

When the steward of the feast tasted the contents, he scolded the bridegroom: Instead of serving the good wine first, he complains, “you have kept the good wine till now.” But why so much wine – far more than the guests at this wedding could possibly drink? The answer should be obvious: God bestows his gifts with overflowing generosity (Jn 2:1-12).

This, John’s Gospel tells us, was “the first of his signs” – “sign” being the word John uses for Jesus’ miracles as public manifestations of his identity, as Jesus himself says: “The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me” (Jn 5:36).

And so Jesus’ public ministry commenced. How long did it last? Probably a little over two years, but the Gospels’ evidence is not entirely clear. However long it was, a great deal began happening in what was to be, after all, a very short time.

Cleansing of the Temple

From Cana, Jesus went to Capernaum, which now became his base of operations in Galilee. Capernaum was a bustling town on the northwestern shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee and later as the Sea of Tiberias (a very small “sea,” however, since a boat could make the crossing from one side to the other in half an hour or so). And now, Matthew reports, “Jesus began to preach, and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Mt 4:17).

The synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – focus mostly on Christ’s preaching and teaching in Galilee. But John’s

Gospel is set largely in Jerusalem, and stresses Jesus' growing conflict with the Jewish religious authorities. It also shows Jesus traveling several times to Jerusalem for major Jewish feasts, something a pious Jew might be expected to do.

Now, with the Passover approaching, Jesus made the two-day journey once again, and, according to John, the cleansing of the Temple then took place. But that raises a question, as the synoptics place this event at the start of Passion Week. In both cases, the timing carries important symbolic weight: if near the start of the public ministry, as a declaration of Jesus' identity and mission; if at the start of Passion Week, as a sign of his challenge to the religious establishment.

Whenever it happened, the Christ of the cleansing is far from the stereotypical "gentle Jesus," as he wields a whip of cords to drive out sellers of oxen and sheep and pigeons (animals used in sacrifice) and overturns the tables of the money-changers. Onlookers demand an explanation. And he replied with a prediction of his death and resurrection – "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Clearly he made an impression. "Many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs which he did" (Jn 2:13-23).

Spiritual enlightenment

Next, John reports two vivid dialogues – a distinctive feature of this Gospel showing Jesus leading someone up an inclined plane of spiritual enlightenment. In the first, a well-to-do Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, comes to Jesus "by night" – a sign of reluctance to be seen consulting this upstart from Galilee. Rather pompously, he begins, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God." But Jesus interrupts: "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus naturally objects: "How can a person once grown be

born when he is old?" Brushing that aside, Jesus speaks of the activity of the Spirit, adding that the Spirit, like the wind, "blows where it wills." And when Nicodemus continues to protest, he points to his coming death and resurrection, adding that belief in him is the key to eternal life. Whether the conversation ended there or not, we don't know. But, as we shall see, Nicodemus was to take the stage later as one who had come to believe in Christ (Jn 3:1-15).

Baptizing

Leaving Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside and began baptizing. (The author later specifies that it wasn't Jesus himself who baptized but his disciples.) The followers of John the Baptist were irritated by what they took for competition, but not John. "He must increase but I must decrease," he comments on hearing the news. Soon after, John was arrested at Herod's command. Jesus, learning what had happened, then resumed his journey back to Galilee.

Woman at the well

Nearing a Samaritan town called Sychar, he pauses to rest at a field that according to tradition was given by the patriarch Jacob to his son Joseph. Noticing a woman drawing water from the well, he asks her for a drink. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans is apparent in her reply: "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

If you knew who I am, Jesus answers mildly, you would have asked for and received "living water." After more back and forth, during which Jesus exhibits uncanny familiarity with the woman's unsavory past, he tells her that true worship of God is worship "in Spirit and truth." The woman exclaims: "I know that Messiah is coming ... he will tell us everything." To which Jesus replies simply: "I am he, the one who is speaking with you."

Full of wonder, the woman runs off to summon others. When his disciples return with provisions, Jesus says: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to finish his work." He stayed in Sychar for two days, and during that time "many more began to believe in him because of his word" (Jn 4: 1-42).

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Wedding feast at Cana in the Catechism

In speaking of Mary's role in the Church, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2618, says: "The Gospel reveals to us how Mary prays and intercedes in faith. At Cana, the mother of Jesus asks her son for the needs of a wedding feast; this is the sign of another feast – that of the wedding of the Lamb where he gives his body and blood at the request of the Church, his Bride. It is at the hour of the New Covenant, at the foot of the cross, that Mary is heard as the Woman, the new Eve, the true 'Mother of all the living.'"

Pertaining to the Eucharist, the Catechism, in No. 1335, says: "The sign of water turned into wine at Cana already announces the Hour of Jesus' glorification. It makes manifest the fulfillment of the wedding feast in the Father's kingdom, where the faithful will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ."