



Research article

God in the Midst of Pandemic COVID-19: Reflections based on John 5:1-18¹

Johnson Thomaskutty

Professor of New Testament, The United Theological College, Bangalore

Emails: jesusandjohnson@gmail.com Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2021.3401>

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17-10-2021

Accepted 15-11-2021

Available online: 30-12-2021

Keywords: *Gospel of John; quarantine; social isolation; healing; cleansing; life camp; COVID-19*

ABSTRACT

This reflection is an attempt to foreground the message of John 5:1-18 in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic context. A contextual interpretation of the passage provides us several new insights and a new perspective that takes into account the struggles of the people and other existential realities. The invalid person who was lying by the pool of Bethesda undergoes a breathless situation as he was undergoing continuous frustration over a period of 38 long years. Though he was ill, enduring a prolonged quarantine, living in social isolation, widely treated as unclean, and resilient to the situation of a 'life camp,' Jesus liberated his life from clutches and transformed him toward a hopeful future age. In today's context, the healed man's story can be considered as a paradigm for the church to follow the words and deeds of Jesus and to engage in the ministry of liberation and transformation. Moreover, the story provides hope for all who are undergoing untoward situations in life during the COVID-19 pandemic context. The man stands tall as a representative of the afflicted, persecuted, and the dehumanized sections of our society. The transformation happened in his life can be considered as a paradigm in the contemporary human situations.

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article ©2021 Published by VEDA Publications

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

¹ This is an edited version of a sermon preached during the Sunday Community Worship Service of The United Theological College, Bengaluru, on 18th July 2021.



Introduction

July 18 is recognized as the Nelson Mandela International Day! UN Website says: “On 18th July every year, we invite you to mark Nelson Mandela International Day by making a difference in your communities. Everyone has the ability and the responsibility to change the world for the better! Mandela Day is an occasion for all to take action and inspire change.”² Mandela said: “It is easy to break down and destroy. The heroes are those who make peace and build.” This is an apt introduction for us to pang deep into John 5:1-18. As Mandela was emphasizing the aspects of changing the community for better, serving humanity and the world at large, making peace and building the community, we need to see how Jesus was involved in change-making, serving humanity and peace-building during the first century Jewish context. By keeping the paradigms of Jesus and Nelson Mandela, it is our responsibility to build people during this pandemic COVID-19 situation.

The pandemic Covid-19 situation persuades a reader of the Fourth Gospel to interpret the Scripture in new lights. In the contemporary context, the Gospel of John has the potential to attune the attention of the reader toward the existential struggles of the people with myriad interpretative possibilities. The Jews often twinned *sinfulness* and *sickness* together and in that light they considered Jesus as a *social sinner* and his followers as a *diseased community*. The Johannine narrator realigns the struggles of the *early church situation* dynamically within the *situation of Jesus* to present the narrator’s defensive rhetoric. The Johannine community was comprised of those who suffered quarantine, social isolation, sicknesses, resource deficiencies, and continuous cleansing processes in the socio-religious and politico-cultural setting of their life. Jesus as the creator of the universe and the giver of life provided them hope in the midst of breathlessness and suffering and liberated them from the clutches of dehumanization and marginalization. As the community was suffering from breathless situations in life, Jesus came to breathe the breath and life in abundance in their lives. By keeping this framework in mind, let us see the story of the man in John 5:1-18. I would like to delineate 5 significant narrative aspects of the story.

A Quarantine Narrative

The Covid-19 situation forces many people to undergo a period of quarantine. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines quarantine as “a period of time during which an animal or person that might have a disease is kept away from other people or animals so that the disease cannot spread.”³ The Jews often considered illness as a consequence of people’s sinfulness. As the Covid-19 patients suffer from shortness of breath and other related problems, a reader of the Fourth Gospel can understand the life-and-death situations of people both in the Johannine community and in the contemporary global context. As sinfulness was metaphorically

² <https://www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/>, accessed on 17th July 2021.

³ Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines quarantine in the following way: “separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.” See <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html>, accessed on 1 October 2020.



considered a pandemic, illness was also considered a universal phenomenon.⁴ Those who come in a closer relationship with the diseased are also considered sinful (9:16, 24). Jesus breaks the traditional Sabbath regulations and takes steps to visit a quarantine centre. This story foregrounds the Johannine community ethos and its ministerial focus even toward the quarantine centers (5:1-17).

During Biblical times, quarantine was strictly observed. Mosaic Law gives instructions concerning people with infectious diseases. Lev 13:46 states that as long as a person has infectious disease s/he remains unclean, must live alone, and must live outside the camp. 2 Kings 7:3 warns that people with leprosy were put out of the city gate. A similar situation is narrated in the Fourth Gospel. In Biblical times, a disabled person was not treated as ‘unclean’ as in the case of a leper or a person with infectious disease. But John’s story gives us an indication that even the disabled people were put together in seclusion. The location here is: “in Jerusalem,” “near the Sheep Gate” and “by the pool of Bethesda” (5:2).⁵ The narrator states that “a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed” (5:3). Though the water is adjacent, Jesus’ interlocutor is unable to take advantage of the miraculous medication. His situation is a prolonged quarantine of 38 years.⁶ He was considered ‘unworthy’ as he was dumped into this situation; he spent 38 years among ‘other disabled’ (hence, his thought-world was shaped accordingly); and he was put ‘outside’ the mainstream society (so, he was a marginalized person).⁷ Jesus transforms his life from *a situation of deadly and breathless nature to a situation of life*.⁸ The church in today’s context should emphasize human transformation and help the diseased to overcome the difficult situations. The church should function as body of Christ that breathes life in a breathless situation.

A Social Isolation Narrative

During the Covid-19 period, people are forced to live in isolation. Shortness of breath and other related symptoms affect the respiratory systems and those lead people to severe health problems and death. The Government and the community regulations instruct everybody to keep away from physical interactions and social gatherings. In the Jewish context, both the so-called ‘sinful’ and the ‘diseased’ were isolated from the mainstream society. The invalid person and the other diseased were dumped to that situation as the man explains: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up” (5:1-2, 7).⁹ The invalid person

⁴ Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 150-152.

⁵ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 71-72.

⁶ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 73-75.

⁷ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 73-75.

⁸ Kanagaraj states that, “Here the word ‘sin’ is not referring to unbelief or rejection of God’s self-revelation in Jesus, as it does in other parts of the Gospel. Rather, Jesus is here speaking of evil acts and moral failure, which are themselves rooted in unbelief.” See Jey J. Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Secunderabad: OM Books, 2005), 172.

⁹ Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 108-110.



(5:1-17) exemplifies the struggles of the early Christian community members. As he was considered 'sinful,' he was also counted as 'diseased.'

Counted as a *social sinner* and hence a *diseased*, Jesus also had to undergo social isolation on multifarious occasions. The coming of Nicodemus to Jesus *by night* (3:2) can be an indication that there was a ban on Jesus and hence people were not allowed to associate with Jesus.¹⁰ Some of the gatherings of Jesus were organized in remote places (6:1-15).¹¹ The narrator of the story states that Jesus went to the festival of the Tabernacles "not publicly but as it were in secret" (7:10).¹² Jesus' social isolation is further exemplified as Jesus takes the disciples along and goes across the Kidron Valley (18:1).¹³ As a friend of the sinners (5:1-17; 9:28-34), a blasphemer (8:58-59), and a Sabbath breaker (5:1-17; 9:1-41), Jesus was considered a *sinner* and a socio-religiously *diseased* personality. Thus, Jesus was marginalized into a situation of breathlessness and isolation. Such an *isolated* Jesus comes to rescue this invalid person from his *social isolation*. One who really underwent social isolation can understand the similar situation of another person. Jesus was qualified to rescue this man due to their common social experiences.

A Healing Narrative

During the pandemic Covid-19 period, people are affected by various socio-political and religio-cultural issues. At present, people's physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and financial areas are under deterioration. It is in this context the universalistic message of the Fourth Gospel functions as a narrative rhetoric with profound persuasion. The Johannine community was comprised of people who were deprived of their rights and privileges due to their association with the so-called socio-religious *sinner* Jesus.¹⁴ As Jesus emphasized a ministry of healing, the Johannine community was expected to get involved in holistic healing.

In the story, the man is addressed as an *invalid* (5:3) person. As a man who was *lying there* for a long span of time and was *unwell*, the narrator invites the attention of the reader toward his emotional pain and social stigma (5:6).¹⁵ When he says that *I have no one*, his isolated position all through the thirty-eight years is brought to the foregrounded (5:7a). When he says *someone else steps down ahead of me*, he delineates his continuous frustration (5:7b).¹⁶ His prolonged quarantine experience is transformed as moments of joy when Jesus intervened in his life. The miraculous power of Jesus over the creation is exemplified through this narrative.

¹⁰ Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, 108.

¹¹ Kanagaraj, *The Gospel of John*, 191-197.

¹² Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 132.

¹³ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 321-322.

¹⁴ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*.

¹⁵ Brant, *John*, 103.

¹⁶ Brant, *John*, 103-104.



The Johannine community was exemplifying its identity as a wounded but at the same time a healing group. The healer Jesus as one who breathes life was placed at the centre stage in their interpretative endeavors. As a community of healing, they exemplified themselves as a sign or a *sēmeion* to the world outside. During this pandemic Covid-19 period, the church should stand on the principles of Jesus and also on the Johannine community ethos to show its identity as a sign to the world and as a community of holistic care and healing.

A Cleansing Narrative

Using masks, sanitizers, soaps, disinfectants, towels, gloves, and Dettol became customary during this pandemic Covid-19 context than ever before. Now hand washing, regular body washing and cleansing the surroundings receive more attention in our day-to-day routine. People pay more attention on cleaning and disinfection of laundry, bathrooms, kitchen and communal canteens, and waste provinces. More water is required in this cleansing process. Johannine theology and community practices take our attention toward several cleansing processes. Water is at the heart of the Fourth Gospel. As John presents water as an element of cleansing and transformation, the readers can understand its symbolical value within the narrative framework.

The narrator of the story cautions us to use the material water for outward cleansing and the living water for internal transformation. The man who was lying by the pool was unable to get the power of healing. When he met Jesus, he started to receive the words of eternal life and the water of life for his internal transformation and also for his external purification. By Jesus' presence and involvement near the pool of Bethesda, the man is externally purified and internally sanctified. In today's context, we need to be internally sanctified as men and women of God and externally purified by keeping the COVID-19 protocol. We need to make the world aware so that all might be purified externally and sanctified internally.

A 'Life Camp' Narrative

During the Covid-19 period, a large number of life/refugee camps are facilitated in different parts of the world in order to cherish life. While the life of people is at risk, these camps function as centers of hope and rejuvenation. The Johannine community was at risk of life as the mainstream society attempted to eliminate the group; but the narrator of the story comforts the community with the message of abundant life. Jesus appears in the Gospel as the source of life.¹⁷ In John, life/eternal life is not limited to a future age, but it is accessible 'here and now' for those who believe in Jesus (3:15-18, 36; 5:24).¹⁸ The metaphor of water is used in relation to the experience of eternal life (4:14).¹⁹ The Jews understand that through diligent study of the scripture one can receive eternal life (5:39; 6:63).²⁰

¹⁷ John 1:4; 5:21, 26, 40; 6:33.

¹⁸ See D. H. Johnson, "Life," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 469.

¹⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 136-137.

²⁰ See Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 180-181.



Jesus says to the person: “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” A transition from his position of *lying on a mat* to a position of *standing up, taking up the mat, and walking* amply demonstrate that he was invited from a *dying and breathless situation* to a *living and eternal life experience*. In 5:11, the person testifies to the Jews that Jesus *made him well*. This further informs us that he was moved from an *unwell* situation to a *well-to-do* position. Later on, Jesus tells him “you have been made well” (v. 14). As the man was brought from a *lying* position to a *stand up* position and from an *unwell* to a *made well* situation, the man started experiencing life in abundance in the presence of God. He became a follower of Jesus and a member of the Johannine community. As a follower of Jesus, he started to experience life in abundance; and as a member of the Johannine community, he felt that he is in a *life camp* where life is cherished. As the Christian community, we have a greater social responsibility to cherish life in all its worth during this pandemic COVID-19 situation. We need to do that all we can do during this turbulent situation.

Implication and Conclusion

The Jesus movement and the Johannine community teach us the following lessons in managing the current crisis situation: first, belief in the Creator God and in the Pre-existent *Logos* should be facilitated irrespective of all sorts of challenging situations during the pandemic COVID-19; second, the church should involve as a community to comfort and heal people who are in quarantine; third, the people of God should get involved in the transforming mission to rescue the secluded and to feed the hungry; fourth, the church should remain as a community of healing both in the physical and in the emotional and psychological areas of human and other created order; fifth, the community of God should teach the afflicted to trust in God even in the midst of deficiencies and promote charity and protection of life; sixth, the believing community should remain as an agent of sanctification both in the physical and in the spiritual levels of human life; and seventh, the members of the body of Christ should reiterate the voice of God in the world to protect human life and to spread the good news of abundant life in Christ. The message of John helps the readers to understand the role and status of Jesus and the Johannine community in breathing the breath of God. As Jesus remained as a change-maker, a social reformer, and a peace-builder in the first century Jewish context, as Nelson Mandela implemented Jesus’ model in the South African context, as Gandhiji adopted the non-violent, Satyagraha, and servant-leader model in the Indian context, and as Martin Luther King Junior foregrounded the ethos and pathos of the Jesus community in the North American context, let us go and do likewise. Let us function as agents of transformation during this quarantine, social isolation, diseased, unclean, and breathless situations in life as Jesus, Nelson Mandela, Gandhiji, Mother Teresa, Pandita Ramabhai, and Martin Luther King did in the world.



References

- Beasley-Murray, G. R., 1999. *John*. Word Biblical Commentary 36. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Blomberg, C. L., 2001. *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Brant, J-A. A., 2011. *John*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Culpepper, R. A., 1983. *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Johnson, D. H., 1992. "Life." *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove: IVP, 469-471.
- Kanagaraj, J. J., 2005. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Secunderabad: OM Books.
- Martyn, J. L., 1979. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Moloney, F. J., 1998. *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina 4. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press.
- Thomaskutty, J., 2015. *Dialogue in the Book of Signs: A Polyvalent Analysis of John 1:19-12:50*, BINS 136. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html>, accessed on 1 October 2020.
- <https://www.un.org/en/events/mandeladay/>, accessed on 17th July 2021.
