

A Look at the Gospel of John

This morning I am going to talk about the gospel of John, rather than unpacking the reading that we heard, about John the Baptist and so on.

We don't really know who was the writer of the Fourth Gospel. It is entirely possible that it was John the brother of James, who was a particular friend of Jesus. Or it may be a different John - we just don't know. That is why I sometimes refer to it as the Fourth Gospel and sometimes just as John's Gospel. The ambiguity needs to be clear.

But the writer has a purpose. The writer of the fourth gospel says, openly, that he writes so that you might believe John 20: 31. " But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." This is not spin doctoring, but when we read the book we have to recognise that it is polemical. There is a purpose in the gospel. John has good news that he wants to persuade his readers to accept from themselves.

The Gospel of John is a book of "signs". There are clear signs, and signs that have to be interpreted. Signs are things, events and people who point to something or someone else. A sign comes between the looker and what s/he should be seeing. So the sign comes between two things or people. Generally in John, intermediaries are necessary to come to the proper faith about Jesus. John the Baptist points two of his disciples to the Lamb of God (1:35-39). Andrew brings Simon to Jesus (1:40-42). Philip tells Nathaniel about the promised one from Nazareth (1:45-50). And so on.

Even Jesus is a type of sign as the logos -- the "Word" or "Revealer" of God. Jesus points us to God, he shows us the Father and he reveals the Father's nature. As I have said: the writer urgently tells the message, as if time is running out. "These are written so that you may come to believe [or continue to believe] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" . No apology for repetition. This is an important point. This book itself is a "sign" to point us to the Messiah.

John's gospel is thought to have been written several decades after Mark, Matthew and Luke. The writer has had time to ponder the deeper realities of the Jesus experience. Although he writes a gospel which points to Jesus as the Chosen one of God, he has also had time to work out just what this means. The book is permeated with contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, heaven above and the earth below. There are subtle references which lead us to believe that John's readers are shrewder than those who met Jesus at the time, and didn't 'get' him.

The Master who stands in the centre of the text is described with the help of lively metaphors. His encounters, his words, and his miracles often have both a concrete and a metaphorical meaning. The sayings of Jesus in the first three gospels, and even in the *Gospel of Thomas*, an apocryphal set of sayings of Jesus, are marked by simple images and short parables. In John however these give way to long and complicated monologues and dialogues, with a rather limited vocabulary which is used very skilfully.

John has been called the 'thinking Christian's gospel'. So I hope you will take special notice of John's gospel, and take it to heart. It is a priceless possession.

And for me, the jewel in the gospel, the great gift to future generations, is the prologue, the first 18 verses. This short section has three sections: The Word's relationship to the Creator and Creation (1:1-5) The Word's relationship to John the Baptist (1:6-9) The Word's relationship to the world (1:10-18). The Christmas Gospel at midnight is almost invariably the first 14 verses of John. In the beginning was the word - the Logos and so on. As the old King's College carol service puts it: St John unfolds the mystery of the incarnation.

He does not explain the mystery - it remains a mystery to this day. But these verses give us the scale and the importance of the birth of Jesus. The writer sets out the cosmic nature of the incarnation - God with us in the form of a human baby. All time stands still at the dawn of the beginning of a new age, the age of the kingdom of God.

Yet, although time stands still, as it were, and all creation holds its breath at the

wonder of the grace of God to condescend to become man, yet these are real events, set at a particular point in time and geography. By introducing John the Baptist into this great prologue, we suddenly focus on the where and when. The early readers could let out their breath and say to themselves: "Ah yes, we know about him, where he was and who he was". It is one thing to talk about Jesus dying to forgive all of the sins of all people. It is another thing to bring that "cosmic" forgiveness into the lives of people at a particular time and for particular sins. Perhaps that is our task, yours and mine, to bring the eternal plan of salvation to particular people today. That is also the meaning, the heart of the sacraments. They bring the cosmic, transcendent God, to a particular time and place and individual. The gospel, and the sacraments, make God real for men and women in every age.

Whilst the arrival of John the Baptist in the prologue nails down the story to historical time and place, we do need to remember that John was not just any man. John had been sent by God (v. 6). This is an important claim, as no one else in the fourth Gospel apart from Jesus himself is described as having been sent by God. John was part of a divine plan: he came to give witness to the light, so that others might come to believe by means of the life-giving presence of the light.

If the "God-sent-ness" of John the Baptist makes him part of God's divine plan; then does Jesus make us part of that same plan when he says: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you?" It seems clear to me that **we** are not just ordinary people any longer either, but part of God's continuing plan of salvation for the world. We are intermediaries or signs that are to point the world of our day to Jesus, and through Jesus to the Father.

A man sent from God. I wonder, how do I answer the question: "Who has sent me to the this parish? God? my bishop? the selection conference? my self? If I and Judy and Sue believe that God has sent us to our congregations, how do we claim that authority without becoming arrogant? That is one of the reasons for the chasuble. It hides the person and symbolises the fact that she or he is covered by God's grace. When I preach I put on the prophet's mantle too - and I say: "I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". This is an enormous responsibility, and I hope at least sometimes you

will hear God's voice and not mine in sermon and liturgy. I need always to remember that it is not I, but Christ in me. So in the same way that the Book of John is a sign, pointing us to Jesus who points us to the father, so too are the ministers who serve you. As Paul put's it: we are ambassadors for Christ? If it is true for me, it must surely be true of all of us.

What we say and do reflect not just about who we are, but also about the One whom we represent -- the One who sent us. As we prepare to remember the mystery of the incarnation and the amazing grace of God, and as we look forward to Christ's return, remember whoo you are. Remember that you are chosen and you are sent out to live and work to his praise and glory. You, my friends, are to be the signs of his coming.