

Week 5

The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is a portrait of Jesus, not a photograph. The Fourth Gospel, called by the name 'John', is in many ways the Bible's most profound book. Biblical scholars have made the study of this book the crown of their academic lives. Its magnificent lines are quoted perhaps more than any other part of Holy Scripture. *'Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'* Most people have heard these words at some time.

The Gospel contains what is probably the best loved verse of all, *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'*. (3:16). The prologue of John's Gospel was once read as the final blessing at every Roman Catholic Mass and at many Anglican services also.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.'

Yet this book offers the fundamentalist some very serious problems. The words of Jesus, coming as they do in elaborate discourses, show evidence of long theological development and therefore cannot possibly have been the literal words of the historical Jesus. In what is called the great high priestly prayer (chapter 17) for example, Jesus reportedly says "that they may know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." It would be strange indeed if Jesus of Nazareth had talked about himself in the third person and in theological terms that did not emerge until the latter part of the first century. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus implored his disciples not to broadcast his divine origin or his secret identity (Mark 8: 27 – 30), (Luke 9: 18 – 21), (Matt. 16:20). In the Fourth Gospel, however, this identity was all but shouted from the rooftops.

The synoptic gospels suggest a public ministry for Jesus that lasted just one year, and Jesus came to Jerusalem only for the climax of his life at holy week and Easter. John, however, had Jesus involved in three Passover celebrations, which would imply a two or three year public ministry, and he had Jesus go to Jerusalem on several occasions. Indeed, the cleansing of the Temple occurred in John at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, not at the conclusion as it is in the synoptics.

Most distressing of all, taken literally this Gospel has fed the dark side of anti-Semitism more than any other part of the Christian Scriptures. On most occasions when the

Jews are referred to the connotation is evil. The Jews are ‘from below’ – John 8:23. “ *You (the Jews) are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.*” (John 8:44). For Jesus to call the Jews “*children of Satan*” is out of character to the Jesus portrayed in the synoptic Gospels. It is not consistent with the Jesus who said “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*”. (Matt. 5:44).

Likewise the saying ‘**Before Abraham was, ‘I Am’.** (John 8: 58.) can only seem outrageous to the Jewish mind of the first century as it does to Jews today.

Does this mean that John’s Gospel ought to be abandoned? Certainly not, but some careful understanding must be brought to bear.

To some people, St. John’s picture of Jesus is deeply unsatisfactory. John portrays Jesus as someone who knows all that must befall him and as one who is in complete control of his destiny. He has insight into character (2:25), knows Judas will betray him (6:71) and above all knows when his ‘hour’ is to come. The result is that his portrait of Jesus tends to make him into a superhuman figure; rather like a Clark Kent at some times and Superman at others. Unfortunately, this has the effect of creating a Docetic portrait of Jesus, which John himself would no doubt have repudiated with horror.

I believe that the Gospel of John is probably one of the richest mines for spiritual excavation that is to be found in the Christian tradition, but it is the least literal, least objective piece of literature in the Bible. I doubt that any of the words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel are to be taken literally. Yet I also believe that this Gospel writer understood Jesus and his ultimate meaning better than any other.

The ‘I Am’ sayings.

In the book of Exodus, God had confronted Moses in the wilderness while he was tending the flocks of Jethro, his father in law. In that narrative God’s presence was manifested in a bush that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3). God called Moses in that moment to be the divine agent to free the Hebrew people from their enslavement in Egypt. Moses argued and twisted in the wind to escape this demand. In one of his escape attempts, Moses demanded to know God’s name (Exodus 3:13ff). God responded with a Hebrew phrase, the best translation of which is “I am who I am”. “Tell them ‘I Am’ sent you”.

The author of the Fourth Gospel took that story and made it a key to his interpretation of Jesus. Jesus was to be understood as part of the great “I Am” of God. It was a startling and provocative claim. In case John’s readers missed the point, he emphasised it in the conversation in chapter 8:57-59. ‘They said to him “you are not even fifty years old – and you have seen Abraham?” “I am telling you the truth,” said Jesus, “Before Abraham was born, “I Am”. Then they picked up stones to throw at him,’ . Also John 8:24 ‘I am who I am’.

The 'I Am' claim for Jesus was carried on throughout the entire text of the Gospel.

"I Am the bread of life" (6:35)

"I Am the light of the world". (8:12)

"I Am the door of the sheep". (10:7)

"I Am the good shepherd". (10:11).

"I Am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6).

"I Am the vine". ((15:5)

"I Am the resurrection" (11:25).

"I Am" was the constant claim of the Johannine Christ. The Word who was with God in the beginning, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us in the "I Am" sayings of this Gospel, claimed for this Jesus the very name of God.

Topics for discussion.

- 1 Should we continue to assume, or give the impression that the **I Am** sayings in the fourth gospel are the actual words of Jesus?
- 2 In St. John's Gospel, Jesus appears to know what is about to happen to him. Eg. John 13; 21f, *'After Jesus had said this, he was deeply troubled and declared openly, "I am telling you the truth: one of you is going to betray me."*' Did Jesus know that he was God Incarnate?
- 3 'The Church is the only human institution which exists for the benefit of non-members.' (Archbishop William Temple).
