



The gospel of John

Additional notes
G. Howard Mellor

What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

John has carefully crafted a narrative about Jesus which draws out the significance of Jesus. He is not simply concerned with history, though in many ways his gospel reflects more accurately the wandering up and down to Jerusalem that Jesus and the disciples undertook. It is more than profound incidents and engaging conversations around a table, at a wedding and by a well. He has a two-fold purpose, to show that Jesus is God and to enable others to believe and 'have life in his name'.

From the very first line of the gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word...' to the very end, 'Follow me' (21:22). John is keen that we should understand and know Jesus as our saviour. He selects his material carefully, and throughout, John is concerned that the light of the world should shine through his text and enlighten his readers.

John's gospel is itself a beacon statement of the way to live; of the one who made that possible and the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. In these verses he indicates his care in writing and his hope that people will come to faith in Jesus as a result. For to find faith is have life in all its fullness.

As we prepare for and share in this Bible Month may this gospel text shine a pathway for each one of us that in turn we may be able to lead people, through worship and preaching, to a deepening understanding of the abundant life John speaks of and Jesus offers to all who will follow.

For reflection as we prepare for Bible Month

- If my life was a written gospel, would it reflect the light of Christ?
- How are these readings from John's gospel affecting my life?
- Do read the whole gospel through, maybe once month in March and April.

John – an overview

The uniqueness of John

John maps out for us a very different account of Jesus' ministry.

The Synoptics have a clear threefold pattern:

- Galilean ministry leading to Caesarea Philippi and the Transfiguration as the hinge point of both recognition and disclosure.
- Journey to Jerusalem
- Entry into the city, Holy Week - criticism of leaders, Passover meal, Gethsemane, trial, crucifixion, burial, resurrection.

John shows a very different configuration of Jesus ministry.

- + Jesus visits Jerusalem four times.
 - Travels up to Galilee after baptism – 1:43
 - To Jerusalem - 2:13, ending at Sidon - 3:22-3 - **1**
 - Back to Galilee via Samaria - 4:3-4
 - Up to Jerusalem – 5:1 - **2**
 - Back in Galilee – 6:1
 - Up to Jerusalem – 7:10 - **3**
 - Time across the Jordan – 10:40
 - Returns to Judea, Bethany – Lazarus 11:7, 17
 - Entry into the City – 12:12-19 - **4**

There are things missing, especially:

- + No nativity account (unlike Matthew and Luke) – but a cosmic setting!
- + No Caesarea Philippi, nor transfiguration, as a point of disclosure.
- + There is no institution of Holy Communion at the Last Supper.
- + No teaching in parables!

A different way of teaching

- + Jesus' person is revealed through 'signs'
- + Teaching based on titles for Jesus, the 'I am' sayings.
- + Teaching based around encounters, conversation and conflict.

There are also significant events:

- The prologue puts the arrival of Jesus as a cosmic event.
- Overturning the tables in the temple happens early – 2:13-22
- The words of disclosure and faith are on the lips of Mary and Martha – chap 12.
- The seven 'signs' all lead up to the eighth and greatest sign – the death and resurrection of Jesus.

A clear purpose:

John 20:30-31,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

But we also see the purpose as understood by Jesus:

3:17 – Jesus came not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved.

12:32 – ‘and I, if I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.’

14:1-6 and 16:25f – going to the father

18:37f – to Pilate – for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

1:12 - In John’s prologue: Jesus enables people to be ‘children of God’ born not of ancestry, desire or knowledge, but born of God’s saving grace.

Relationship with the Father:

There is a real emphasis of the closeness of Son and Father. Indeed, it is in John that we have the testimony which led the early church (Tertullian) to conclude that the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit was best described as ‘*Trinitas*’, one God but three persons.

The prologue (1:1-5) sets the scene speaking of Jesus as (λόγος), the Word, who is with God and is God, through whom all things were made.

1:14 - The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ dwelt, encamped among us – Jesus pitched his tent in our street! The image is of the tabernacle in the midst of the children of Israel in the desert years.

1:18 - Jesus brings the divine attributes of grace, truth, life, we have received from his fullness. ‘Begotten’, comes from *genos* meaning ‘kind’ or ‘essence’ rather than *gennao* which means beget. Jesus of the same essence as the Father.

5:17-18 - Controversially, ‘My father is working and I am working’ not only breaking the Sabbath but being understood by opponents as making himself equal with God.

5:19-24 - the closeness of the relationship with the Father and Son. Emphasised also in 10:25 and 30: especially ‘The Father and I are one.’

12:44-50 The Holy Spirit is a *paraklétos* ‘another counsellor’, as Jesus has been to the disciples, so the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father, ‘in my name’.

It is in John that we begin to understand the interrelationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit building on the importance of the Holy Spirit as indicated by Luke.

‘Signs’ in John

In his gospel, John deliberately records ‘signs’ that point to who Jesus is. He tells us there were many more signs he could have recorded, but he chose these particular ones so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah (20:30-31).

The signs provide a framework for the book as a whole. John records seven signs in chapters 1-12: the changing of water into wine (2:1-11), healing the official’s son (4:46-54), healing the paralytic (5:1-18), feeding the five thousand (6:5-14), walking on the water (6:16-24), healing the blind man (9:1-7) and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45). This is then followed by the greatest sign of them all, Jesus’ death and resurrection for us in chapter 20.

The purpose of the signs is to guide us towards belief. It was after they saw the first miraculous sign at Cana that the disciples believed (2:11). Later on, a leading Pharisee came to Jesus by night, believing that the miraculous signs were indisputable evidence as to who Jesus was (3:2). Later still, we read that many people followed Jesus because of the signs (6:2). Yet, in spite of these signs, many still did not believe (12:37).

The signs also point to a greater spiritual reality. Each one reveals something of God and his truth and draws the attention of everyone present, including ourselves as John’s readers, to the glory of God.

The signs continue to have relevance for us today. Many contemporary people would understand faith in Jesus is a matter of personal opinion (a private faith), and nothing to do with indisputable evidence (a public faith), John would disagree. He says there is good evidence (‘signs’) and the evidence should lead us to faith in Christ.

The ‘I am’ sayings

Some of Jesus’ clearest claims about himself are set out in the seven ‘I am’ sayings of John’s gospel. He describes himself as the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12, 9:5), the gate for the sheep (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25-26), the way, the truth and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1).

Many of these sayings are linked to the miraculous signs in John and all have their roots in the Old Testament. The bread of life speaks of the manna in the wilderness; the good shepherd invites us to contrast Jesus with the bad shepherds of ancient Israel.

The ‘I am’ sayings are also inescapably personal. In each of them, Jesus invites us to come to him personally. He, himself, is the source of our illumination, truth,

fruitfulness and life. We mustn't look elsewhere but come to him alone. He is not just the one who gives life; he is life itself. He is not just the one who gives bread; he is the bread of life; true and lasting satisfaction is only to be found in him.

These sayings are also claims to be God. The uniform introduction to them – 'I am' – bears the hallmark of God's authority when he revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 3:14. The truth of what Jesus is claiming is staggering. He is claiming to be God – the same one who revealed himself in the Old Testament as 'I AM.'

This is even something that was recognised by Jesus' enemies. After a particularly heated exchange with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus exclaims, 'Before Abraham was born, I am' (John 8:58). They knew that he was claiming to be God and so they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy. Modern people may deny that Jesus is God, but his enemies knew exactly what he was claiming.

The 'I am' sayings take us to the heart of our faith – the person of Jesus Christ. They are just as compelling now as they were to Jesus' first hearers.

Holy Spirit

In the New Testament the usual word for Spirit in Greek is *pneuma* and in common with the other gospel writers, John uses *pneuma* most often in his writing. For instance, in John 7:37-39 where Jesus is speaking on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. During the seven days of the feast a golden jar was filled with water at the Pool of Siloam. It was carried ceremonially through the streets of Jerusalem to the Temple where it was used for ritual washings. The river of living water, to which Jesus refers, is the *pneuma* (Spirit), which at Pentecost will be given in a new and fuller manner and measure.

This promise of the Spirit is explained in more detail by Jesus in the Last Supper discourse (John 14-16). The Holy Spirit is now given the title of *paraklétos* who comes from the Father and the Son and will point towards Christ and reveal the truth (John 14:15-17; 25-28). John in fact uses both titles for the Spirit in John 14:15-17, where we read Jesus will ask the Father to send 'another *paraklétos*, who is the '*pneuma* of truth'.

The Holy Spirit is to be 'another' *paraklétos* (translated in different Bible versions as counsellor, comforter, advocate, or helper), a clear inference that the Spirit will minister to the disciples as Jesus had, by teaching, enabling, encouraging and supporting them. John records the word *paraklétos* on the lips of Jesus, to explore the ministry that the Holy Spirit will have. The word, in regular usage at the time, could be used in the following ways:

1. *Paraklétos* always meant someone called in to help and to render some service; therefore the Holy Spirit is essentially the **helper**.
2. *Paraklétos* described the kind of **comforter** and consolation in distress which kept a person on their feet when, if left to themselves, they would collapse. It is the comfort which enables a person to pass the breaking point and not break.
3. In Greek law the *paraklétos* was the prisoner's friend, the **advocate** and **counsellor** for the defence, the person who bore witness to the friend's character when most needed, and when others wished to condemn.
4. It is also the word for **exhorting people to noble deeds and high thoughts**, especially a rallying call for courage in battle.

John assumes all these meanings and his gospel looks forward to the period after Christ's resurrection when the Holy Spirit is fully given at Pentecost. It is in the Acts of the Apostles that we read of the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit and in the church today we see the Holy Spirit in operation as both *paraklétos* and *pneuma*.

Some macro themes in John:

Lifted up – referring to his crucifixion. Jesus refers back to Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness (3:14 and Numbers 21:4-9), where the children of Israel are urged to 'Look and Live'. Jesus speaks of his death is drawing all people unto him, 8:28 and 12:32.

Darkness to Light – Jesus is revealed as the light coming into the world (1:4-9); the contrast is made between the people of darkness and light (3:19-21). Jesus declares he is the light of the world (8:12), and his followers will walk in the light. After the Greeks come to 'see' Jesus, there is similar teaching in 12:35-6 and 46. In parallel teaching people are encouraged to move from blindness to sight (9:35-41).

Life – more specifically in John, eternal life. Not simply about length, but about a quality of life lived in the orbit of God's love (1:4, 3:15-16, 6:47 and 20:31).

Glory – from the beginning of the gospel John is keen we understand that Jesus' glory has been seen and understood (1:14). The hour of his glory, is not to be hastened (2:4). Curiously glory is apparently Jesus' demise, death on the cross, but the Father makes this 'hour' to be the crowning 'glory' of Jesus ministry and purpose in coming (12:23, 13:31-32, 17:24).

A note about gardens in John's gospel.

There are more indications of John's observation of nature – in 6.10 the people sit in groups on 'grass'.

15.1 – 'my father is the gardener'

18.1 – Jesus and the disciples go, 'to a place where there was a garden'

20.11 – Mary 'supposing him to be the gardener.'

Week One – The Cosmic Christ - Chapter 1

It is no exaggeration to say that the prologue to John's gospel (1:1-18) is one of the most important theological texts ever written. I rather think this section was written after the rest of the Gospel was constructed as a summary of faith for the early church, though we have no evidence of it being available separately.

Some scholars have wondered if it was originally a poem or a song of worship to Jesus; everyone agrees that in the space of a few verses John takes his readers into matters of time and history, eternity and divinity. It is however complete in itself and introduces the main themes of the gospel.

John introduces us to themes that will be unpacked later on in the gospel: Jesus is the life (v4); the light (v5-9); the truth (v14); believers are children of God (v12-13); the divine Word, present in creation has come to 'dwell' (literally: tabernacle) amongst us though he will be rejected by the world that he came to save (v10-11).

However, the importance of the prologue is most clearly seen in what it tells us about Jesus. Jesus is introduced as the Word, the **logos** (λόγος) who is with God and is God. Here John is masterfully combining ideas which are both **Greek** (the underlying principle of the universe), and **Hebrew** (the powerful word of God which speaks life into being). This emphasises Jesus' divinity, his closeness to the Father, his incarnation and humanity.

For those who receive Jesus, this Word made flesh, are given '*dunamis*' power to become children of God, born not of ancestry, or desire, or knowledge, but of God (1:12).

Some points:

- Jesus the Cosmic Christ – the Word who brought all things into being.
- The one in whom light shines – all who know light see something of this Christ
- The word became flesh – and dwelt, (tabernacled), encamped – 'pitched his tent in our street'.
- Glory, grace and truth we see in him
- From his fullness have we all received.

A community of questions for learners (disciples):

Who are you? 1:19 and 23, a question of identity, ultimately: Who is Jesus?

What are you looking for? 1:38, search (desire) for meaning.

Where are you staying? 1:38, can I be included (home) in your invitation?

Invitation!

Come and see – 1:39 and 46.

Week Two – Extravagance, Encounters and Controversy

Chapters 2-12

Extravagant Grace

2:1-11: John is so clever – he takes us from declarations of deep theology, the word made flesh, dwelling with us – to illustrate the good wine of the kingdom is abundant and overflowing!

The contrast here is between the old wine and the new wine (not water and wine!)., The fulfillment of the divine purpose in Jesus coming are all exemplified in this ordinary community event – highlighting, extravagant provision, abundant grace.

Nicodemus

3:1-16: Who comes under cover of darkness, the teacher who comes to learn.

Be born from above, anew, again 3:16

A notion of natural and spiritual birth. Writers also suggested the waters of baptism rather than natural birth.

Woman at the Well

4:1-42, despised and ostracised by her community, coming for water in the heat of the day, when others did not. She is respectful, thoughtful about worship, the coming Messiah and her life. She becomes a credible witness to Jesus transforming grace and the townspeople recognise the change in her life.

Healing of the man at the Pool of Beth-zatha

Chapter 5:1-18. There is a telling question on the lips of Jesus, 'Do you want to be made well?' Though languishing by the pool, its waters said to make people well, he needs to declare his need, and the hope of healing.

Those who criticise the man carrying his mat, are not aware of their need, nor any hope of change.

Feeding of the multitude

6:1-14 and 22-59. At its heart is the notion of Jesus as the sustenance of life, Bread of life, 6:35. The bread which brings life – the bread, taken, blessed, broken and given to the people. This is the closest we come to a eucharistic meal in John.

Controversy building!

Jesus is unafraid to speak truth to power. He shocks people by overturning the tables in the temple outer courtyard (2:13-25), the dispute about sabbath healing leading to a critique of the authority of religious leaders in contrast to his own (5:10-46). A failed attempt to arrest Jesus (7:32-36). The debate about who are the real inheritors of Abrahams legacy leading to quite pointed critique of religious/political leaders (8:39-59). The Pharisees are scandalised by the healing of the man born blind on the sabbath (9:13-34). Final rejection by the authorities (10:22-39). Plans to arrest Jesus are made (11:45-53).

There is in John a growing anger at Jesus' popularity, a sense of scandal that he heals on the sabbath and that he makes the Jewish leaders look foolish in debate. They fail

to arrest Jesus on two occasions and on two 'pick up stones' to throw at him (8:59 and 10:31).

The woman caught in adultery

This remarkable event, written in a very different way from the rest of the gospel (all the verbs are participles) so written by a different hand but included for its powerful teaching.

Note, just the woman is brought, 'let him (it would just be men) who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (8:7). 'Woman where are they? Has no-one condemned you?...Neither do I condemn you, Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'

This is dramatic incident highlighting double standards (men and women, religious and 'sinners'), and the importance of forgiveness and mercy in public life.

Healing of the man born blind

The man is healed (on the sabbath!), but the teaching is about spiritual sight and blindness (9:1-41).

Good shepherd

The Jesus who cares for his flock, leads his flock, tends the flock – we have all preached on this passage! Here is the statement, 'I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly' (10:10).

Resurrection and Life.

The death of Lazarus is the context of the faith statements by both Martha and Mary (11:21 and 32), which also may carry criticism that Jesus had not arrived earlier! We have the declaration of Jesus as 'resurrection and life' (11:25). There are many people for whom the instruction, 'Unbind him and let him go' (11:44) is relevant.

Choosing:

In many ways too much material for this week – however there is a wonderful array of encounters to choose from.

Maybe three points!

Extravagance – Wedding at Cana and woman caught in adultery, or 7:39

Encounter – choose one of the characters

Conflict – show Jesus speaks truth to power with laser critique of the religious and political leaders.

Week Three – Walking in the Way of Jesus – Chapter 13-17

Servant Leadership – We are in the Upper Room, which starts with the washing of the disciples feet (13:1-20). David Ford has good notes on servant leadership.

Community of Jesus followers - The new commandment for the disciples is 'just as I have loved you, so you should love one another' (13:34). It becomes the first step in Christian community living, relationships not rules. Grace not law. The mission of the Christian community starts at this point for 'by this everyone will know you are my disciples'.

This does not mean all should agree on everything, but the manner in which we discuss and even agree to disagree is to be one characterised by respect for the other. This is how love works.

The Way – the gospel builds towards this description of discipleship. The lack of alternatives: 'to whom should we go, you have the words of eternal life'(6:68). The offer of forgiveness (8:36) and abundant life (10:10). It all leads to the declaration 'I am the Way, and the truth and the life' (14:6).

Abiding in Christ - It is in chapter 15 that we have the heart of discipleship explained. That disciples should be grafted into Christ from whom all nourishment is received. For those who are 'abiding' comes divine love, which is to be lived and shown to others. Indeed, obeying Jesus commands is a sign of love reciprocated.

Holy Spirit – Chapters 14&16 have teaching about another *Paraklétos* see pp.5-6.

Jesus prayer - The David Ford notes make helpful reference to other passages in Matthew and Ephesians highlighting that this passage becomes the context in which the early church prayed.

'that they may be One' 17:21 has been used to point towards structural unity (e.g. one Church **in** England). My reading is that we are made one in Christ and our mandate is not about structures (though proper recognition of orders and church governance would be helpful!), but about relationships globally and locally. It is about how we mission together for our mutual benefit, collaboration rather than competition! This being highlighted in this chapter and Ephesians 4:1-6.

Sanctify them in truth – the word 'sanctify' means 'difference' – so what is the difference following Jesus, adhering to his teaching makes for each of us. What difference does this community of Christians have from any other social grouping?

Protect them from the evil one – Christians in many countries know the power of this prayer – religious persecution, areas of conflict. Even for us, desire for power, status, finance, can corrupt. The need to be and keep people safe, and deal justly with all can be undermined.

Finally, 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them' (17:26)

Week Four – Glory and Hope – Chapters 18-21

The anointing by Mary 12:1-8 is not part of this section but points towards it. In thankfulness for Lazarus, in love of Jesus, in preparation for his death, Jesus is anointed with nard, expensive aromatic oil (worth a year's wages) made from a plant in the honeysuckle family which grows in the Himalayas of Nepal, China, and India.

The section begins in a garden, the risen Jesus is found in a garden and the book ends with a breakfast by the lake.

At the garden of olives Jesus rejects violence as a way to deal with the intrusion of a deployment of soldiers led by 'friend' Judas. As David Ford brings out so well, Jesus bears all this but is not passive.

Threefold questioning

- To Annas the High Priest, Jesus simply recounts what he has been doing, nothing is in secret.
- He goes to Caiaphas but we are not told details.
- No Herod in this account!
- Then sent to Pilate and ultimately the exchange about truth: for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice' To which Pilate asks: What is truth?

The Disciples

Peter and John follow Jesus, John seems to have access which allows Peter close. The three denials. Peter leaves the scene. John alone of the disciples is with the women at the crucifixion. Jesus seeks security for his mother with John.

Pilate seeks to release Jesus – 'I find no case against him...18:38, 19:6 and 19:12.

Jesus is crucified at Golgotha, 'King of the Jews' and his garments divided, lots cast for his robe.

The Crucifixion

We do not have the detail of Luke or Matthew. 'It is finished' is the profound statement that all that Jesus as Son of God has come to achieve, is now complete. Paul recognises the interrelationship between Jesus and the Father when he says, 'In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor 5:19). We do well to remember this when preaching about the cross.

Resurrection

We are back in a garden! John has this detailed and wonderful account of Mary finding the empty tomb, and eventually asking the 'gardener', 'tell me where you have laid him?' Then in the sound of her name she knows – there is a deeply moving drama in this story.

A tale of two disciples.

The book concludes with an account which raises the question of certainty and faith.

Thomas is not there in the house. Why not?

We know Thomas is courageous in following (11:16) and can ask awkward questions (14:5). Did he not get the message? Was he left out? Did the disciples not get on with him? Jesus returns to show the reality of his risen life.

There are many people like Thomas.

Peter is as impetuous as ever at the lakeside breakfast.

After the meal comes a remarkable conversation which we do not fully appreciate the way the English versions are translated. There are, in NT Greek, four words for love of which two are here. *Agapē* (ἀγάπη) meaning 'unconditional love', and *Philia* (φιλία) meaning loving in the sense of 'a dear one', a 'good friend'. It is when we add these words to the English text we see the full intensity of the exchange between Peter and Jesus.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you **Agapas** me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I **Philō** you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you **Agapas** me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I **Philō** you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you **Phileis** me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you **Phileis** me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I **Philō** you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, **'Follow me.'**

Jesus threefold question clearly relates to the denials, but something else is happening. Previously Peter had made all kinds of claims about his devotion to Jesus. In Peter's responses we see a humbled man, a realism and an honest portrayal of his discipleship, he is still learning to love, to follow. *Agapē* may be where he is aiming but all he can offer is *philō*. Jesus confronts him by changing from *agapē* to *philia* in the final question. Jesus comes down to his level and Peter responds with honest reflection. He receives forgiveness, and the offer of a new start. Thus: Follow me! Peter is like many of us!

Blessing May the Light of Christ surround you,
 may the Love of the Father enfold you,
 may the Power of the Holy Spirit protect you,
 may the Presence of the triune God watch over you,
 now and for ever, Amen.

© G. Howard Mellor, February 2025.