

John part one: an introduction

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere, 30 July 2017

Reading: John 21:20-25

Let us pray: We honour you, living Word, word with God from the beginning word made flesh.

Make your home among us, by your breath, in all our words, we pray. Amen.

This is John Part One. The Gospel of John. I wonder if I could put the question to you first of all, before I launch in – what do you know of the Gospel of John?

Can you think of any phrases or key words or word pictures in John?

Has anything in John been particularly significant to you?

Have you heard any theories about who might have written it?

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We've done some Old Testament in July, and now August will be John month.

Can I ask of you that you read the Gospel of John? I don't mind how you read it but please read it, all of it. 21 chapters, some of the greatest words ever written!

OK. So. Who wrote the Gospel of John?

Let me start this story in the middle of the 2nd century, so a hundred plus years after Jesus. In the 2nd century the early church was growing amazingly, despite two major problems. On one hand the early church was suffering from violent persecution by both Jews and Romans. And on the other hand the early church was suffering from huge internal arguments about the faith and what it meant to believe in Jesus. The issue of who to trust was critical. The writings of the leaders of the early church are feisty, condemning those they disagreed with most forcefully. Because it really mattered, what to believe in.

The church leaders were fighting to keep the church's beliefs real, in the reality of Jesus and his real life and his real death. Because the tendency for new Christians was to slide towards super-spiritual stuff. People wanted the faith to be more airy-fairy, less confrontational, to fit better into a Greek world view. So, for example, someone wrote a gospel claiming to be written by Peter, which described the crucifixion of Jesus but instead of saying that Jesus died it said that he was lifted up into heaven. The church leaders rejected it.

And, people wanted super-spiritual stories about Jesus as a child so they wrote stories about Jesus as a child, giving him all manner of magical powers. The church leaders rejected these infancy narratives.

It mattered for the church what they could trust, in a time of competing claims to what was true.

Thankfully they all agreed on one thing, which was that the truth about Jesus was to be found in four books, four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four, and these four alone, were unanimously agreed to be the foundation for the Christian faith.

And fairly early in the 2nd century the church leaders wrote quite confidently about these four gospels, that Matthew was written by the tax collector whose Hebrew name was Levi, Mark was written by Mark under the mentoring of Peter, Luke (& Acts) were written by Luke, the young doctor who accompanied Paul, and John was written by John the son of Zebedee, who had been one of Jesus's closest friends and disciples together with his twin brother James.

Then in the 20th century biblical scholars challenged all this, starting from the conviction that these men couldn't possibly have written the Gospels after all, that the gospels actually were written by some anonymous authors or somehow were written by committee. And so you may have heard sermons about John emerging from "the Johanne Community" in Ephesus ... possibly influenced by the apostle John but much processed, i.e. made up, by others.

Does it matter who wrote it? The text is the text no matter where it came from. But we come to the text asking questions of it. As we enter into the stories and conversations described in the Gospel of John we wonder to ourselves – did this really happen? Did they really drink good wine at that wedding party in Cana or is this just a metaphor? Did a Jewish priest called Nicodemus really come sneaking in the night to talk to Jesus and how did the gospel writer know what they talked about? And all those chapters of what Jesus said to his disciples on the night before he died – is that someone else's imagination or did Jesus really say all that?

And the issue with John's gospel is particularly sharp for us because it reads so differently from the other 3 gospels. It seems so much more spiritual and symbolic. And in the 20th century the claim dominated that John's gospel was written far removed in time and space from the events it claims to describe.

I would like to put to you this morning the possibility that the gospel of John was in fact written by the person it claims to be written by, the apostle John, known in the gospel as the Beloved Disciple, the son of Zebedee.

So, back to the beginning. John and James, working in their father's fishing business. They owned at least 2 boats and employed staff. Fishing was big business in Galilee, and fish were exported throughout Israel and as far away as Rome. Curiously, the word used in the gospel of John for cooked fish is the technical word for smoked fish, rather than the generic word 'fish' which is used in all the rest of the New Testament.

As good Jewish boys in a well-off professional family James and John would have been well educated in both the Jewish and Roman worlds.

They responded enthusiastically to Jesus' call and became part of his inner circle with Peter. They were known as the Sons of Thunder, and could be argumentative at times. They were ambitious and secretly thought they should be in charge, but Jesus loved them anyway and taught them the hard way.

James sadly was martyred quite early on, but John lived to an old age, mostly in Ephesus where he lead the church there.

After Peter was killed in 64 his young colleague Mark wrote up the first Gospel, recording the stories Peter told about Jesus. Other disciples were also putting things down on paper, and bits of papyrus with parts of the story about Jesus were being circulated around the early church. Luke and Matthew each received a full copy of Mark's gospel and each independently decided to rework Mark and add in more material. But what about John? He didn't use Mark's work. Did he not see it? That's highly unlikely. Ephesus was a major hub. It makes far more sense to me that he read Mark, read what others were writing, and he just decided to write his own story.

He didn't address it to anyone in particular, the Gospel of John is written for the early church as a whole. It does not attempt to match the other Gospels; some things are the same and some things are different. It is much less concerned with the narrative details.

Mark tells us, for instance, that Jesus rested his head on a pillow in the boat in the storm. John's is a quite different style of story telling, far more relational, far more about the depth of the meaning in the stories. Most of John is conversation not action. What does that tell you about the author?

One of the most striking things about John's gospel is that it is written in very simple Greek. When I was studying Greek I could after just one year at varsity translate most of John. He uses the same words over and over. He uses simple words, like light and dark and come and go and see and hear and gain and lose. But don't for a moment think that the Gospel of John is simplistic. Infinite depths of theology are contained in the simplest of phrases. This is the brilliance of John.

I know that as you read it some words will jump out at you, and will continue to work in your soul.

This month I will be choosing a few of John's favourite words to talk about.

I will keep coming back to chapter 17, Jesus' prayer for his disciples, because this seems to me to be a summary, a condensing down of all of John's vast understanding of Jesus and God and us.

Let's hear, then, the beginning of John 17, which gets us to two of John's favourite words, 'send' and 'receive'.

John Sermon part 2: Send & Receive **John 17:1-8**

Email is a big part of my life. Other people send me emails and I send other people emails. Every day, in and out. I recently did a clear-out of my inbox because it had well over a thousand emails in it and that's just confusing. My husband just lets them pile up & ignores them most, I believe the current tally in his inbox is ...

The office computer has a box in the corner of the screen labeled 'Send and Receive'. That's what you push to wake up the computer to the possibility that a message is either trying to get in or trying to get out.
How do you get on with emails?

It is an extraordinary thing though isn't it – I am just old enough to know what it was like to have a job before the days of email, when you had to put a stamp on something and put it in a letter box and then wait 3 days for it to arrive. This instantaneous sending and receiving is quite astonishing.

And actually it fits in very well with the theology in John's Gospel. 'Receive' and 'send' are two of John's favourite words.

Listen again to the extraordinary simplicity and clarity of the sending and receiving process as described in John 17 verses 8 and 18

Jesus is praying to his Father:

the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

It is a clear and straightforward flow
God sends Jesus to us.

God sends his word to us, in the form of Jesus, and using the words of Jesus.
Jesus sends God's word to his disciples.
His disciples have received the word, have received Jesus himself, and so they believe.
The world has on the whole chosen to not receive him, and so they do not believe.
Jesus sends his disciples into the world to continue the flow of word, the word of love, grace & truth.

At each point in the process there is choice, freedom. God in his freedom chooses to send his word, chooses to send Jesus his Son.
Jesus in his freedom chooses to work in complete one-ness with God his Father
People can choose to either receive or reject the gift of the word
People can choose to be sent, or not.

So it is with emails. You have to choose to click 'send' (and sometimes it is better to not send!). When I receive your email I can block it, delete it, or open it (sometimes it's better not to open them, especially emails that begin "dearest beloved sister in Christ")
If I open it, read it, and appreciate it I might well send it on again to someone else ... if it is a cute kitten video I might send it to Leith who might well appreciate a cute kitten video.

Let me read John 17 verse 8 again. Listen again for each of the key words, each of them used many times in John's gospel, at the way the interlock and build on each other
the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

The challenge in reading John is not that it is difficult, but that it seems so easy. Our brains skim over this, thinking, 'yeah, got that'.
word. gave. given. received. know. truth. came. believed. sent.
Reading John is a process of holding each of these, letting them sit, sink in, finding yourself in them, letting them find you. This is the action of the Holy Spirit to inspire and build faith, to reveal truth and grow us into maturity in Christ.