

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

The Fourth Gospel

The Gospels have had differing influences on the Church over the centuries. The triple witness of the Synoptics has always suggested the theory that they are based primarily on historical truth; three voices against one seems to carry authority in every case of difference between the two traditions. Now that we have realised the way in which the Markan plan actually furnished the story-line for the other two, the odds are considerably evened, and we can actually sit more easily to the relationship between *either* tradition, and the real historical facts.

We've already mentioned the fact that, because this account of the formation of the traditions was unknown to previous generations, there was a confirmed habit amongst theologians and preachers of preferring Matthew to the other Synoptics, simply on the grounds of length *and consequently fullness*. With their suspicion that the similarities between Matthew and Mark were due to Mark's being an *abbreviation* of Matthew, they assumed that Mark could safely be discarded by an attentive student of Matthew.

It was also customary, following Clement of Alexandria, to speak loosely of the Fourth Gospel as "spiritual", that is (in plain words) indifferent to historical facts, if not actually unreliable: but still filled with important *spiritual* insight. This attitude, which pays poor homage to the theology of incarnation, where the Word becomes precisely 'historic', has encouraged people to quote liberally from John to establish *spiritual* understanding, without engaging the troublesome business of reconciling awkward *factual* matters between the Gospels. The conclusion to be drawn from that is that we believe spiritual matters to have an existence independent of fact; a most dangerous piece of nonsense.

The appetite of theologians for *plenitude of expression* has taken many different forms down the ages. We might suggest that the best *philosophical* insights that have been brought to bear on religion have been privative - in theological terms *apophatic*: statements, in other words, which prohibit or deny facts about God¹. The Eastern churches speak of "negative theology"; it stresses the supremacy of God to all our cognitive faculties, let alone our categories of thought. This discipline is endlessly imposed on anyone who wants to talk about divine life in human words. However, the privileged place of Scripture - which is "the Word of God in words of men" - allows a stream of positive insight (*cataphatic* theology) which is governed above all by the *human* experience of Jesus of Nazareth and the impact he has on the inspired authors of Scripture². About this we *can* speak positively, and something happens in intellectual terms which "earths" the reality of God. We could speak of the face of God in Ps 41³ without anyone needing to imagine a configuration of eyes, mouth and nose. But Jesus of Nazareth has a face, and it is in his face that we see the glory of God. The glorious outpouring of Christian art ever since - despite the aberration of the iconoclast controversy - has celebrated the fact that the first commandment has been in some measure superseded by an act of God's revelation; in sending his Son he has shown to us "the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of all creation"⁴. We are still forbidden to worship an image of God *that we have made*; but God calls us to worship one whom he has

¹ For instance *God has no favourites, God exists outside time, God has no definition*

² For instance *God is love, God is truth, God is eternal beauty*

³ *When can I enter and see the face of God?*

⁴ Colossians 1:15ff

“consecrated and sent into the world⁵”. This is the mystery which the Gospels catch hold of, and endeavour to embody. We can also live easily with a variety of images of the face of Christ - not, indeed, hoping that we have a clear record of what the historical Jesus looked like: but finding our faith in him expressed, and fed, by artists responding to him as we do, and expressing him in a variety of ways that are respectful of our faith. This multiplicity of artistic expression was a trouble to the Church at first (as painters like Michelangelo, Veronese, and Caravaggio all found when they were dragged before inquisitors to answer for it). But they were theologically correct to do what they did, and they can illuminate for us the way in which we receive the admitted variety of presentations of Jesus in the Gospels.

One of the revolutionary insights of our time came about when CH Dodd began his career of studying the Fourth Gospel. He wrote a book called *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* which endeavoured, in a *tour-de-force* of scholarship, to embed the Gospel in the texture of the Mediterranean culture of its day, finding its sources in a mixed world of Judaeo-Hellenic thought, Alexandrian Neo-Platonism and the like. This was published in 1953, a mere six years after the first discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Ten years later came Dodd's second work, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, in which he laid before the scholarly world the evidence for a completely independent Johannine tradition of Gospel material, running in parallel with the Synoptic Tradition. He wrote in a footnote:

It would not, I think, be unfair to say...that the conservative or traditionalist school (has) tended to value the Fourth Gospel as the most authoritative source of the teachings of Jesus, being the work of his most intimate disciple; while the 'liberal' school, having decided against the 'historicity' of the work, could make little of the teachings embodied in it beyond a hotch-potch of borrowings from popular Hellenism with a 'Deutero-Pauline' setting. As for the narrative, the factual accuracy of the miracle-stories was vital to the one school, while the other, for which miracles as such were a scandal, rejoiced to be free to get rid of them. In the current semi-popular presentations, at least, of the liberal position, the Fourth Gospel appeared as a second-rate work, while the high conservative estimate of it stood or fell by the criterion of 'historicity'.

This realisation has been immensely amplified by the insights into contemporary Judaism offered by the Dead Sea scriptures, and we can now think in a new way of the Fourth Gospel, as embodying a stream of theological thinking organically Judaeo-Christian.

Having said all of this, we have to acknowledge that the theme of fullness which I have been circling round through this lecture reaches its terminus in the figure of Jesus presented in the Church; and this is built predominantly from the materials delivered in the Fourth Gospel. The various and delicate programmes of the Synoptists' presentation of the person of Jesus are cut across by the Fourth Gospel, like a speedboat cutting a swathe through the pedaloos. In John, there is no secret, no reticence, and from the beginning Jesus is announced to us as the ultimate word of the Father, the Alpha of creation, the saviour of the world. This might, at first, be understood as the Johannine form of those lines in Mt and Lk which speak of Jesus at and before his conception, revealing his nature to the reader, but not, in the subsequent narrative, to anyone else in the Gospel.

Matthew takes 16 chapters to reach the words, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*: words whose very utterance is greeted as a revelation from God, as the founding-point of the Christian Church, and as the turning point of the Gospel, when the revelation of the

⁵ Jn 10:36

Cross can begin. There is no such interval of ignorance after the Prologue of John. By contrast, we find Jesus defined in the first chapter by Andrew, who tells Peter *We have found the Christ*, by Philip, who says he is *the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one the prophets wrote about*, and by Nathaniel, who tells Jesus *You are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel*. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus moves among the people of his time like a giant among pygmies, and dominates the scene so effortlessly that it raises for us the question how anyone could have failed to accept him for what he was; indeed, the only conclusion is that those who refuse him are culpably ignorant, *refusing to believe in the only Son of God*⁶. Jesus himself tells them roundly that if they refuse to welcome the Son they must not think they can keep faith in his Father; *whoever refuses honour to the Son refuses also the Father who sent him*⁷. His challenge is actually a day of judgment for them: *if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins*⁸.

Organically one with this challenge are the signs which accompany it. The people are not left without evidence for the claim of Jesus; it is for them to see, and to respond with integrity to what they see. They are offered a clear choice, because *the light which enlightens all humanity has come into the world*⁹; only the blameless blind can be excused from knowing it¹⁰. The signs, along with the proclamation and teaching of Jesus, put the world on its honour: it has to make a choice - to believe, or to withhold belief. There is no space for a *don't know* option.

Consequently the form of the Fourth Gospel is that of a huge trial in court. The language everywhere is that of legal process: *discernment, witness, testimony, guarantee, judgment, condemnation*, and above all the crowning concept of *truth* itself, with its handmaid, the verb *to see*. The discourses of Jesus constantly take on the quality of legal argument for the defence, the speech of his opponents the quality of legal accusation. When the debate has reached its ultimate threshold, in that the decision lies clear before the court, the hour of God is said to have sounded, and Jesus withdraws to the seclusion of the Last Supper. Here the final summing-up for the defence takes the form of the discourses at the Last Supper and its subsequent prayer for the vindication of the Word by the Father. The climax of this theme in the Gospel comes in the actual trial scene - more correctly, condemnation-scene - where Pilate, a Roman, representing the powers of this world, places Jesus on the chair of judgment, and offers him to the people as their King, crowned, enrobed, and enthroned. In condemning the one seated upon the chair of judgment, the people condemn themselves, and the crucifixion that follows is their sentencing (he dies, to their dismay, as *King of the Jews*); for him, it is the ascent to the Father, whose will he has accomplished. In this parting of the ways, the map of God's salvation is finally drawn, and revelation is complete. Thus the words of Jesus as he dies: *It is fulfilled*.

It can hardly be denied that the Catholic presentation of Jesus of Nazareth - the one our people in the pews would recognise - is in theological terms based more or less exclusively upon the figure we find in the Fourth Gospel. Most Catholics will, for instance, assume that Jesus knew he was God, knew his vocation, and knew the Resurrection before it happened. It's the Fourth Gospel that begins the Passion narrative - described by scholars as "The Book of Glory" - with the words:

⁶ Jn 3:18

⁷ Jn 5:23

⁸ Jn 8:24

⁹ Jn 1:9

¹⁰ Jn 9:41

*Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands,
and that he had come from God and was returning to God¹¹*

and it is therefore no surprise to find in the Fourth Gospel no account of the Agony of Gethsemane. It is hard not to think that this theme of certainty is a grave impediment to any understanding of the human reality of Jesus' suffering and death. In a strange paradox, most Catholics will find the veracity of Jesus' suffering central to their picture of him; a profound reverence, for instance, for the story of Gethsemane can apparently co-exist with the effortless assumption that Jesus was uniquely gifted with foresight about the meaning of his journey to the Cross and its eventual outcome. Probably few Catholics will have been challenged to face this paradox. They want to believe that the Crucifixion was in some sense an unimaginably painful experience, beyond anything we could be asked to suffer; at the same time they want to believe that Jesus endured it with razor-sharp foreknowledge of its limits and its meaning and its outcome.

Equally, it has been possible, chiefly because of the liturgy, quietly to supplement the picture of Jesus received in the Fourth Gospel by the happenings which go undescribed there, and only appear in the Synoptics. For instance, the institution of the Eucharist is undescribed in the Fourth Gospel; yet the understanding of what Jesus intended by it is drawn from the latter, rather than from the former Gospels which actually give us the account.

It is a salutary exercise, as I have often said, to read the Synoptics separately, and to try to imagine that you are reading the only Gospel that was ever written. We find it almost impossible to clear our minds of the insights of John, because we have traditionally employed this Gospel in the rôle of interpreting all the others.

One of the things Dodd says is that the quintessence of the whole Gospel can usually be elicited from reading any one of its parts, and this is an extraordinary fact. It is as if John selects his material - fairly restrictively, by comparison with the Synoptists - and writes each incident as if he is giving himself the task of including the themes of the whole work at every point. In the time remaining I would like to see if we can verify this fact.

THE PROLOGUE

Jn 1:1-18

A habit I've fallen into in reading the Fourth Gospel is to relate any passage from the body of the Gospel back to the Prologue. In some ways this is perverse, in that the dominant concept in the Prologue is that of God's Word; and it is a concept conspicuously undeveloped - indeed, quite undeveloped as a title for Christ - in the body of the Gospel. Despite that, I've yet to find a passage that is not illuminated by this exercise.

So to the prologue. We could begin by form-criticism: what sort of writing is it? In literary terms it is quite unlike the prologues of Mt and Lk - the famous birth narratives - because they are highly-developed stories, and this is not a story, but poetry, even if poetry with a heavy charge of theology. Yet the comparison isn't useless; the birth narratives, in their different ways, take back the Passion account and the account of the ministry to their roots: in the case of Matthew, to a time before Jesus' birth; in the case of Luke, to a time before his conception. We can immediately see that John takes the story back to the furthest possible point: before time began, before the Beginning. That is why he cannot voice these things by a human story, but must resort to poetry. The shorthand for theology that is written as

¹¹ Jn 13:3

poetry is *hymn*. The Prologue is a Christological Hymn. We know this genre from other examples within the New Testament.

Now for redaction criticism: what is the quality of the text? It could do with a bit of weeding, which the NJB has already carried out for you: the elimination of vv 6-8 and 15. If you lay these down consecutively, you will discover that they fit together perfectly and slot into place before v 19, and it makes the Prologue sit far better if they are so excluded from it.

The Prologue is going to tell us the relationship of Jesus, not to his earthly parents, but to the Father and to the whole of creation. The relationship described between God and Word at the beginning of the Prologue is very complex. Note the use of *God* in verse 1 is replaced by the use of *Father* by verse 18. This makes possible the giant statement of v 1c,

The Word was God

The Gospel begins with this statement, and certainly there is an inclusion between it and 20:28 at the far end of the Gospel, where Thomas calls Jesus “my Lord and my God”. On the way Jesus will be charged with blasphemously “making himself God” (5:18, 10:33), so that this statement stands at the very head of the Gospel is of great, not to say rather mysterious, significance.

Fr Michael might easily have set you an essay asking why, in the light of this verse, the Church made such heavy weather of arriving at the Nicæan formula, *true God from true God* (325 AD). I have prepared a sheet for you which draws comparisons between the Johannine Prologue and other New Testament hymns, showing how near they come to using divine titles for Jesus, often long before John 1 came to be written. In the case of the ones quoted by Paul, we are looking at potentially the oldest Christian affirmations: if 1Thess is our oldest Christian writing, then the hymns written before Paul obviously predate even that. It is quite clear from these sources that the affirmations of the Fourth Gospel are far from being late first-century or early second-century theological essays. These affirmations are far nearer to the event of Jesus Christ’s life, and the effect that he personally exerted on the minds of his contemporaries. I feel that this reflection is of great importance for our grasp of the credal milieu amid which the Gospel came to receive its written form in the New Testament.

(to be continued)