



## JOHN THE SOARING EAGLE

Lent Course, St Michael's Cornhill,

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For some sixteen years I lectured once a year for Swan Hellenic. Indeed I only gave up just a year ago. It took me to almost every part of the globe, even as far as Cape Horn and the Falkland Islands. I remember as we travelled in southern Chile being encouraged to look for the condors. When we eventually espied them, they were enormous with a huge wingspan and cruising up high. Eagles are not dissimilar, albeit not quite so large or high flying. I've seen eagles once or twice in northern Scotland as you may well have done in different parts of Europe. These remarkable birds see our world in quite a different way from us. They scan a farther horizon. All they see is within a much more panoramic context.

This is something of the contrast we see between John's Gospel and the three synoptic records which we've so far encountered. Perhaps I can add a further metaphor. You will know our BBC television programmes like *Newsnight* and *Panorama*. These and similar programmes on other channels are undeniably 'news programmes' but they are in sharp contrast with 'the News' – that is news bulletins. These other programmes come at the news from a broader perspective: there has been both time and opportunity to stand back and be that much more reflective

It's this sort of contrast that we see between John and the other evangelists. The difference is marked up from the very beginning with his remarkable and unforgettable prologue. The essence of that is captured in the first fourteen verses of his first chapter. What would Christmas be like – whether Midnight Mass, or the Nine Lessons and Carols without John's prologue. In the Catholic tradition it gained the title 'The Last Gospel', generally because it would be included at the very end of the rite just before the 'Ite missa est', the dismissal: 'Go, the Mass is ended!'

But that title ‘the Last Gospel’ is appropriate too for a quite different reason. Almost certainly the prologue was written after the main structure of the gospel had been completed. Quite often, when I’m contemplating a piece of writing, I shall decide finally on the title of the piece only after I’ve written it. By that point it will be clear to me how the piece has turned out and what the main focus has become. If I’d written the title any earlier, then the title I’d chosen may be quite inappropriate. In his prologue, John is able to crystallise, not only the gospel, but also the significance of Jesus, which is, of course, why the gospel has been written.

Before we reflect on other aspects of John’s amazing piece of writing, let’s spend a moment or two looking at the prologue. First of all it makes clear that since Jesus is God incarnate, and although there is something very specific and particular about his humanity – he is a human being just like us – nonetheless, the essence of Jesus’ being is eternal, for God as we see God in Jesus did not suddenly appear at the beginning of what is now often described as the *Christian Era*. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God;’

*The Word*, of course, is Jesus. The Greek word translated as *word*, *logos*, means more than just ‘a word’, or even ‘the word’ as it’s often used of Scripture or even a sermon. Word here is charged with far more allusiveness; so it means *reason, pattern, purpose*. It also stands in parallel, almost as a synonym for the Hebrew word translated as *wisdom* in the Old Testament. I mentioned in an earlier talk the Jewish philosopher and theologian, *Philo*, who was writing in northern Egypt at about the same time as Jesus was teaching. The term *logos* or *word* is a key concept for him too. It sits at the heart of an understanding of God as the essence behind the purpose of all life and existence.

This very point is elucidated in the very next sentences: ‘In him was life and the life was the light of men (*we might now* say humanity, humankind or mankind). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’ Here is one of those places where the King James Version does us better service. It reads: ‘The light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.’ Here there’s a marvellous ambiguity. For here comprehendeth means *understanding* as we would expect, but it also means capture, obscure or even *extinguish* it. The darkness neither understood it, nor indeed could it put out the light.

Light is a key word for John, and especially as we move towards the passion, for light is used to describe the *glory* of God in Christ. In spite of the profundity of John’s thought, his vocabulary is generally very simple and even fairly spare. Words like light, darkness, love -above, below - glory are key words and are repeated in different ways throughout the gospel.

The prologue bears just a little further attention before we move on. Let me remind you of just a little more of it, so: ‘He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.’

This, of course, all points forward to the passion which in John, using the strongest irony of all, sees Jesus as both *dying and being exalted all in one and the same act of God*: ‘I, if I be lifted up will draw all people unto me.’ The final paragraph of the prologue is the keystone of the entire Johannine corpus. It was how the Johannine community understood the seminal part of Jesus in God’s plan: ‘And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father.’ Here is set out again the coincidence of God and humanity in Jesus, but also God’s existence and indeed the Word’s existence for eternity. All these simple words are there again – grace, truth, glory, word.

So, then, the prologue, written after the gospel’s completion, sets the scene. But what sort of scenery is there in the set of this dramatic performance? It’s a very different scenario from that of the other gospels. Did John know the other gospels? Let me say something of the scenery in the dramatic set of this play, and then try to answer my second question: In the synoptic gospels, as we’ve seen, there’s quite a lot going on, on the human level. Even in Mark, the earliest and shortest of the accounts, there’s no shortage of action. As we’ve moved on, we’ve seen that activity increase. For the most part, in John’s Gospel, however, there is much less activity.

So, in the first twelve chapters a pattern establishes itself with a limited number of miracles or 'signs' which then severally issue into dialogues between Jesus and others and then finally appears a reflection from Jesus himself – often fairly extended. This 'book of signs' as it is often known is then followed by what some writers have called a 'book of glory'. Here the focus is on Jesus, leading into the passion and all that follows from that. The story of Lazarus in chapter eleven acts almost as a hinge between these two parts of the book. One mustn't somehow be too certain that John, whoever he was, conceived or even wrote his gospel as two separate sections precisely like this. It's easy for us as readers to place our own structure on it. This is, however, how the book reads to us.

Then there's the second question: did John know the other three gospels – or indeed any one of them? Now what is tantalising is that there is indeed overlap between them. Some incidents – like the feeding of the 5,000, for example, appears in all four gospels. More tantalising still, there are pieces of dialogue that are identical. But virtually all scholars now believe that John didn't actually know of the synoptic writers, or of their writings. Why so?

First of all there is such a contrast in the construction of his narrative. Second, there are absolute clashes. So, for example, there is no rehearsing of the Eucharistic narrative in John. There is a 'last supper' but it's part of the Lazarus story. The rest is rehearsed in the 'bread of life' chapter. Then, the cleansing of the Temple, a crucial episode, comes right near the beginning for John, whereas with the other three it is effectively the incident that finally triggers Jesus' arrest, trial, passion and crucifixion. So, scholars do instead believe that John knew of some of those oral traditions which predate all the gospels. He then used some of those, hence the exact use of dialogue or descriptive passages.

Just a dip into what I've called the 'book of signs' may be illuminating. The first sign (and it's actually described as that in the gospel) is the miracle of the water being changed into wine at Cana of Galilee. This is idiosyncratic amongst the signs inasmuch as there's little dialogue and no monologue at the end of the incident. The cleansing of the temple follows and then the visit of Nicodemus by night. This sets the mystical pattern in John's thought. Nicodemus comes by night, so in darkness, and in secret. There's a fascinating dialogue which follows and which leads into more reflection on light and darkness.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is perhaps the classic example of an incident. Out of it follows a dialogue with the woman and that then issues in the saying about *living water*. Often the key sayings in John are preceded by that twofold 'Truly, truly, I say to you' or 'Verily, verily' in the older translations. Perhaps one of the classic signs passages is the whole of chapter six which begins with the feeding of the 5,000. That incident itself leads into a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples about the bread which leads to eternal life. It is a thinly disguised encounter with the eucharist. Of course, the key moment comes in verse 35. Jesus' disciples ask him, following his talk of 'the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world', 'Lord, give us this bread always.' He responds: '*I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.*'

This saying is but one of a series of 'I am' sayings that pepper the gospel, both in the 'book of signs' and in the 'book of glory'. Some of you may have encountered the powerful, simple modern hymn by an Indian writer: 'Jesus, the Lord said, "I am the bread, the bread of life for the world said he."' The hymn-writer then takes one through some of the other great 'I am' sayings in later verses. Jesus the Lord said 'I am the life', and so on. These 'I am' sayings have an enormous breadth and resonance. For one of the key words used in the Old Testament for God, *Yahweh*, means in Hebrew 'I am'. Indeed the Lord says to Moses that 'I am who I am' – and then later that 'I am' sent you. So these sayings identify Jesus' divinity.

I hardly need remind you of others – 'I am the light of the world', 'I am the good shepherd', 'I am the resurrection and the life', 'Before Abraham was, I am.' Let me stop briefly at one more sign. It is the healing of the man born blind in chapter nine. Here there are powerful signs of John's irony which reappears so profoundly in the trial and passion. Jesus heals the blind man and the Pharisees attempt to make trouble. There's one marvellous moment when they question the man:

'"Give God the praise", they say, "we know that this man (that's Jesus) is a sinner."' The man answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I

see.” They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered them, “I have told you already and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?”’

There is an irony in this chapter which evokes great humour. One only has to hear it read aloud by a good reader and it is true comedy. Of course, the entire discourse about blindness runs all the way through the dialogue at two levels. It is not only about physical blindness – it’s about spiritual blindness too. So, let me move us on. Chapter eleven is the story of the raising of Lazarus, and it acts as a hinge to the passion, to the ‘book of glory’, by pre-empting Jesus’ ‘resurrection’. It’s here that Jesus utters another of the great ‘I am sayings’ – in verse 25: ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’ Supper follows, with the anointing of Jesus by Mary for his burial and then the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

It is in the trial that John’s irony is paramount. So many of the resonant phrases from Jesus’ passion are found here. The entire dialogue about Jesus’ kingship manifests the irony: ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ asks Pilate. Later Jesus responds: ‘My kingship is not of this world.’ Pilate responds: ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus replies: ‘You say that I am a king.’ Jesus then continues: ‘For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.’ This prompts from Pilate: ‘What is truth?’

Out of this extraordinary dialogue – and I have treated you to but a smattering – issues Jesus’ condemnation and crucifixion. But, despite the brutality and agony, in John’s account it is also Jesus’ vindication by God, his exaltation and effectively his enthronement. Already, in chapter twelve we’ve heard Jesus say: ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me.’ The resurrection narratives in chapter twenty effectively *crowns* this. Jesus is lifted up in glory. The ‘book of glory’ ends with a tiny coda telling us what the book is all about:

‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.’

Here once again we encounter the word sign; here too is a hint of other material about Jesus which John has not used. Here is the reason for the book’s existence. It is fairly clearly the original ending of the gospel. Chapter 21 is believed by most to have been added afterwards. It’s in John’s style and if it isn’t by him it’s by a very close friend and member of his community. There are more resurrection appearances and also Peter’s vindication by his threefold affirmation of his love for Jesus, following his earlier threefold denial. John is the only evangelist who takes the trouble to vindicate Peter. The chapter closes with another curious coda. It refers to the disciple who has written the narrative, affirming its truth – and then enigmatically: ‘But there were also many other things that Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.’

We know, as he hints here, that the gospel has offered more than enough. The incarnate one, the ‘I am’, has performed signs, engaged with humanity and finally is crucified but manifested in glory. ‘I, if I be lifted up will draw all people unto me.’ In that stands our hope.