

In St Mark's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the strong, vigorous Son of God. For St Matthew he is the fulfilment of the Jewish Law and the Prophets. In St Luke he is the universal Saviour. And now in St John's Gospel, Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

This Gospel was written towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century: we know this from papyri dating from early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century which refer to it. The character of St John's Gospel is remarkable, very different from the other three. There are no parables, no commandment to the disciples to baptise. There is, strikingly, no account of the institution of Holy Communion. And yet St John's is the most theological and the most sacramental of all the Gospels. But also in St John we have a profound theological teacher who sprinkles his work with whimsical episodes and jokey, even satirical, comments. So when the disciple Philip introduces Jesus as from Nazareth, Nathanael shrugs and says:

*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth.*

Today someone might say, *What? Surely he never comes from Barnsley! Or Sarfend.*

The intensely theological is all mixed up with brazen jokiness. For instance, when Jesus is speaking with the woman at the well – about no less a topic than the water of eternal life – the woman tells Jesus that she's not married and he replies:

*Thou hast well said, I have no husband: for thou hast had five husbands – and he whom thou now hast is NOT thy husband!*

So what do we find in St John's Gospel which we find in none of the others? There is the wedding at Cana and the water into wine. Jesus' conversation in the middle of the night with Nicodemus about being born again. Here too there is a sardonic, satirical response to the literalistic academic Nicodemus who thinks being born again must mean entering a second time your mother's womb. And Jesus replies,

*Art thou a master of Israel and knowest not these things?*

In St John's Gospel Jesus is not made out to be a prophet, or even a teacher. Rather he speaks boldly of himself. The words are specifically, repeatedly, I AM. So:

*I am the good Shepherd... I am the vine.*

And, supremely, at his trial before the High Priest, Jesus uses those words I AM to reveal that he is God:

*Before Abraham was, I AM*

This is the centre of St John's proclamation. There is no room in his Gospel for the typical liveryman's or freemason's, or any other modern liberal, semi-believing, respectable sub-Christian view of Jesus as *one of the great teachers*. You know the kind of thing. I hear it all the time from these respectable people:

*I don't go along with all that miraculous, Son of God, stuff. But I think Jesus did a lot of good*

You can't have that, says St John. He tells us straight: a man who goes around saying that he is God on earth is either exactly who he says he is – or else he is bonkers. And Jesus does go around saying this, again and again:

*I and my Father are one...All things that the Father hath are mine...And now O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was...*

And Jesus does not merely say these things, but he backs them up with actions as in the raising of Lazarus. St John alone contains this very long, detailed and dramatic story.

Unlike the other gospel-writers, St John does not give us Jesus breaking bread and offering the cup. He does not say *Do this in remembrance of me*. And yet St John's Gospel is the most sacramental of all four gospels, for he tells us what the eating of the bread of the Eucharist and the drinking of the Cup actually signify. Jesus speaking in St John's Gospel is explicit:

*Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*

Jesus is also explicit on church authority: *Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained*

These are hardly the words of a decent chap who had a few good ideas, don't you know! It's a long way from the do-gooding type who goes in for a bit of social involvement – so beloved of the modern, half-believing bishops and clergy. St John is in effect saying, *Either take Jesus at his own estimation of himself – or leave him alone.*

And so we come to St John's presentation of Good Friday. St John in two words declares that the death of Christ brings about life for us. From the Cross, Jesus declares:

*It is finished!*

The original meaning of the word is *accomplished*. *It is accomplished.*

For St John, the death of Christ is not a tragedy: it is a triumph.

Jesus is the dying and rising God. But he is not the dying and rising god of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Jesus is not part of any myth. He is the God who truly dies and truly rises again: not in fable but in history.

St John's Gospel is not just a theological treatise. He is the most personal and emotional of all four Gospel writers – even more than St Luke. Hear him as he writes of Jesus dying on the Cross:

*When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son.*

Or see him by the empty sepulchre on Easter morning:

*Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?*

Perhaps the most moving episode of all comes when, after his resurrection, Jesus restores Simon Peter. Remember, Peter denied Jesus three times. Here Jesus gives him three chances to confirm his love and then he commissions him as an apostle:

*Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? And Peter said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.*

In each of these sermons on the Gospels, I have tried to send you away with one feature that characterises each Gospel. So what, if we may make so bold, is St John's singular theme and his greatest achievement? It is to condemn fiercely and repeatedly a form of wickedness in religion which throughout history is always erupting, threatening to undermine and finally destroy us. This is the phoney religion – what the Church Fathers call *heresy* – the phoney religion of *spirituality*

In the Roman Empire in New Testament times, this heresy was found in various strands of what is called *Gnosticism*. The Gnostics – the word derived from *gnosis, knowledge* – claimed to be the privileged sect who were in the know. And what they claimed to know was that the world is evil and it was not created by God. All material things, they taught, are evil. And the only thing to be valued and striven for is the world of pure spirit. This is not a merely theoretical matter for, if you believe that this world in which we live, move and have our being is insignificant and unreal, then you can easily go on to say that how you behave in this world doesn't matter. And that is the high-minded philosophical excuse for immorality, excess, cruelty, torture and indifference of every kind.

Gnosticism, spirituality, is the perennial phoney religion. It reappears in various disguises. It was there in the Manichees of St Augustine's day. It came again with the Albigensians. In our day, I can think of two places where this most vile and destructive influence appears. It is there on the *body, mind and spirit shelf* in all the new-agey hokum which, thanks to the gullibility of the public, makes such fortunes for the trashy booksellers and popularises the colour supplements. And Gnosticism is there in every interpretation of life which is theoretical: the phoney world of abstractions, systems, processes and techniques. This is our modern world, wonderfully satirised by T.S. Eliot when he spoke of:

*Men dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.*

St John's Gospel is the remedy for this pernicious stuff. No theory will do for St John. We cannot escape this world into the higher world of abstract ideals – that Gandhi-esqe, Tolstoyan, Hampstead-Buddhist, Madame Blavatsky, diets and Inner Light fantasy of pure spirituality which urges you to *get in touch with your true self*. That way, says St John, is not the lofty tastefulness of refined people: it is poisonous. For St John, truth is about eating Christ's Body and drinking his Blood. Supremely, he repeats this until he is blue in the face in the superb Christmas gospel in which he tells us that God made himself into the lowest of the low in order to raise us to the highest heaven. The everyday world is not insignificant, it is not an illusion and it is not evil. No one could put it more clearly, more vehemently than St John:

*All things were made by him and – just in case we are too stupid to get this - without him was not anything made that was made...And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory: the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*