



Sensing the
Divine

John's word made flesh

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 658 7

First published 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Introduction

The city was frenetic, throbbing, pulsating below him, and John's pen hovered over the parchment. Dare he write it? Dare he put into ink the four most outrageous words ever written, that *would* ever be written? Words that are either utter madness or life-transforming truth?

As John looked out over the city, he witnessed a heaving metropolis, a vibrant centre of commerce humming with human life and bristling with unstoppable energy. He viewed the buzzing harbour and docks, ships unburdening themselves of varied cargo. All life was there, in Ephesus. Prostitution was rife, some associated with the temple to Diana, Artemis the fertility deity, her sanctuary hailed as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was precisely in this social setting, this urban context, that he penned words that would change the world: 'The Word became flesh.' In Ephesus, the very word 'flesh' took on a meaning that was visceral, earthy, full of passion.

The original inspiration for this book comes from reading the prologue to John's gospel in its most probable original setting. As course director of St George's College, Jerusalem, I led pilgrimages not only throughout the Holy Land – celebrated in two other books¹ – but also in Turkey, ancient Asia Minor. A highlight of such a tour is Ephesus, magnificently excavated to reveal its Roman treasures, many dating from the time of Hadrian but significant elements from the time of Christ.

John in Ephesus

Irenaeus (d. 202), in his work *Against Heresies*, written about 185, affirms that the author of the fourth gospel was John the Lord's

disciple, who wrote it at Ephesus, where John remained until the time of Trajan. Eusebius tells us that Irenaeus' authority for these statements was Polycarp, who learned truth from the apostles. Polycarp taught Irenaeus, passing on to him stories about John.²

Irenaeus relates how Polycarp told him this episode:

John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and seeing Cerinthus [the gnostic] inside, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, 'Let us fly, in case even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside.'³

This vignette is not only part of the chain of testimony linking these early Christian generations, but it also supplies a minor clue about the opulence and luxury of Ephesus at this time.

Appreciating creation

As John looked out from his writing desk, he surveyed the horizons. In Roman times, Ephesus was situated on the northern slopes of the hills Coressus and Pion, and the dawn was breaking in the east, dispelling the gloom of night. The first rays of light were illuminating the hills. He glimpsed the turquoise Aegean Sea and enjoyed watching the unceasing movement of the incoming waves. His eyes alighted on the ribbon of the river Cayster, and the stunning Meander Valley. He was awestruck by the mountains that surrounded him, with their exposed rocks and cover of cypress trees. He looked down on the vineyards below, and the irrigated horticulture with its rich harvest of fruits of every kind. Looking up, he saw the bluest of skies, broken only by the occasional cloud. He felt the wind blowing on his face, rustling his parchments. As he surveyed the creation around him, below him and above him, he began to write:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All

things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... He was in the world, and the world came into being through him.

JOHN 1:1-5, 10

John's timeless words were not written in a vacuum. They are not an abstract philosophical treatise. They are a hymn of praise, a poem that springs from a certain context. They refer to an environment, an ecology, that John saw with his own enquiring eyes. John will go on in his gospel to delight in the natural world, because he sees Jesus the Word in every wave and every fold in the hills, in every leaf and bud. He will go on to see how the vine, the flowing water, the seed, the shepherd and the lamb reveal God the Word. For John, the Word – the very instrument and tool by which God originated and shaped the cosmos – has focused its divine power and presence in the human life of Jesus.

Celebrating incarnation

When John was in Ephesus, its sprawling population numbered about 150,000. It was the one of the largest cities of the Roman empire, a pivotal trade and administrative centre, as well as a focus of pilgrimage to Artemis. It enjoyed a rich and sensuous culture. It boasted a theatre, seating 25,000 spectators, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (19:29), and a significant stadium. The city had a number of temples, testifying to the multicultural and pluralistic nature of its society. Statues of the healing god Asclepius, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Hygeia and Pan were found in the bath-gymnasium complex – a place not only for cleansing and healing, but for sport and sexual activities of all orientations. The brothels of the city were infamous and much frequented.

As a key crossroads of civilisation, politically Ephesus was hailed as 'the supreme metropolis of Asia'. The Roman governor of the region

lived there. Economically, Ephesus was a giant among first-century cities. With its strategic location, it was the chief commercial centre of western Asia Minor. Its harbour welcomed ships from around the Mediterranean and even from India, while its two major roads gave ready access to other cities along the coast and inland. A city used to welcoming foreign guests, travellers and traders, a variety of ethnicities and races were represented in its populace.

In Ephesus, it could be rightly said, 'All human life was there': traders and sailors, craftsmen and artisans, priests and prostitutes, sages and shopkeepers. Poverty and need coexisted with opulence and riches. The population was swelling: those 'who were born... of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man' (John 1:13). Ephesus was an important centre of the slave trade, with men and women bought and sold to be used in mining, construction or domestic settings. Indeed, a quarter of the city's population was composed of slaves. The city's wealth was underpinned by the untold, underground story of slavery and exploitation.

As John looked out on this multifaceted mosaic of human life, he drew a deep breath. His pen hovered for a moment above the page. Dare he commit to writing those words that had been drumming in his mind, as he tried to encapsulate the mystery of Jesus? Was it too much to affirm? As he looked at the city below him, with its blend of sweat and fragrance, its maelstrom of human emotion and fleshly activity, his pen touched the parchment. There was no going back:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

JOHN 1:14, 16

These words in the prologue to John's gospel – celebrating creation and incarnation, Word and flesh – announce to the reader what is to come. John knows that he is pondering a paradox. The one of whom

he will write is at once ‘from above’ yet living fully here below. John will need to combine, somehow, the intimacy and ultimacy of Jesus, his transcendence and tenderness. His testimony will be at once sublime and visceral. Later, he will write in a letter:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1 JOHN 1:1-4

While in Palestine, John had seen for himself with his own eyes and touched for himself with his very hands the mystery of Jesus. Now he longs with all his heart not only to communicate his discovery to others, but also to invite them, in some sense, to reach out and encounter Jesus. He has no alternative. If he is writing of a sensual Christ, of flesh that bears the Word, he must write a sensual gospel.⁴

For John, the person of Jesus is an intriguing enigma and paradox. He is ‘from above’ – a transcendent figure, the divine Son of God. Yet he is also earthly, and reveals human vulnerabilities: thirsting, hungry, fatigued. The Jesus of the fourth gospel delights in human company, relationships, touch and physical contact.

Infinity meets fragility, transcendence blends with tenderness, meekness radiates majesty. The prologue gives us a glimpse of the intimacy between Father and Son: ‘No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known’ (1:18). Actually, John refers to Jesus’ being ‘in the Father’s bosom [Greek: *kolpon*]’. This word is repeated when he writes of the beloved disciple at the last supper reclining ‘in the

bosom of Jesus' (13:23). The intimacy between Father and Son is mirrored in the relationship of Jesus and disciple. Indeed, Jesus describes friendship in terms of a sharing of secrets: 'I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (15:15). In the same discourse, pouring water intimately over the bare feet of the disciples, Jesus says: 'I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done' (13:15). Jesus' sensuality and experience of intimacy is paradigmatic – in it, he offers us an ideal to emulate.

Spiritual gospel?

Since the earliest times, the fourth gospel has often been characterised by commentators and writers as the most mystical of the gospels. Cyril of Alexandria (378–444) hailed John's work as 'the spiritual gospel'.⁵ This labelling stuck and encouraged a symbolic reading of the text, a search for an esoteric Johannine mysticism.⁶ Cyril was contrasting it with the other gospels, which had recorded, he felt, the 'bodily facts' of Jesus' life and ministry. John was doing something different, he thought, by placing an emphasis on the symbolic over against the physical.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Origen (185–254) writes:

What John calls the eternal gospel, and what may properly be called the spiritual gospel, presents clearly to those who have the will to understand, all matters concerning the very Son of God, both the mysteries presented by His discourses and those matters of which His acts were the enigmas.⁷

In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo wrote:

In the four gospels, or rather in the four books that make up the one gospel, it was St John who in his teaching soared to heights far loftier than those attained by the other three

evangelists, and it was his wish to carry our hearts with him on his flight. The other three walked with the Lord as with a man upon the earth and said little concerning his divinity. But John, as though scorning to tread upon earth, rose by his very first words not only above the earth, above the atmosphere, above the heavens, but even above the whole army of angels and all the array of invisible powers. The sublimity of this beginning was well matched by all that followed, for John spoke of the divinity of our Lord as no other has ever spoken.⁸

Augustine likens John to the eagle who can soar higher than any other bird, because John's 'spiritual understanding compared to the eagle, has elevated his preaching higher, and far more sublimely, than the other three'.⁹ In this passage, Augustine suggests that the author of the fourth gospel is not only elevated but his feet are not on the ground; he is soaring above the earth.

Aim of this book

It is the contention of this book that the fourth gospel is rooted in the dust, dirt and beauty of the earth. It brims with sensuality, alerting and activating our senses, both bodily and spiritual. It is pervaded by a physicality, a materiality, shot through with transcendence, teeming with divine life. This book aims to do three things. First, we shall appreciate afresh the meaning and significance of the most outrageous of all Christian claims: the idea that the divine Word took flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. We will trace this theme through the fourth gospel, identifying and celebrating its sensuous, tactile character. Second, we shall see what implications this has for the practice of Christian spirituality, and what this suggests for contemporary ways of praying and acting. The gospel of John will be a springboard, a catalyst, a stimulus as we search for forms of spirituality that speak to us today and connect with people's contemporary search for the divine. Third, we shall conclude by pondering its significance for the nature of mission in today's world.

Approach of this book

In this book, we will enjoy exploring the ways in which the fourth gospel combines spirituality and physicality. As we ponder the themes, we will also be on the lookout for clues to a spirituality relevant to our own time and clues about our contemporary mission in the world. The book can be used in groups, and both questions for reflection and practical directions for prayer exercises are offered at the end of each chapter.

This is a book for enquirers and those seeking a spiritual way today. It is a resource for teachers and preachers. It can well be used by spiritual directors and by retreat-givers – indeed, the contents of this book suggest a rich outline for a retreat or an agenda for various sessions with a parish group or prayer group.

As we look at the senses in the fourth gospel, we will discover that John has a singular approach to each of them, quite unlike the other gospels. He approaches the senses in a unique and distinctive way and gives to them a particular meaning: looking, listening, touching, tasting, drinking and eating, and even scent has a singular meaning. This is not incidental or accidental, but springs from John's conviction: 'The Word was made flesh.' For John, the senses have a deep theological significance, challenging and inspiring the practice of spirituality today and pertinent to the very nature of our engagement with the world.

The need for this book

We need to rediscover a sensuous gospel today, because for centuries the Christian religion has been plagued by a dualism between flesh and spirit that has led it to be dehumanising.

The formative first centuries of the church were infected by Neoplatonism. Monastic life, which developed as the paradigm of

Christian perfection, celibacy and hatred of the body, maintained by all forms of self-mortification, forced Christianity into the mould of a world-denying not world-affirming faith. Divisive, dualistic thinking gave rise to disastrous polarities in Christian thinking, as things were pitched against one another. Heaven was opposed to earth, the body to the spirit. Politics and prayer were to be kept separate. Sacred and secular were delineated with barriers, as if they were two separate realms, holy and unholy. The church and the world are set against each other. There is a natural human tendency towards polarisation, keeping things apart. It has to do with being in control, trying to make sense of things neatly, seeing things in black and white, but as we know it can lead to fundamentalism, racism, homophobia, fear of the other. We feel safer when we oppose, judge, differentiate, label and compare.

Today, we live in a polarised world: Republican vs Democrat, Conservative vs Labour, Protestant vs Catholic, east vs west. Things are often said to be black or white. In the UK, Parliament is based on government and opposition being locked in perpetual combat. We are uneasy with the idea of coalition; we say: 'It shouldn't be like this! It will never work!' Bifurcation is the preferred option. It has been said, we live in a 'tit-for-tat universe'.¹⁰ Binary operating is not only confined to the workings of the computer; it infects our very mindset. In spirituality, dualistic thinking has created unnecessary distances and opened up uncalled-for chasms. Where God is thought of as something 'out there' or 'up there', the divine is perceived to be remote and unapproachable.

But John does not tolerate such a dualism. While 'no one has ever seen God', he delights that the divine is indeed seen and felt in the person of Jesus. For him, the two worlds meet in Jesus: they intersect, they interpenetrate. The Word became flesh. The incarnation is a breakthrough.

But there is another reason why this study is timely. In today's culture, we are increasingly removed from the natural world.

Technology is distancing us from nature, keeping us at one remove, at least, from an immediacy of contact and touch with the physical world. We have inserted a range of electronic gadgetry between ourselves and our environs and, while this might have the potential to be a lens, a magnifying glass as it were, it often turns out to be a barrier that fences us off from the natural world. This journey through John's gospel will help us to reconnect with the ground beneath our feet. It will stimulate a re-engagement, a re-enchantment with God's world, which is brimming with epiphanies. John will help us to recognise and welcome these, to rediscover theophany. He will help us, indeed, to become fully human once again, activating afresh our senses and sensibilities.

In this book, each chapter is in two parts as we explore this theme. First, we discover how John invites us to open our eyes, unstop our ears and discover God through one of the senses. In the second part of each chapter, we seek to retrieve from the Christian tradition examples of how Christian spirituality celebrates the use of such senses in the practice of prayer and in the outworking of our faith.

An invitation to respond

The reader-response approach to literature has alerted us to the vital role that the reader enjoys when interacting with the written text: the experience of the reader meets the givenness of the written word in a unique dynamic that unlocks fresh possibilities for appreciation of the work. The fourth gospel invites us into such an exploratory relationship. We are summoned to engage with the text with body, mind and soul. This can be an unpredictable exercise: we need to be ready to be surprised, shocked, disturbed, heartened, moved and challenged by our encounter with John's gospel. Our physical and spiritual senses can be stimulated and reactivated. We need to be prepared for a fresh reading that may change and transform us in the process. Culpepper pioneered such an approach to the gospel by his attentiveness to time, plot and characterisation within

the narrative.¹¹ Staley took this further in his study *The Print's First Kiss*.¹² This present book asks of its reader an openness, a readiness to respond, a preparedness to receive the impact of God's word afresh. This book is not a literary analysis of the fourth gospel but a springboard for prayer, reflection and deeper engagement with God's world.

Overview

The first two chapters open up the journey for us. We begin our encounter with the fourth gospel by taking a look at the physicality of Christ and the use of our bodily and spiritual senses. Second, we seek to activate our 'sixth sense' and explore how John's gospel summons us into a deeper kind of knowing. Our journey gets underway as in chapters 3 and 4 we appreciate the acute sense of place and time in the fourth gospel. Successive chapters take us through the senses: the theme of touch and feel (chapter 5) enables us to explore both the physicality and the emotionality of Jesus in the gospel. After engaging with the key senses of sight (chapter 6) and hearing (chapter 7), we look at the less appreciated themes of taste (chapter 8) and scent (chapter 9). We conclude by celebrating how John's gospel summons us to life in all its fullness – to becoming fully alive and awake to God's revelations and epiphanies, however they may come (chapter 10). It is hoped that this book will be empowering and liberating for you as you unfold the sensuous gospel!



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This compelling, inspiring book is an invigorating rereading of the fourth gospel by a well-known Christian writer who has lived some years in the Holy Land. Uniquely, it approaches John's gospel by exploring how he uses the senses, both physical and spiritual, in his encounter with Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. This refreshing appreciation of the gospel will activate and stimulate our own discoveries and spiritual quest, not only of the gospel, but also of God's world, ourselves and our mission.



The Revd Canon Dr Andrew D. Mayes is Priest of St Barnabas, Limassol, and the Spirituality Adviser for the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf. He is an international speaker and the author of several books on spirituality, including *Journey to the Centre of the Soul* (BRF, 2017).

‘The Word may have been made flesh, but the church has usually turned it back into words and formulas as soon as possible. They are easier to monitor. But Andrew Mayes’ thoughtful book lets the sensuous physicality of who God is in Jesus abide with us. And even though it is of course words (it is a book, after all), it is words that encourage us to rest and play and pray and act in the flesh and spirit of which we are made.’
Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford

