



**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. John 1:14**

Jesus, the Word Made Flesh (Part 1)

Throughout the ages, through endless varieties of religions and systems of belief, human beings have sought to encounter God. The evidence of religious expressions—temples, rituals, and sacred writings in every corner of the world in every age of history—convince us that this search to experience God is the deepest longing of the human condition. Yet the many attempts by all religions to meet God have only resulted in brief glimpses and fleeting insights into God's full reality. Ultimately, God is absolutely transcendent, so different from us and so far beyond us that human words and the human senses are incapable of grasping God's essence. The tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures expresses this transcendence of God by stating in various ways that God cannot be seen by human beings. God says in Exodus, "No one shall see me and live" (Exod 33:20).

Yet the gospel according to John demonstrates that humanity has reached a new experience in its attempt to encounter God. It announces that Jesus himself is the revelation of God, that if we want to know the unseen God, we must look intently at Jesus. "No one has ever seen God," the last line of the Gospel prologue confirms. But the way to meet God is through the life of

God's Son: "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18).

This is the key to the fourth gospel. John announces that the revelation brought by Jesus, the Son of God made flesh, makes possible a genuine and definitive knowledge of God. The Son is able to reveal God to us because he has lived with the Father throughout eternity. The Son has forever been "close to the Father's heart." The expression "close to the Father's heart" suggests an intimate relationship that unites Jesus inseparably to the Father in a bond of tender love.

This eternal bond of the Son with the Father enables Jesus to reveal God to us. And because the bond of the Father and the Son is one of intimate love, the revelation that Jesus offers us is not just one of doctrines about God but rather of letting the Father shine through his earthly life. As Jesus reveals himself, through the actions and teachings of his life among us, he shows us the Father. As Jesus proclaimed at the end of his public life: "Whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (12:45).

Reflection and Discussion

- In what ways have I sought to encounter God? Why do these give me only partial glimpses and insights into God's full reality?

- What does John's gospel tell us is unique about the revelation of God in Jesus? In what ways does this alter my attempts to encounter God?

Revelation through Signs and Divine Titles

One of the ways that Jesus reveals God to us is through the “signs” of John’s gospel. The narrative contains a series of “signs,” the word John uses to designate the wondrous deeds of Jesus. The author chose those miracles of Jesus that were most used in the preaching of the church. And rather than simply recounting these miracles and letting them speak for themselves, John developed them into great dramas, and they became powerful stories to teach about who Jesus is.

The first eleven chapters of the gospel recount seven signs: first, changing water into wine at Cana (2:1–11); second, healing the royal official’s son (4:46–54); third, healing the paralyzed man at the pool (5:1–15); fourth, feeding the five thousand with the loaves and fish (6:1–15); fifth, walking on the water (6:16–21); sixth, healing the blind man (9:1–41); and seventh, raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44). These deeds of healing and power are not so much significant in and of themselves as in their ability to point beyond themselves. Each of these seven signs points to the truth about who Jesus is. They are important because they reveal the Father at work in Jesus. They manifest the power and the love of God as Jesus draws people into the Father’s heart.

In each of these signs, the emphasis is placed on the meaning of the event and the spiritual reality of the miracle. When Jesus cures a sick person, the gospel makes it clear that this is a complete healing, a healing of the body and the spirit. When Jesus restores the sight of the blind man, the dialogue that follows makes it clear that Jesus has also given him spiritual sight (in contrast to the blindness of the Pharisees). When Jesus gives physical life to Lazarus, it is an outward manifestation of the eternal life Jesus gives to all. Physical health, sight, and life are gifts that anticipate God’s total healing, true vision, and eternal life. These gifts that Jesus offers are manifestations of the life that God wants to give to all people as they encounter him through the life of his Son.

Our transcendent, unseen God has always manifested himself through “signs” to his people, beginning in the foundational event of salvation history, the exodus. These Old Testament stories form the background for much of the Gospel of John. The Passover lamb, bronze serpent, manna, water from the rock, crossing the sea, the authority of Moses—all of these are ancient exodus motifs that form the context for the revelation of Jesus. In Exodus we are told

that God multiplied “signs” through Moses, but the people refused to believe. In the book of Numbers God asked: “How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have done among them?” (Num 14:11). Like the signs God worked through Moses, the signs in John’s gospel are works of revelation. They are actions of God that liberate people and lead them to salvation. Yet, as in the case of Moses, the gospel notes, “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him” (12:37).

A sign is an encounter with God and is intended to lead people to faith. John wrote his gospel to help us come to faith in Jesus Christ, because faith leads to life. He states his purpose very clearly toward the end of the gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). Thus, the most important reaction we should have when reading the gospel is a response of faith. We read not just for information or doctrinal knowledge, but to encounter the living Christ so that he may reveal to us the life of the Father and draw us near to his heart.

Another way that the Gospel of John reveals God to us through Jesus is through the “I am” sayings. On several occasions throughout the gospel, Jesus identifies himself with the words “I am.” For anyone familiar with the Old Testament, the words “I am” immediately call to mind God’s encounter with Moses at the burning bush. For example, Jesus solemnly declared: “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). By claiming this divine title for Jesus, the gospel writer expresses the oneness of Jesus with the Father, so much so that those who encounter Jesus also experience the unseen God.

There are also seven instances in the gospel in which Jesus speaks of himself with the phrase “I am...” followed by a variety of different predicates: “I am the bread of life” (6:35); “I am the light of the world” (8:12); “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:7); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25); “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6); and “I am the true vine” (15:1). The predicate is a description of who Jesus is in relationship to us. The seven images, like the seven “signs,” are keys to understanding the nature of Jesus and his work in the world. They proclaim that Jesus himself, present in flesh in our concrete world, is truly the definitive revelation of the Father.

Reflection and Discussion

- What is the difference between a “sign” in John’s gospel and a miracle in the other gospels?

- Why is a familiarity with the Old Testament so helpful in understanding John’s gospel?

The Physical, Earthly Revelation of God

Sometimes the Gospel of John is described as a “spiritual” gospel. While it is true that this gospel emphasizes the divine and other-worldly nature of Christ, it also makes it very clear that Jesus was a physical being who manifested the presence of God in very concrete, earthly ways. Throughout the gospel his humanity is unmistakable. Jesus knows the weariness of a tired body and the powerful emotions of the human heart. He was angry in the temple courts; he was tired as he sat down at the well in Samaria; he visibly wept at the death of his friend; he cried out on the cross with parched lips, “I am thirsty.”

The gospel also sets this human Jesus in a very real, physical world. The gospel indicates a detailed knowledge of the geography of Palestine, its regions and peoples. The author writes in amazingly accurate detail about the city of Jerusalem: for example, the sheep gate and the pool of Bethesda, the pool of Siloam, Solomon’s portico, the stone pavement of Pilate’s praetorium, and Golgotha, which he says looks like a skull. Much of the gospel reads like that

of an eyewitness, giving us many details that enhance our experience of Jesus living within the historical reality of his times.

The Gospel of John, even more than the other gospels, is filled with vivid, dramatic scenes in which Jesus personally encounters a host of other human beings. He encounters John the Baptist and his first disciples (chapter 1), his mother at Cana (chapter 2), Nicodemus (chapter 3), the Samaritan woman (chapter 4), the royal official (chapter 4), the paralyzed man at the pool (chapter 5), and many others. Through these human experiences, Jesus enables people to “see” the Father. In response to Philip’s request that Jesus “show” him the Father, Jesus said, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). Jesus reveals God through human encounters, not so much through communicating beliefs but through experiences of the senses—as John said in the opening words of his first letter: “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1). By revealing himself in earthly life, Jesus makes the Father known.

More than any other gospel, this proclamation of the good news summarizes the reason why the Christian religion is incarnational. All the good news of Christianity springs forth from the climactic verse of John’s prologue: “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” (1:14). The eternal Word of God became human; he literally pitched his tent in our world. This image of the tent is a metaphor from the exodus for God’s dwelling among his people in the wilderness. God’s “glory” is the visible manifestation of his majesty, seen in the desert and Jerusalem’s temple, and now in the very person of Jesus Christ. It is this wondrous reality of God incarnate among us that radiates throughout the whole gospel, filling it with light and wonder.

Reflection and Discussion

- In what ways does John’s gospel emphasize both the divine and human natures of Jesus?

- How does the Incarnation make the Christian religion unique among all other systems of belief? How does John's gospel make this dogma personal and real?

The One-of-a-Kind Gospel

The four gospels share many common elements. They tell of Jesus' inspiring words and powerful deeds as he traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem. They recount many similar stories, like the feeding of the crowds, the healing of blindness, and the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. By recalling his words and deeds, the power of his presence, and the impact of this experience on their lives, the early disciples began to form the memories and expressions of faith from which the gospels were eventually written. The very end of the fourth gospel reminds us that the account is only a limited view of Jesus, only a fraction of all that could be said about him, only a segment of all his many words and deeds. John concludes: "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).

Though each of the four gospels creates a unique expression of who Jesus is, the Gospel of John stands out as significantly different from the rest. With its rich symbolism, its unique vocabulary, its developed theology, and its spiritual insight, this fourth gospel bears only superficial resemblance to the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, ninety percent of the material of the other gospels is simply not found in John. His gospel does not contain parables, nor do we see Jesus performing exorcisms. Unlike the other gospels, we do not find in John any rapid accounts of miracles; rather we have seven carefully chosen miracles which become teaching moments. Whereas in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the central message of Jesus was the kingdom of God, in the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaims himself. In the series of "I am" statements, Jesus reveals who he is in a style that reflects God's self-revelation in the Old Testament. At

the Last Supper John does not give an account of the institution of Eucharist, rather he narrates Jesus washing his disciples' feet. And the passion and death of Jesus, which is presented in the other gospels as Jesus' self-humiliation, is presented in John's gospel as a process of glorification. And, perhaps most dramatically, the gospel does not begin with Jesus' baptism or with infancy accounts. Rather, the beginning of this gospel takes us back before the world was created, to the Son's existence with God from all eternity.

Though the authorship and origin of the fourth gospel are frequently disputed and discussed, there is no significant reason to doubt the opinion of second-century theologians and historians that John the Apostle was its source. According to these writers, John lived to a ripe old age and was the last of the evangelists to write his gospel. Because he lived in Ephesus, the churches of Asia Minor were probably the first to hear this gospel proclaimed, though John no doubt envisioned an eventual audience that was more universal. Though some question the ability of a Galilean fisherman to create the literary artistry of this gospel, he was most likely assisted by more educated scribes, and his gospel could have been edited from more primitive forms during the final decades of the first century. Whatever the details of its origin, God's Spirit has produced a magnificent testimony of apostolic witness and ecclesial faith.

Reflection and Discussion

- What might be some reasons why John's gospel is so significantly different from the others?

- What are some of the unique ways the Gospel of John might lead me to appreciate the person of Jesus?

Prayer

Creator God, you are the loving source of all that exists and you have renewed the world through the coming of the Word Made Flesh. Through the words of this holy gospel, deepen my belief that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God so that through believing I may have life in his name. Shine your light into my mind and heart, and give me a desire to know Jesus Christ more fully and to love others as he loves. Help me to respond to his invitation to “come and see,” and encourage me to remain faithful to the challenges of study and prayer which your word offers me.