

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN
John 3: 1-15
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Over a period of four weeks we have been trying to take a look at the portraits of Christ which the four gospels give us. There are some things which are peculiar to one gospel, which are not present in another. However, the four taken together, give us a composite picture. Our task is not so much to decide which is right, as it is to see how each adds to the dimension and to the depth and to the richness of the Christ-event. You will recall that each one of the writers had a particular purpose in mind when he drafted his story of what happened. Mark was the forerunner of the existentialists, one whom I called a realist. For Mark - belief is not so much an intellectual thing that you debate, as it is a truth that seizes you inwardly and to which you are willing to give yourself, and if necessary to die for it. Mark told us that who Jesus was not as important as what happened to people when they stood in his presence.

Then Matthew, who wrote after Mark, wrote because he was concerned about the older people. The younger ones had taken to Mark, but the older ones said this is too new. It is too brash. We want the familiar. I said that Matthew was the pragmatic conservative. Everything that has been, may still have a purpose, but it must be re-interpreted. He was a conservative - but not a fundamentalist. A fundamentalist says that you must literally take everything from the past and fix it upon the present. But a conservative says, let us take everything, for Jesus came not to destroy but to fulfill. He kept up-dating the old in the light of the new. He also said be religious because it works. He gave us the teachings - the Magna Charta of Christianity, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and some of the great parables.

Then we took a look at what Luke had to say. Writing for the Greeks, he emphasized not only that Jesus is the promised Messiah but also savior of all. It is Luke, the consummate storyteller, who gives us the parables of the Lost Son and the Good Samaritan.

So, finally today we talk about John. He wrote his gospel about 100 A.D. We know that it was probably written in the city of Ephesus, a Greek city. We believe he had different sources for his writing. We know that the author had several specific problems in mind to which he addressed himself when he wrote his gospel.

In the first place, the people of Ephesus were a long way from Jerusalem, and they were naturally inquisitive and curious. They said we have heard about Christ, but we want to know about this person - Jesus. Tell us about his biography and give us some anecdotes. Sketch some pictures of what he was like and tell us of the intrigues and of the history that made for the whole event which culminated in the crucifixion and the resurrection. So John goes to great pains to fill in the details and he does it in a wonderful way. (For example, he corrects Matthew, Mark and Luke, and tells us the crucifixion took place not on the day of Passover, but on the day before so that the crucifixion occurs at the same time the Passover lamb is being slaughtered.) He gives us the image that the Orthodox Church understands every so well - that Jesus became the lamb of the world, to take away its sins. He gives us other details that no other writer gives us. John alone tells us of the marriage feast at Cana; of the encounter with Nicodemus; of the raising of

Lazarus. It is in John alone that Thomas speaks; that Andrew becomes a real personality; that we get a glimpse of the character of Philip; that we hear the carping protest of Judas at the anointing at Bethany. He alone shows us Jesus sitting weary by a well and having a conversation with a woman and talking about the water for which no person thirsts. He alone gives us the great insight that God is Spirit - and that they who worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth.

Only John tells us that not only does a woman come to anoint the feet of our Lord with alabaster ointment, but that there was a fragrance which permeated the whole room and gave a scent of beauty and freshness to the whole situation. All the other disciples say that Jesus said whoever would be great must be least, and whoever would rule must also serve. But John alone, gives us a lovely picture of Jesus at the Last Supper taking a basin and some water and going around the table and washing the feet of his disciples.

It is true that most artists who try to capture on canvas some picture of Jesus, inevitably resort to the 4th gospel more than to the other three, for John paints the pictures. So John wrote to give a distant population a close-up view of Jesus and the events of his life.

John also wrote, however, to combat what we call the "Gnostic Heresy." The basic doctrine of Gnosticism was that matter is essentially evil and spirit is essentially good. The Gnostics went on to argue that on that basis God cannot touch matter and therefore did not create the world. That is why John begins his gospel with the ringing statement: "All things were made through Christ; and without Christ was not anything made that was made." That is why John insists that "God so loved the world." Some of the Gnostics held that Jesus had no real body - for that would be evil; therefore Jesus was a kind of phantom without real flesh and blood. And that is why it is so important for John to say that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

If I might give a final reason for John's writing, it was to address a changing church. By 100 A.D. two features had emerged in the situation of the church. One, Christianity had gone out into the gentile world. But that time the church was no longer predominantly Jewish; it was in fact overwhelmingly gentile. The vast majority of its members now came, not from a Jewish, but an Hellenistic background. That being so, Christianity had to be restated. It was not the truth of Christianity had changed; but the terms and the categories in which it found expression had to be changed.

And he wrote to bolster the sagging spirits of the Apostolic Church at the turn of the century. When Jesus ascended into heaven as Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us, the promise was that he would return and there was much debate over whether he would come on a fire cloud or he would come as a serpent, or whether the earth would open up and have fissures in it, or how he would return. That debate has gone on from that day till this, and ever-so-often one reads in the paper of some group who goes on a mountain to wait the second coming because the word is out that he will be back. John was trying to deal seriously with a real problem, namely, if Jesus went away, when and in what form will he come back. At the turn of the century some were saying it is a hoax. He will never come back and the whole idea is bankrupt. John took a big step and said that the second coming will not be anything external. If it comes at all, the second coming

will be internal. The indwelling presence is now the way that God comes again and again. Therefore, says John, look not for a sign outside but rather look inside and find the secret to new life.

There are two words, at least two words, I need to begin to comprehend what the fourth gospel is trying to say. One of these is the word, "spiritual" or "mystical." This isn't a text book definition, but for me, the mystic puts the accent on the inward experience as opposed to the outer event. In a day when we get so fascinated by the outside world or by the science that can see, touch and feel, the probability is that the soul will shrink up and will die, because the drama we see acted out is only a dim and imperfect model of the living soul experience which is inside. Therefore, in order to be born again, as Nicodemus put the question, one must lose his fascination for physical birth and begin to look for that inward spiritual birth which says, "Even as I was born of a woman, so now may I be born again and discover the undiscovered part of myself, that region we call the soul."

So John says that you must always assume that anything in the outside world is but a dim reflection of what was first on the inside. In our language he is saying, look well to the laboratory of your own inner experience, for you don't have to go around the world in order to know that which is truth - for that truth will be found within you in the basic struggle between light and dark, good and evil, love and hate.

The other word along with "spiritual", I need to comprehend the fourth gospel is the word "paradox." If you look in the dictionary, you will find that paradox literally means contrary to opinion. We say that a paradox is complete when two statements that appear to contradict each other are made with equal vehemence. John is a master of paradox and what he tells us is that religious truths are always wrapped around paradox. If you succumb to consistency, or if you capitulate only to rational thought, you may have a group of words, but they are in earthen vessels, without a living experience. For it is in the ability to bear the burden of the opposites that the in-flowing presence is to be found.

A characteristic of John's gospel is the "I am" passages. Some 135 times John has Jesus say "I am", while only eighteen times in Matthew and only thirteen times in Luke. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am he who witnesses to myself." "I am the door of the sheep." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the truth" - and on and on. Then John has Jesus say things like this, in Chapter 5, "Truly I say to you the son of man can do nothing on his own accord but only what he sees the Father doing. I can do nothing on my own authority: as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just; because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me." Well, did he mean it when he said, "I am the way," and did he mean it when he said, "Of myself I can do nothing?" John says that he meant both because these are the tensions and these are the paradoxical elements. Is he divine - is he human? Some say both. The anguish is bearing the opposites in our own lives.

There is one other thing to say about John, among many things, and that is he not only writes about mysticism and paradox, about the inside and the outside, but John gives us a whole different set of symbols. He says that you must be able to think symbolically if you want to

understand the revelation of the cosmic Christ and then he assists us with a great deal of symbolic language. He tells us that Jesus is the symbol of the shepherd - and what a great symbol that has been. Or, he says that the symbol is the door. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any one opens, I will come in and sup with that one and that one with me." Who has not been up against a locked door?

So John gives us these symbols of power, might, and thunder; the symbol of the wind - he says, find God symbolically in light, in doors; and he also says, find God in water. Remember that he said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. The water I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Water since the beginning of humanity has symbolized cleansing and redemption and regeneration. In the early church up until about 200 A.D. water was used in the communion. Water is the symbol of what we call the unconscious. Why did the primitive feel that he was between the devil and the deep blue sea? Somehow in this water which threatens to consume us, and through which we must pass - the veil of tears or the water of the Jordan - we have to pass through this because, until we go back down and come up again, said Jesus, we can never be born again.

Well, John was the last but not least of the four writers. He gave us a rich heritage. He wrote of the spirit, giving us mysticism and paradox, and he talked about symbols and life. Most of all he wrote, committed to the purpose, and called by the hope, that even though Jesus lived 2,000 years ago, the Christ of experience is here now. And that's the Gospel according to John. Thanks be to God. Amen.