

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 1- John 1:1-51

In Peaceful Silence, Came the Almighty Word The Canticle of the Word- The Prologue (John 1:1-18)

The Christian assembly is singing in the prologue of John's gospel. This most exalted of gospels begins with a liturgical hymn that celebrates the divine origin of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word became flesh. We cannot hear the notes of their music, but we can definitely feel the faith.

So filled with the Spirit were those first Christians that they expressed their faith in a song that is one of the purest expressions of the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth that has ever been composed. In our imagination we can stand with John, the son of Zebedee, in the Christian assembly at Ephesus and look at his face as he sang this song with his fellow worshipers. When the Spirit moved him to write his gospel, he could think of no better way to begin this incomparable record of revelation than to use this prayerful poetry, which expressed the faith and worship of the church of his time.

Luke gave us the human face of Jesus as the privileged access to his divinity. John presents us with the divine identity of Jesus as the royal opening to appreciating his humanity. In each case we encounter the full mystery of Jesus.

Ingeniously, this liturgical hymn employed the image of the Word to unfold the mystery of Jesus. The Christian community of John the Beloved found a way to praise Jesus in an image that appealed both to its Jewish and Greek members. The Hebrew Scriptures personalized the Word as Divine Wisdom. Hence the Jews were already accustomed to thinking of the Word in personal terms. Greek philosophy maintained that the Word (or Logos) accounted for the inner dynamism of the world. Thus the Greeks connected the Word with reason as the impersonal force that ordered the world. Both Jews and Greeks linked the Word with creation. That is why the first words of the hymn repeat the first words of the Bible: "In the beginning." A second creation has begun.

Genesis taught that in the beginning, God created the world by speaking. "Then God said, 'Let there be light'" (Genesis 1:3).

The Father created all humans, animals and the cosmos itself through his Word. John's gospel repeats this truth but amplifies the Genesis message by being more explicit. The Word was more than speech. The Word was God.

This Word generates and energizes all life. In the case of human beings, this life contains a potential for participation in divine life itself. In biblical thought God breathed life into each person, hence a human shimmers with an image of divinity already. But a person needs the ability to see this and embark on a journey to union with the divine.

That is why the Word- "The true light which enlightens everyone" (verse 9) – who endows us with the beginning of life is also our light to help us see our origins and our destiny. We need the light of the Word to appreciate the life received from the Word. The first gift of creation in Genesis is light. Throughout John's gospel, Jesus will return frequently to these basic themes of life and light.

Sin causes us to walk in darkness. It blunts our awareness of the exciting truths proclaimed here. Sin makes us forget our true identity. It places our origin and destiny in the shadows. Many people feel this shadow when they try to look into themselves. The shadow is the evidence of the darkness, for which the ultimate cure is the light of the Word, Jesus Christ. His light still shines despite the shadows. The darkness will never overcome his light. Historically, that victory has been won by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Personally, we can share in that victory through faith and baptism, grace, and continual moral conversion.

John the evangelist inserts here in verses 6-8 a note about John the Baptist, sent from God to draw people's attention to Jesus Christ, to invite them to believe in him who is the true light of the world. This observation eliminates any ambiguity about who the Word is. The Word is the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

After this clarification, the hymn resumes with the theme of light. Our rational culture makes us think of the light as intellectual illumination, something that comes from the process of logic and thinking. But the light of the Word is not first seen by a clever mind, or arrived at by extensive thinking, however sincere or deep. Reason can only deduce the existence of God. Love, expressed as faith, experiences the personal presence of the Word. Love alone has the eyes that perceive the Word. Love knows more than the Word's existence. Love knows the presence. Then the Word is known as light. The fourth gospel frequently speaks of the union of faith and love (John 6:66-69; 11:20-27; 20:1-8;21:7).

Mother Teresa tells a story about visiting an old man in a dark and dirty room. She wanted to clean it up for him, but at first he refused. After she gained his trust, he let her clean it. She found a lamp crusted with dust and asked him why he never lit it. He told her that there was no reason to do so because no one came to see him.

Would he light it if her sisters visited him? He agreed. "If I hear a human voice, I will light it." She heard later that now his lamp is lit all the time. Affection leads to the light.

The Word is light because the Word is Love. First our hearts see the Word. Then our minds form thoughts about the Word.

This gospel says the world failed to recognize the Word. Even many of his own people did not accept him. But some did and they were given power to be the children of God and believe in his name. Their union with divine Love did not come from merely being born. Nor was it caused by a human choice based on logic and common sense. They chose union with the divine Word - Love because Love first chose them.

They were open and ready for this because they had a purity and simplicity of heart which made this possible. Or in other instances their sinfulness and feeling of being lost caused them to hunger for love and forgiveness. They sought the light and found Jesus.

The Word became flesh and lived among us in a human community. A Christmas antiphon says, "When the sun rises in the morning sky, you will see the King of Kings coming forth from the Father like a bridegroom from a bridal chamber." The Word who was the brightness of the Father's glory came to us in a body of flesh. The Word did this for us so we could share in his holiness, to make us partakers of the divine life, to plant the seed of absolute Love in our hearts.

The Word Becomes Flesh

Christian realism has strenuously affirmed the incarnation of the Word by using as basic a term as one can employ, flesh. From the very beginning there were people who tried to separate the Word from flesh. Greek philosophy sought liberation from the material world and the burdens of the flesh. It could not imagine God taking a body.

Christians replied that the Word did not just live inside a body, like God wearing a costume, as that philosophy maintained. Truly, "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Jesus the Word liberated us from sin while honoring the positive aspects of the flesh and the material world. He showed us how the body and creation can be a stage on which to sing God's praises in innocence and purity. The Word became flesh and entered into human history.

*When peaceful silence lay over all,
and night had run half of her swift course,
down from the heavens, from the royal throne
leapt your all-powerful Word.*

Wisdom 18:14-15 Jerusalem Bible

At the same time the Word never ceased to be God. Godhead and manhood are joined together in One Person – the Word. The Son of God took our human nature truly and authentically, “like us in all things but sin.” Meditative people throughout history have offered various ways of appreciating this deep mystery. In the end, the faith of the church and personal meditation and the disclosures that come from loving union with Jesus, give the best access to the reality of the Word. Light from Jesus, when communicated in a loving exchange, helps us see his glory.

“And we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth”
(John 1:14).

The Jesus “Glory”

To understand the meaning of the term glory here, we should look at how the expression was used in the Old Testament. Glory is the biblical way of speaking of God’s presence. The people of the Hebrew covenant said they experienced God’s presence in terms of majesty, power, the glow of his holiness, the dynamism of his being. Many scriptural texts speak of glory as God’s presence, as in the liberation at the Red Sea, the appearance of the manna, and even in storms. Isaiah exclaimed that the glory made him feel God’s presence with the vividness and intimacy of cloth against the skin (Isaiah 6:1).

God manifested his glory as light, warmth, guidance, surprise, everywhere, and the source of our self discovery. God as pillar of cloud and fire illustrated his presence that lit up the world of the Hebrews and guided them. God’s glory as breath and air spoke of his presence to all creation. The glory of God resting on the ark in the vision of Isaiah was a cause of religious conversion for him. The burning bush did this for Moses and whirling suns caused a similar experience for Ezekiel. God came with his powerful presence in these signs, personally changing these men.

This glory is an act of personal presence. God as glory is God seeking a communion with each of us. It is God present to us for the purpose of influencing our awareness and desires with his creative, transforming and redeeming love. Hence biblical people did not stare at the glory of God, but experienced in the core of their hearts the fire of divine love and presence.

They were doing more than gazing at the equivalent of a glorious sunrise. They were feeling within themselves the most pleasant experience available to a human being, the inner approach of one who would totally and convincingly fulfill their most basic longings.

The Great Hymn in John’s prologue gathers up all these diverse experiences of God’s glory in the Hebrew covenant. It declares that Jesus is the Son of that God whose glory and faithfulness Israel came to know. Jesus now possesses exactly that same glory.

God's love and truth was enfleshed in a real, historical human being whom people could see, hear, and touch. To see his glory now meant being in a growing personal relationship with him who affected their entire lives with a love that thrilled, challenged, forgave, and changed them forever.

Jesus the Word is full of grace and truth. The words grace and truth were frequently applied to God in the Old Testament. Grace meant God's transforming kindness, affection, and love. Truth meant more than an abstract statement of a principle or a standard. Truth implied fidelity, as in the saying, "This above all, to thine own self be true."

Just as God was full of transforming kindness (grace) and fidelity (truth) so also was Jesus who treats us with the fullness of a kind and faithful person. When we experience the glory of the Word, we encounter love and fidelity in its absolute form. When the spark of a relationship is struck between Jesus and us, then we begin to finally know what it is like to be changed by someone who truly loves us and will never let us down.

As the music and poetry of this Great Hymn settle into our awareness, we are drawn to a lifelong relationship with Jesus. This is less a time for analysis and more an occasion for letting ourselves be loved and responding with affection. Then we acclaim what the final surge of the hymn tells us, "From his fullness, we have all received" (verse 16).

Desert Voice (John 1:19-34)

As the splendor of the Great Hymn receded, the affairs of daily life resumed. The gospel focuses on the role of John the Baptist. His activity is best understood against the background of Old Testament prophecy. Four hundred years before the birth of Christ, there had been an era of prophets, stretching back several centuries. In various ways they foretold the coming of the messiah. In the next four hundred years the voice of prophecy was silent.

Then came John the Baptist, looking and sounding like the mighty prophets of old. Practicing a desert spirituality, he passed countless hours alone in silence, communing with God. His powerful spiritual lifestyle inspired numerous moral conversions. People listened with respect to his words because his personal life was so clearly and honestly spiritual. He preached moral conversion with the fervor of an Elijah. He cited the rich poetry of Isaiah to alert people that the messiah's arrival was imminent.

With messianic expectations newly aroused, the religious leaders approached the Baptist to ask him if he were the messiah himself. Or Elijah? Or the prophet? They mentioned Elijah because of the popular belief that he had to come back again and finish his life cycle, and that he would do this in messianic times. Recall that Elijah had not died a proper death, but was borne into the skies in a fiery chariot and not seen or heard from again. The "prophet" of whom they spoke, referred to a prediction of Moses that "A prophet like me will the Lord raise up for you" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Folk religion assumed that Jeremiah was most like

Moses and that he was the one to look for in messianic times. Since the Baptist acted a lot like Jeremiah, it was natural to think he was fulfilling this prophecy.

The Baptist told them he was not the messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. He was a desert voice urging people to undertake the spiritual renewal necessary to recognize and welcome the messiah. His baptisms at the Jordan were a first stage in this spiritual readiness. His baptism helped people wash away their old attitudes and worn out ways of thinking. The bath in the Jordan symbolized their decision to cleanse their hearts of immoral desires and their behavior of sinful practices.

The messiah will also baptize with water, but will go further. He will introduce the creative power of God's breath or Spirit. The messiah's baptism would have the force of creation, making a new woman and a new man out of the recipient. When the God of Genesis combined his breath-Spirit with the waters, a creation occurred. John's baptism with water simply produced an improved person. Christ's creative baptism would generate a truly *new* person.

The next day the Baptist told his disciples what he believed about Jesus. Like the great prophets of the Golden Age, the Baptist attracted disciples. As their spiritual master, the Baptist would have initiated them into desert spirituality. He invited them into the great silences of the desert, taught them how to survive on very simple foods, and to let the mystery of God enfold them.

He also shared with them his Spirit-inspired belief that the messianic moment had arrived. He went further and named his cousin Jesus as that very person. They had seen him baptize Jesus and then watch Christ go off, just as they did, alone into the desert. They were veterans of this mighty solitude and also retained the memories of the spiritual battles they experienced as they confronted themselves in their self-imposed isolation. They knew something of what was in store for Jesus and wondered how he would emerge from his first known days in the desert.

Possibly it was forty days later, while they were gathered for a teaching from their master, they saw Jesus coming out of the desert (verse 29). They recognized the lean look. They also beheld the warmth that tempered his austere appearance, for the Spirit who brought him there stayed with him throughout the challenging days. They would hear that angels came and consoled him after the conquest of Satan. Jesus looked ready to begin a mysterious mission.

The Baptist raised his arms in welcome and said of his cousin that he was the lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. By using the expression "lamb," the Baptist aroused in his listeners the picture of the servant of Isaiah 53. Like a lamb this servant-martyr was sacrificed that by his sufferings the wound of people's sins would be healed.

Another rich connection came from the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, where the young man asked his father Abraham, "Who shall provide the lamb?" Abraham replied that God would give the lamb. As the Baptist warmly embraced his cousin, he gave his followers the look that said, "God has given us the lamb in this man." Jesus is the ultimate servant-martyr who has come to redeem us.

What would this lamb/person do? He would take away the world's sin. No one could be more conscious of the reality of sin than the Baptist and his desert community. The lonely spiritual struggles each of them had fought in the spare vastness around them had given them an exceptional awareness of the evil drives that arose from their inner depths. They were not naïve about their potential sinfulness. They faced moral reality. They did not deny it or lose themselves in illusions that would persuade them there was no moral order.

One purpose of their spiritual disciplines was to cleanse their hearts of sinful desires and their behavior of sinful acts. The Baptist now tells them that Jesus the lamb would deliver them from sin. He said no more than that. He did not describe how that would happen. But by using a sacrificial symbol, he taught them that Jesus would somehow be sacrificed so they could experience salvation.

The Baptist then said something strange. Twice he said that he did not recognize Jesus. Obviously he did know Jesus from early childhood. As cousins they grew up together, playing, eating, singing, joining in family birthdays, weddings, funerals, and other gatherings. Who knows what secrets they shared and what spiritual influences they exerted on each other? All of that the Baptist definitely knew. So why does he say he did not know Jesus?

He means that he did not know, until his baptism of Jesus, the extraordinary truth about him. At the Jordan baptism he received a revelation about Jesus. He beheld the Spirit hovering like a dove over Jesus. In biblical imagery, the dove symbolized the end of the flood to Noah and God's reconciliation with the world. A new creation began with the survivors of the ark. John saw the Spirit/dove anoint Jesus as the source of a new spiritual creation and prepared him to be the ultimate reconciler of all humans with God.

That moment of revelation returned as he gazed on his beloved cousin and intimate friend. The Spirit filled the Baptist again and moved him to a further prophetic utterance (see verse 33). John said that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit as well as water. And then possessed even more strongly with divine insight, the Baptist said: "Now I have seen and have testified that he is the son of God" (verse 34).

Disciple Selection (John 1:35-51)

The next day, Jesus began selecting his disciples. His first candidates came from the Baptist's circle of followers. Their names were John and Andrew.

They addressed him as Rabbi and asked where he was staying. Jesus said, “Come and see.” This is a call to discipleship. “Come and see” is an invitation to follow a person first of all. People will listen to teachers only when they are impressed with the witness of the teacher. Jesus called the apostles to experience him as a person and to observe his witness. Then his teachings would begin to sink in. The witness gives the credibility.

Andrew’s call was a life changing encounter for him. He would never be quite the same again. Till his dying day he would even recall the hour it happened, 4p.m. (verse 39). Andrew was so taken with Jesus that he went and recruited his brother Simon to join their little group. Andrew told him they had found the messiah. When Jesus met Simon, he changed his name to Peter, which means rock.

The following day Jesus encountered Philip and said, “Follow me.” Philip came from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip went to his friend Nathanael and told him he had found the one that Moses and the prophets had written about, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael wondered if anybody worthwhile could come from Nazareth. Philip said, “Come and see.”

When Jesus met Nathanael he said that here was a man in whom there was no duplicity. Nathanael asked him how could he tell that since he never saw him before. Jesus said that he had seen him under a fig tree before Philip ever invited him to join their group. Nathanael became effusive and declared, “You are the *Son of God*. You are the *King of Israel*.”

This narrative of the call of the apostles shows how important personal contact was in bringing someone to Jesus. At the same time, it demonstrates that Jesus does the choosing. Lastly, this text combines the calling stories with a series of faith statements about Jesus. They call him Rabbi, messiah, Son of God, and King of Israel. The author of the fourth gospel tells us from the very first chapter who Jesus of Nazareth is, from Word become flesh to all the other designations heard from the lips of the apostles. He expresses the full faith of the church about Jesus, even though for the disciples and the early church their growth in understanding Jesus before the resurrection was more gradual. In the remainder of the gospel all these truths will be visibly demonstrated in the message and ministry of Jesus.