

PROLOGUE : JOHN 1:1-18

Prologue

¹In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²He was in the beginning with God.

³All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being ⁴in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light,
so that all might believe through him.

⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.

¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God,

¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh
or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And 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.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said,
"He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."')

¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses;
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸No one has ever seen God.

It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart,
who has made him known.

This solemn chant sets the tone for the Gospel. We are being invited to fix our eyes upon Jesus and to listen to him as he makes known what he has seen and heard in the intimacy of his Father's embrace. Jesus invited the Beloved Disciple to share in the 'fullness' of the communion of love which he enjoyed 'close to the Father's heart'. Now the Beloved Disciple, in his turn, is inviting us. This invitation is made explicit in the Prologue to the First Letter of John which is modelled on the Gospel Prologue and is intended as a commentary upon it:

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.

– 1John 1:1-4

In his words, indeed in every aspect of his person, Jesus brought to fulfilment the words by which God revealed himself through Moses and the prophets. He perfected the necessarily imperfect revelation of God which is found in the law. In inviting us to 'accept' Jesus and to 'believe' in him, John is reminding us of the fact that on the whole God's own people who were recipients of his special presence and revelation failed to accept and believe in his word. He invites us to join those who opened their hearts to God, welcomed the life of grace that God was offering them, and became 'children of God'.

He takes us back to creation which is itself a revelation of God. The opening words of his hymn are the opening words of the creation account from the Book of Genesis. He speaks of God's all-powerful word that brings everything into existence and that sustains the whole of the created universe: 'God spoke and it came to be' (Psalm 33:9; see Genesis 1:3ff). We find the same pattern of rejection and acceptance here, the same attempt by darkness to resist the light.

John is not content to place Jesus within the context of God's self-revelation (God's word) as expressed in creation and in the history of Israel. Like an eagle 'he soars above the clouds, above the powers of heaven, beyond the angels, and discovers the Word at its source: he sees the Word of God' (Ambrose). Already 'in the beginning' there was God's Word spoken in the eternal silence of God's being. This Word was with God enjoying the fullness of communion in divine love. It is this divine Word through whom creation came to be. It is this divine Word who spoke through Moses, and it is this divine Word who 'became flesh and lived among us'. The Word who was 'with God' is 'God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart'. This Word became flesh in Jesus and lived with the Beloved Disciple and those others who were privileged to know him. He 'has made God known'. It is he who is the subject of this Gospel which John is sharing with us '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' (20:31).

**¹In the beginning
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**²He was
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**³All things
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The stage is empty. The chorus is chanting this solemn hymn. The opening words 'In the beginning' echo the opening words of the Book of Genesis, for John wishes to invite us to look anew at the purpose of creation and at the relationship we are meant to have with God our creator who sustains us in existence and offers us a share in his being.

But first he takes us outside time and space to contemplate a Word already uttered in the eternal mystery of God's being. In the beginning this Word was already with God, sharing in the being of God. As noted in the Introduction (pages 30-31), the biblical language that is nearest in form to the language of the Prologue is that found in the poetry that praises God's Wisdom. Personified Wisdom, however, for all its divine attributes, was thought of as the first creation of God. The Word, however, was not created. The Word already was when creation began. The Word was God.

We also suggested in the Introduction that it was the quality of Jesus' love that brought the Beloved Disciple to see God as love and therefore as communion in giving and receiving love (see pages 25-27). From the beginning to the end of the Gospel John wants us to hold in our minds and hearts the picture of this intimate communion of God and the Word, for the Gospel is about how this Word, made flesh in Jesus, reveals the true nature of God as love, and invites us to share in the communion which we are here contemplating.

In reminding us that everything that has come into being has its existence through the Word, John is saying that creation is essentially an act of revelation. In creating, God is revealing the communion of love which he enjoys with the eternal Word. This is God's glory and it is this that is expressed in creation. Thomas Aquinas picks up this point by beginning his commentary with a quotation from Isaiah: 'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple ... the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isaiah 6:1-3). The splendour of God's being, the love he shares with the Word, radiates throughout creation. This is why it is full of the glory of God.

In God 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). The being of every creature is an expression of the love shared between God and the Word and we are all held in existence in order to enjoy the same intimacy: 'I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race' (Proverbs 8:30-31).

Elsewhere in the New Testament we read: 'He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3). Paul writes: 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Corinthians 8:6). 'All things have been created through [Christ Jesus] and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:16-17).

Creation reveals God (Wisdom 13:1; Romans 1:19-20). Creation, too, is by its very nature facing towards God. The world made by God is also made for God and there is a cry at the heart of creation calling on God and yearning for closer union with God.

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.

– Psalm 63:1-5

Teilhard de Chardin picks up something of the feeling of John's opening stanza when he writes:

By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. 'In him we live'. As Jacob said awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with boredom and disrespect, with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it (Genesis 28:17).

– The Divine Milieu (Harper&Rowe, 1970) page 89

Gerard Manley Hopkins reflects on creation in his poem 'God's grandeur'.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
 And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

^{3b}What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

God is the Living One. We creatures live only because God breathes into us the breath of life:

When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

– Psalm 104:29-30

‘Life’ for John always means communion with God – a communion that is not limited to space and time nor brought to an end by physical death. Here he is stating that the life we are designed to experience is the life of the Word. Later we will hear Jesus say: ‘I am the life’(14:6). He will also say: ‘I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly’(10:10). This life is the life which he receives ‘in the beginning’ from the Father: ‘Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself’(5:26).

Genesis speaks of primeval darkness which the light dispels but does not annihilate. It also describes how this darkness enters into the minds and hearts of human beings who give way to pride and disobedience. It is this which causes suffering, frustration, violence and a loss of the divine life for which we are created and sustained in existence by God. The author of Genesis makes no attempt to speculate on the origin of this darkness. Neither does John.

He speaks of darkness but his focus is on light, and he makes five observations. Firstly, the light to which he is referring is the life of the Word which consists in the intimate communion of love with God of which he has already spoken.

It is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

Secondly, this life is offered to ‘all people’. The universal scope of God’s saving action through his Word is highlighted throughout John’s Gospel. Jesus is ‘the Saviour of the world’(4:42; see 1:29; 3:17). Jesus promises: ‘I will draw all people to myself’(12:32). His mission takes Jesus beyond Israel to the whole world (7:35; 11:52; 12:20-21): ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd’ (10:16).

John speaks of ‘the true light, which enlightens everyone’(1:9). We recall Isaiah: ‘I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth’(Isaiah 49:6). Later we will hear Jesus say: ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’(8:12).

We find this same universal outlook in Paul: ‘For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’(1Corinthians 8:6). ‘From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen’(Romans 11:36). ‘All things have been created through him and for him’(Colossians 1:16).

Thirdly, the light ‘shines’ (note the change from the past to the present tense). As the First Letter of John insists: ‘the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining’(1John 2:8). The Word is always present to us, lighting up the way to life. In the words of the Psalmist: ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation’(Psalm 27:1). ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’(Psalm 119:105). ‘With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light’(Psalm 36:9). We follow him by opening our hearts to the life of love which he shares with God and which he offers to us, and by allowing that love to permeate and to direct our lives.

Fourthly, the light shines ‘in the darkness’. It is in the midst of the darkness that threatens to engulf us that the Word of God comes to shine upon us and guide us to life.

Finally, though darkness resists the light it did not overcome the light of the Word (as we shall see in the life of Jesus) and it need not overcome it in our lives either. If we fail to walk in the light darkness will overtake us (see 12:35), but we are being invited to come out of the darkness. As Paul says: ‘Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light’(Ephesians 5:8). Moreover, ‘though light is succeeded by night, against wisdom evil does not prevail’(Wisdom 7:30).

John assures us that the Word of God is present at the heart of creation, calling on God the creator of all and summoning everything and everyone into divine communion.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John has been soaring high as he reflects on the mystery of God's being. By introducing John the Baptist here he demonstrates that his interest is in history. It was the Baptist's role to announce the presence of God's Word when the Word entered our world in the person of Jesus. Because of his relationship to Jesus (a point that will be made in verse fifteen), the Baptist is presented here in this early section of the Prologue as the most illustrious witness to God's Word. He is the culminating example of the prophetic witness in Israel and, indeed, in all the nations of the world who have experienced God's invitation to communion.

By telling us that the Baptist was 'sent' (see also 1:33; 3:28), John is alerting us to focus on the mission given to the Baptist by God. Only thus will we understand his role in the gospel narrative. John also tells us that the mission of the Baptist is universal in its scope. So it concerns us. The Baptist was sent by God to witness to the Word 'so that all might believe through him'. Believing is the essential response which we must make if we are to receive the offer of love which God is making through his Word. (We will begin our examination of what John means by believing when we come to comment on John 2:12.)

When Paul arrived in Ephesus a generation or so before the composition of John's Gospel he found disciples of the Baptist who were not members of the Christian community (Acts 19:1-7). From other parts of the Gospel it would seem that one of John's aims was to persuade disciples of the Baptist to believe in Jesus. If this is so it may account for the stress given here to the Baptist not being himself the light.

Later, Jesus will say of the Baptist: 'He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light' (5:35). Here our narrator stresses that the real light is the Word, the light that is continually coming into the world, the light already mentioned in the opening stanza, the light to which the Baptist witnessed and which the Beloved Disciple and his companions came to see in Jesus (3:19; 8:12; 9:5). If the Baptist were not himself enlightened by the Word he would not be able to light up the way for others. The same can be said, of course, for the Beloved Disciple himself, as for anyone called and graced to be an instrument of the Word. It is the *true* light which enlightens everyone.

John has two words for ‘true’. More commonly he uses the Greek *alêthês* meaning true and not false. Here he uses *alêthinôs* which adds the nuance ‘the only one really worthy of the name’. Not only is the light that comes from the Word real light, but no other light can compare to it, for the Word enlightens by revealing the one, true God. The phrase ‘coming into the world’ may qualify ‘everyone’ or it may, as in the translation which we are using, refer to the light. . In either case the author is stressing the universal scope of God’s gift. If anyone is in darkness it is because he or she has rejected the light. John Chrysostom writes:

If there are those who have closed the eyes of their intelligence, not wanting to receive the rays of this light, the darkness in which they are living does not come from the nature of the light, but from the bad will of those who deprive themselves by their free choice of the gift of grace. The truth is that grace has been poured out over everyone. Those therefore who do not want to enjoy this gift can blame themselves for their blindness.

– Homily 8 on John

God invites us into a new and intimate covenant of love. He also instructs us as to how we are to respond to his offer. Our obedience to God’s commands, especially to his command of love, is a test of the reality of any knowledge of God that we might claim to have. It is also a means of growing in the only kind of knowing that is of real value: knowing through an intimate sharing of life. As the author of the First Letter of John expresses it: ‘Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments’(1John 2:3).

The prophets complained of this failure to know God, a failure that is the result of a failure to attend to God’s inspiration and to respond obediently and lovingly to God’s offer of life:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.

– Hosea 4:1

He opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. If they listen, and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity ... But if they do not listen, they shall perish by the sword, and die without knowledge.

– Job 36:10-12

The author of the Gospel reflects on the tragedy that, on the whole, ‘the world did not know God’s Word’. Human beings, made by love and made for love, kept rejecting light and succumbing to darkness. The Word that kept calling from the depths of our own being and from the heart of creation – calling us to freedom, to enlightenment, to divine communion – kept falling on deaf ears.

⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

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It was then that, by a special providence, God sent his Word to Israel. He chose to reveal himself to a special people chosen out for a special covenant love. They were to be God's instrument in drawing the world out of darkness and into the light where we could enjoy divine communion. This special providence of God revealing himself to Israel finds poetic expression in the writings of Sirach:

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High
and covered the earth like a mist.
I dwelt in the highest heavens,
and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
and traversed the depths of the abyss.
Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
and over every people and nation I have held sway.
Among all these I sought a resting place;
in whose territory should I abide?
Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
and my Creator chose a place for my tent.
He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.'
Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.
In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion.
Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,
and in Jerusalem was my domain.
I took root in an honoured people.
in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.

– Sirach 24:3-12

The foundational event which encapsulates the essential revelation to Israel was the Exodus from Egypt. In that mighty deed God revealed himself as the Lord (*Yahweh*), a God of 'grace and truth' (Hebrew: *hesed* and '*emet*'), a God who has made a commitment of love to his chosen people (*hesed*) and who will remain faithful to that commitment ('*emet*'). The people of Israel felt called upon to respond to God's grace and truth by themselves being faithful to the special covenant which the Lord had formed with them. They were to do this by being faithful in their obedience to God and in their love for one another. 'I desire steadfast love' (Hosea 6:6). 'What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

Obedience to God is an essential condition for receiving the promises of God for it is through obedience that we open our hearts to grace.

If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

– Exodus 19:5-6

Tragically, again and again those especially favoured by God turned away in disobedience. The destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC and the subsequent exile in Babylon was interpreted as being the result of the failure of the chosen people to observe their part of the covenant. The prophets frequently lament the failure of God's chosen people to obey. It is a complaint echoed by Jesus who is rejected by his own people 'because they have not known the Father or me'(16:3). 'Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him'(12:37). 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil'(3:19).

Recognising that the failure to know God results from a failure to observe God's commandments, some of the prophets expressed the hope that God would offer a new covenant to which we would respond:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

– Jeremiah 24:7

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

– Ezekiel 36:25-27

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

– Ezekiel 37:27

It is this covenant which the Beloved Disciple found fulfilled in Jesus.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

The rejection we have noted has never been universal. Throughout history, including the history of Israel, there have been those who have heard and heeded God's Word, and who have responded with obedience and love: 'In every generation Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God' (Wisdom 7:27). In his commentary on the Gospel of John, John Scotus Eriugena (c.870AD) writes:

From the beginning of the world there has never been a time in which receivers of the word were lacking.

– I,xx,7-8

Receiving God's word is not something that comes automatically just by being a member of a certain race (by 'blood'; the word is plural in Greek, referring to the role of the male and the female in producing a human being). It does not come from our striving ('flesh') or our determined will or power ('the will of man'). We must be 'born from above' (3:3). We must open ourselves to receive God's gift, for the life of communion with God – the life enjoyed by God's word – is a life that can be engendered in us only by God himself. It is always gift.

The intimate communion with God enjoyed by the Word is being offered to the whole world through Jesus. John will speak later of Jesus as giving his life 'not for the nation [of Israel] only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God' (John 11:52). In a letter from John's community we are assured that 'everyone who does right has been born of God' (1John 2:29; also 3:9-10). 'Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God' (1John 4:7).

In the passage from Sirach quoted earlier (see page 48), we heard of God pitching his tent in Israel. In accordance with his fidelity to the love which he has for humankind, God has now pitched his tent 'among us'. In the light of the universal perspective of the Prologue, the 'us' includes the whole of the human race, but in a particular way it refers to the Beloved Disciple and those who identify with his experience. This point is made by the author of the First Letter of John in his prologue (1John 1:1-4, quoted above on page 41).

Isaiah refers to our human condition as 'flesh'. We wither like the grass and our beauty fades like that of a flower (Isaiah 40:6). The Psalmist speaks of God's forgiveness: he remembers that we are 'only flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again' (Psalm 78:79). In highlighting the aspect of 'flesh' John is countering the idea that the Word took on only the appearance of being human.

The Word was present in the world from the beginning. In Jesus we see the Word present among us in a new way, sharing in the weakness, the vulnerability, and, in a particular way, the death that is part of our being as humans.

This is stressed even more strongly by the author of the First Letter of John (see 1John 2:22, 4:2-3, 5:1,5-6). The acknowledgment of Jesus-Christ-come-in-the flesh is for him the key criterion of faith and of belonging to the community of Jesus' disciples:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

– 1John 4:2

We are here at the heart of Christian revelation.

He was revealed in flesh ... taken up in glory.

– 1Timothy 3:16

**¹⁴And the Word
became flesh and
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among us,**

**^{14b}and we
have seen
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the glory
as of
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only son,
full of grace
and truth.**

When Moses prayed to see God's glory (Exodus 33:18), he was told: 'You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33:20). He was given the Law and so, as it were, he saw God's 'back'. He saw the path he was to follow in order to respond to God's offer of covenant love, but he could not see God's face. The Beloved Disciple has seen the face of Jesus. He has gazed on him and Jesus' words found a home in his heart.

In telling us that we see the glory of the Word in the flesh of Jesus, John is not referring to one or other extraordinary manifestation such as the transfiguration mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels (see Luke 9:32; compare 2Peter 1:16-18). He is saying that it is precisely in the weakness of human flesh that we see God's Word, God's Wisdom, God's glory fully revealed. Who God is and what God calls us to be is finally and fully revealed in Jesus, who shared our human condition, who knew weariness and misunderstanding, who suffered betrayal and rejection, and who suffered a terrible death by crucifixion. In his Gospel the Beloved Disciple will give us a number of signs, each of which reveals an aspect of the glory of God as revealed in Jesus, the Incarnate Word.

In an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul we read:

Though he was in the form of God, Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him.

– Philippians 2:6-9

It is above all when we look upon Jesus on the cross that we behold 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6). Later in the Gospel John will call Jesus' dying on the cross his hour of glory (12:23; 17:1). Jesus is the revelation of God's Word calling us into the same obedience, the same love and the same divine communion that he himself experienced. We are to experience this communion, not by escaping from the human condition, but by living it, like Jesus, in obedient love.

Later we will hear Jesus praying that those close to him will see his glory (see 17:24). Clearly, his prayer was answered in the case of the Beloved Disciple. He heard God's Word spoken to him in Jesus and he saw in Jesus the inner beauty of God radiantly revealed. Jesus reveals God's glory because he is the Word who alone radiates the full beauty of God. In his humanity, the Word is revealed as the only Son of the Father (see 3:16).

John specifies the way in which Jesus manifests God's glory: he is 'full of grace and truth'. Some understand grace and truth as corresponding to the Hebrew *hesed* and *'emet*, qualities found regularly in the Bible in descriptions of God. We find them occurring together especially in the credal formula: 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*'emet*)'(Exodus 34:6; see also Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

Jesus is the image of his Father, and so it is true that he is full of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. However, if this was the point John wished to make we would have expected him to use the traditional Greek formula used in all the above texts to translate *hesed* and *'emet*. The fact that he uses a different expression leads some scholars to suggest that in this passage it is more likely that John is stating that Jesus is full of the grace which is truth, referring to the truth of who God really is. In their view, John is saying that Jesus goes beyond Moses because his grace or gift (Greek: *charis*) is greater than the law; it is the full truth (Greek *alêtheia*) about God. Jesus gives us this gift because he gives us himself and he is the perfect human expression, the incarnation, of God. The 'grace' which Jesus offers is the 'truth' which he has because, as the Word, he knows God with the intimate knowledge that comes from perfect communion in love.

¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."")

¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

In verse eight the Baptist was presented as the one sent by God to witness to the light of the Word radiating in the world. Here he is presented as the one who identified Jesus as the one in whom the Word who *was* before the Baptist came to be has become flesh, the one on whose face and in whose heart the beauty of God's love was manifest for all to see. .

John declares that he and his community have all received from the 'fullness' of divine life and faithful love that is found in the Word who assumed our human nature in Jesus in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19). The expression translated here 'grace upon grace' is interpreted by some as referring to the words which immediately precede: 'from his fullness we have all received'. They suggest that John is focusing upon the correspondence between the grace (gift) which we experience and the grace (gift) which Jesus himself enjoyed. Our grace flows from his.

Others suggest that the word translated 'upon' (Greek: *anti*) is intended by John to indicate contrast. We have been given one gift; now we have been given another in its place. 'Grace upon grace', in their view, prepares for the words which follow (1:17). God gave us a gift through Moses (the Law). Now he has given us a gift through Jesus (the 'truth'). All that God gave through Moses is given abundantly in Jesus, and all that was promised to Israel is fulfilled in Jesus. Furthermore, the grace given by Jesus supersedes the grace given by Moses and stands out in relief against it. As Paul says, we are 'not under law but under grace' (Romans 6:14). 'God sent his Son in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children [literally 'sons' - we are sharing the very life of the Son]' (Galatians 4:4-5).

'Law' is an imperfect translation of the Hebrew 'Torah'. Perhaps 'Way' would be better, for the Torah is the revelation of the way in which God has revealed himself in the history of Israel as well as the way we are to respond. In spite of the eulogies of men like Sirach who delighted in 'the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses gave us' (Sirach 24:23), the prophets, as we have already noted, looked forward to the time when there would be a new covenant, when the 'Way' would be written in the human heart. John sees this promise fulfilled in Jesus, the Way (14:6).

Perhaps it is best to take the expression ‘grace upon grace’ in a more general and universal way. It includes a reference to Judaism, but it includes also the ways in which the other peoples of the world were graced to experience the Word prior to the incarnation. Now the Word is revealed fully in the man Jesus. The grace he offers, as we saw in verse fourteen, is the grace of the ‘truth’, the complete truth about who God is and how God wants to relate to us and how God wants us to relate to him. It is this fullness of intimate knowledge - through communion - that Jesus has as the Word, and it is this fullness that John and his community have received from him.

Jesus offered all who would receive him the grace to respond to God’s offer of a share in the communion with God which he enjoyed as the Word. Moreover, he gave us his Spirit to make our response possible. God’s will was engraved in the heart of Jesus and he in turn engraved it through love in the hearts of his disciples. In loving us Jesus gave himself to us and ‘dwells in our hearts’. Thanks to this amazing grace we ‘are being rooted and grounded in love’(Ephesians 3:17).

For the first time in the Gospel, Jesus is named. He is called the ‘Christ’, the one promised by the prophets. The term derives from *chrism*, a perfumed oil used for anointing. So does the equivalent Hebrew term ‘Messiah’(used by John in 1:41 and 4:25). *Chrism*, which is associated especially with festive celebration, had a special cultic use in the consecration of the king. As the *chrism* flowed down over the head and beard of the king, the Spirit of God anointed him. As the perfume filled the air around him, so did the glory of God radiate out from him throughout God’s Holy Land. We read of king David:

The Lord said, ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.’ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

– 1Samuel 16:12-13

Chrism came to be associated also with the consecration of a priest (Exodus 29:7), and perhaps also of a prophet (Isaiah 61:1; Psalm 105:15). In different ways these too were responsible for making the Spirit of God effectively present in people’s lives. The kings, priests and prophets, however, carried out their divine commission imperfectly. This gave rise to hopes that one day the Spirit would come down and anoint the perfect Christ, the one who would finally bring about the fulfilment of God’s promises (Ezekiel 34:23). John identifies Jesus as the fulfilment of this hope. He will tell us later that he composed his Gospel that we might share this faith and so find life (20:31). The author of the First Letter of John insists on this as the primary criterion of true belief: ‘Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God’(1John 5:1). Once again the insistence is on Jesus in the reality of his shared humanity, the reality and saving significance of his flesh.

Prologue

From the beginning God's Word has been calling everyone to him. This Word has been present in the depths of the human heart, indeed at the heart of every created thing, crying out to God. While the darkness could not stifle it, at the same time the human heart, for the most part, found itself unable to respond. Now, at last, in Jesus, God's Word has met a wholehearted 'Yes'. In Jesus the Word from God and the human word responding to God's self-revelation have come together in perfect identity.

The Psalmist longed 'to behold the beauty of the Lord' (Psalm 27:4). Moses experienced a special intimacy with God: 'The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11). However, when he prayed to see God's glory, he was told 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33:19-20). John restates this traditional Hebrew theology: 'No one has ever seen God' (see also 5:37; 6:46; 1 Timothy 6:16).

The author of the First Letter of John has the same teaching, but the context highlights the wonder of the grace enjoyed by those who live the life of Jesus:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

- 1 John 4:11-16

We do not see God in God's transcendent being, but we can live in an intimate communion of love with him if we open our hearts to receive the offer made to us by Jesus to share in the life of the Word. It is precisely here that Jesus stands out as unique in his revelation of God. He is the incarnation of the Word and he is caught up in a dynamic movement of love into the very bosom of the Father (1:18). Later we will hear him say: 'I have seen the Father' (6:46). For this reason he can say: 'the Father knows me and I know the Father' (10:15). We find a similar idea in Matthew: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27; see Luke 10:22). It is Jesus 'who has made the Father known' (1:18). Here John does not use a word that indicates seeing. Rather he chooses a word that indicates hearing: Jesus 'made God known'. Jesus alone sees the Father. As the Word he tells us what he sees. Here we believe in him and we live in communion with him. Later, in union with Jesus in the beatific vision, we will see him.

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

– 1John 3:2

For now we are to listen and believe that in seeing the human face of Jesus we are, insofar as it is possible here on earth, seeing God. God's 'Word' is incarnate in Jesus. In Jesus, the divine Word who existed before creation ever came into being, the divine Word who brought creation into existence and sustains it by drawing it into the embrace of God's love, the divine Word who pitched his tent in Israel, has pitched his tent with John and his community. This is he of whom the Letter to the Hebrews can say:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

– Hebrews 1:1-3

We all would want to find our origin. The Prologue does not say that in the beginning there was action. It does not invite us to search out our identity by seeking to discover the nature of the God who creates us. John tells us that in the beginning was the Word. We are to listen to the One who is the source of our being and who is in constant dialogue with us. God is inviting us to be part of this constant dialogue and to live in intimate communion with him. God speaks to us in creation, in history, in the events of our life. We read in the psalms:

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

– Psalm 19:2-4

John tells us that God is speaking to us perfectly in the man Jesus. If we listen to him he will tell us who God is and who we are; he will tell us how to enter into dialogue with God and how to enjoy the intimacy which he himself knows, till we come, one day, to see God face to face.

Jesus is the protagonist of the Gospel of which this hymn is the prologue. John wants us to be clear from the outset that in watching Jesus and in listening to him, we are watching and listening to the Word of God, to 'God the only Son'. Some early manuscripts do not include the word 'God' in verse eighteen. With or without the word 'God', the divinity of Jesus is being clearly stated. He is the Word mentioned in the opening sentence, the one who is constantly being drawn into the bosom of the Father. Jesus is the Word who has chosen to share our human condition. It is he who will lead us into this same intimacy as he reveals the true God to us. Perhaps it is necessary to point out that our focus is on Jesus only so that we may see in his face the face of the God he calls 'Father' and to hear from his lips the words spoken to us by God whose Word he incarnates. As Jesus will say: 'I am the Way' (14:6). His gaze is fixed on his Father. As we look into his eyes and as we listen to his words, may we allow him to take us with him into the embrace of God.