

PART ONE
JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY
JOHN 1:19 – 12:50

ACT I : THE NEW COVENANT
JOHN 1:19 – 2:12

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'

²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah'

**²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?'
He said, 'I am not.'**

Act I Scene 1 of John's dramatic presentation of Jesus.

The testimony of the Baptist

John presents his text as a narrative. However, it is not difficult to imagine it as a staged dialogue introduced by a narrator. Though Jesus is not physically present, it is not long before he becomes the centre of attention: 'Among you stands one whom you do not know'(1:26). John is interested in the Baptist only as the witness to Jesus – a witness whom we can trust because he has been 'sent by God'(1:6). He is being interrogated by priests and Levites sent by 'the Jews'.

Who is this group called here simply 'the Jews'? After all, the priests and Levites are all Jews, as is John the Baptist and just about every one else who appears in the Gospel including Jesus himself. John often refers to 'the Jews'. Sometimes, as we would expect, he is simply identifying a religious or national group (4:22; 18:33,39; 19:19,40). Sometimes he is referring to the Judeans as distinct from the Galileans (chapters 11 and 12). Mostly, however, he is speaking of a particular group who are hostile to Jesus (see John 5:16-18; 8:44,48; 15:24).

Verse twenty-four seems to indicate that Pharisees are included among 'the Jews'. The Pharisees (the 'separated ones') were a sect of laymen who carried on the tradition of the Hasidim, who, in the period of the Maccabees (c.167BC), resisted all attempts to impose Greek culture in Judah (1Maccabees 2:42; 7:13). At their best the members of the Pharisee sect were truly devoted to God and wanted to do God's will in the least detail of their daily lives. They found God's will in the writings of their sacred Scriptures which they scrupulously followed.

The gospels make it clear, however, that many were blind to the surprising way in which God revealed his love and his will in Jesus. Jesus' rejection of their understanding made him a threat which they were determined to oppose. In the experience of many communities in the early Church it was the Pharisees who were mainly responsible for defending Judaism against what they saw as the inroads of Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, that from the Christian perspective they came to symbolise those responsible for the rejection of Jesus and of the members of the Jewish community who chose to follow him.

After the collapse of Jerusalem in 70AD, leadership of the dispersed Jewish community fell to the Pharisees and it was they who excommunicated their Jewish brothers and sisters who had become disciples of Jesus. This brought to a climax the growing rift between so-called faithful ‘Jews’ and those ‘heretics’ who were following Jesus and so were considered by official Judaism as rejecting their Jewish heritage. Echoes of this excommunication can be found in 9:22 and 16:2. It is probable that the expression ‘the Jews’ is shorthand in John for these religious authorities.

It is tragic that a failure to grasp the author’s intention in calling this hostile group ‘the Jews’ has encouraged ill-informed and badly led Christians over the centuries to scape-goat the Jews as a people for the death of Jesus, and has encouraged a totally unchristian anti-Semitism. Statements which refer to ‘the Jews’ need to be read in the light of the experiences of John’s community. We should not need reminding that Jesus, Mary and the apostles, including Paul, were all Jews, and moreover that they loved their own people. We cannot follow Jesus and indulge anti-Jewish sentiments!

The Jerusalem establishment sent priests and Levites to interrogate the Baptist because they were specialists in matters of cult. The distinction between ‘priests’ and ‘Levites’ has a long and complex history. Before the cult was centralised in Jerusalem late in the 7th century BC, there were priests in every sanctuary throughout Israel. With the loss of the northern kingdom and the centralisation and reorganisation of the cult in the Jerusalem temple, there were too many priestly families for the needs of the cult. It seems that one faction – those who looked to Aaron – retained power, while others were reduced to lesser roles in the cult, helping to prepare the sacrifices, but not actually responsible for offering them. The latter groups were called ‘Levites’.

When approached by those sent by the religious authorities, the Baptist emphatically asserts that he is not the promised and hoped for Christ (see also 3:28). This title has already been claimed for Jesus in the Prologue (1:17). The Baptist goes on to assert that he is not Elijah. Elijah was the prophet who stood out boldly against those who would compromise the religion of Israel. He called all to repentance, demanding that they cease worshipping false gods. The blazing fire of Elijah’s inspired words is celebrated in Sirach: ‘Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch’ (Sirach 48:1).

According to the legends of 2Kings 2:1-18, Elijah had been taken alive to God in a fiery chariot. It was popularly believed that, by a special providence, Elijah was not dead, but alive, and that God would send him back to be the herald for the Messiah:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

– Malachi 3:1

Other Gospels present the Baptist as fulfilling the expectation expressed in this popular belief (see Matthew 11:14), and as coming ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah’ (Luke 1:17). John wants to distance Jesus’ herald from this Elijah connection. If we want to come to know Jesus we will have to go beyond the categories of Jewish Messianic expectation.

'Are you the prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

²²Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

²³He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord,"' as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

²⁵They asked him, 'Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?'

²⁶John answered them, 'I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.'

²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

Finally, though the Baptist is a prophet, indeed, according to Jesus' own estimation, 'greater than a prophet' (see Matthew 11:9), he is not *the* prophet promised by Moses: 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people' (Deuteronomy 18:15).

How then, according to John, did the Baptist understand himself and his mission? John has the Baptist quote from the opening passage of that part of the scroll of Isaiah that comes from an anonymous prophet of the final years of the Babylonian exile (550-539BC). Hearing of the victories of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies, and witnessing the liberation which the conquering king was effecting throughout the crumbling Empire, this prophet saw Cyrus as God's instrument in once again liberating his chosen people from slavery. According to John, the Baptist saw his mission as preparing the people to relive the exodus of their ancestors.

The words quoted here by the Baptist are inviting the people to 'make straight the way of the Lord' (Isaiah 40:3), who is coming to lead them through the desert to the Promised Land.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says God.
Priests, speak to the heart of Jerusalem, comfort her! Her humiliation has reached its end, her sin is taken away, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her faults. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight for our God ... The glory of the Lord will be seen, and all flesh will see the salvation of our God ... See, the Lord comes with might, and his arm with power.

– Isaiah 40:1-3,5,10 (from the Greek)

The focus on God, the taking away of sin, the revelation of glory to everyone ('all flesh'), and the need for our response, are all themes developed by John.

The sacred writings of Israel looked forward to the Messiah and they find a voice in the Baptist who witnesses here to him. The Baptist's mission is to prepare the way for one who is greater than Moses (see 1:18), and greater than the one who was God's instrument in leading the people back from exile. He is preparing the way for the Liberator God himself, 'the Lord' come to redeem the world.

The Baptist is 'baptising with water' on the other side of the Jordan, re-enacting the cleansing needed to enter the Promised Land. The word 'baptism' refers primarily to the experience of being immersed in water. Naaman is cured of leprosy by being immersed seven times in the waters of the Jordan (2Kings 5:14). Judith immersed herself in purifying waters in preparation for the mission God had for her (Judith 12:7). Metaphorically the word baptism can be used for the experience of being overwhelmed in other ways as well. In the Greek version of Isaiah we read: 'anarchy baptises me' (Isaiah 21:4).

The Baptist is challenging the people to go down into the river Jordan and to experience physically what it was like to be overwhelmed ('baptised'), and then to rise from the water to begin a new life. In doing so he is reminding them that it was from the chaos of the swirling waters that God brought forth the splendour of the heavens and of the earth. He is also getting them to relive the journey of liberation through the waters of the Red Sea.

I have been referring to John the Baptist as 'the Baptist' rather than 'John' so as to avoid confusion with John, the traditional name given to the author of the Gospel. It must be said, however, that John the author shows little interest in the baptising activity of John the Baptist. He is singled out not for his baptising, but because he is a key witness to Jesus. In any case, the Baptist recognises that his baptising is nothing more than a symbolic action. He is baptising with water and only with water. This baptism cannot bring about the new life that the people need. That must come from 'the one who is coming after me'. This one is standing among them, but they do not know him (compare 1:10). The Baptist does not feel worthy even to perform for him the menial tasks of a domestic slave.

It is not without significance that John's first image of Jesus is of one who is standing among us whom we do not know. John is challenging his community to reflect that they too, perhaps, are unaware of the presence of Jesus among them. The challenge of this opening scene is as urgent today as it ever was. Where is the Lord? How are we to prepare the way for his coming? Why do we not recognise him?

This opening scene offers us another challenge. If John practically ignores the activity of someone as significant as the Baptist to concentrate only on the way he witnesses to Jesus, what might this say to the members of John's community and, indeed, to us? Are we, perhaps, so caught up in what we are doing that we forget that it is Jesus who is the revelation of God and the one who gives life? Our greatest privilege, as the Beloved Disciple knew so well, is to share in Jesus' intimacy with God. If, from that intimacy, we are graced to go out to others to attract them to Jesus that they too may share in his life, let us be grateful for the privilege. Let us not, however, be so caught up in the mission that we neglect the intimacy.

Missionary activity

When Jesus selected the Twelve, it was firstly so that they would be with him. Only from there were they to go out as his missionaries (see Mark 3:14). The missionary does not take God's Word to others. We would not exist if the Word of God, through whom we were willed into being, was not already holding us in existence and drawing us to the Father. As missionaries we are called to look and to listen and to be so sensitively in touch with our lives that we can help others to recognise the one who is already in their lives but whom they 'do not know' (1:26).

Act I Scene 2. Further testimony of the Baptist

At first the stage is empty except for the Baptist. Then, for the first time, Jesus appears. He is coming towards John. He is always coming towards us, bringing with him God's faithful and forgiving love and inviting us to be with him 'close to the Father's heart' (1:18). We see him, but he is silent. The Baptist points to him and says: 'Here is the Lamb of God'. This is the Lamb referred to in the Book of Revelation: 'The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Revelation 7:17). This is the Lamb who conquers the forces of evil, for 'he is the Lord of lords and the King of kings' (Revelation 17:14).

We think of the lambs that were a regular part of the Jewish daily sacrificial cult. We think of the Passover lamb slain on the eve of God's great redeeming action at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12:13) – a ritual renewed every year at Passover. John is preparing us from the beginning for the tragedy of Jesus' death.

There is an echo here also of the description of the prophet whose role it was to announce the coming salvation of God and to encourage the exiles to renew their trust in God and to prepare to return home. That prophet's words fell, for the most part, on deaf ears, and he himself was pushed aside and despised. The description warns us to expect a similar fate for Jesus:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

– Isaiah 53:7-11

**²⁹The next day
he saw Jesus
coming
toward him
and declared,
'Here is the
Lamb of God ...**

²⁹[Here is the Lamb of God] who takes away the sin of the world!

³⁰This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me."

³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.'

It is significant that in introducing Jesus, the evangelist speaks immediately of sin. It is sin that prevents us from receiving God's love. It is sin that cuts us off from the light and plunges us into darkness. It is sin that brings death, the death of separation from God. The word 'sin' translates the Greek *hamartia*, 'missing the mark'. We are like an archer unable to hit the target. We are struggling through the forest unable to find the path. We want to love but find ourselves unable to love well; we want to be truthful but we act in such a way as to avoid the consequences of the truth; we want to share but are too insecure to let anything go. 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate' (Romans 7:15). Why is this?

Partly it is because of the sin of those who have gone before us. We inherit their weaknesses. There is also the sin that surrounds us. It penetrates even to our heart, corrupting us and poisoning our lives. We are like a bird caught in an oil-slick, helpless to free itself from the sludge that clogs up its wings. We are created to soar. We are made by love and for love, but we are trapped in sin.

And there is more to sin than this. We add our own personal sin to the pollution that suffocates us. Sin takes many shapes, but throughout his Gospel John keeps a sharp focus. He continually refers to the sin (in the singular, as in this text) of rejecting belief in Jesus. All sin has its origin here, in the rejection of God's Word offering us a share in God's life.

John's lack of attention to the various moral implications of belief in Jesus or the rejection of such belief in our everyday living does not mean that he thinks that sins, as distinct from sin, are not important. Against people who asserted that sins do not matter so long as we believe in Jesus, the author of the First Letter of John insists that sins do matter and that they are incompatible with being a disciple of Jesus. Believing in Jesus means living Jesus' life. We are to purify ourselves as he is pure. There must be no compromise with sin (1John 3:3-6,9; 5:18).

When we do sin, in spite of the love that God has poured into our hearts and the intimacy of communion with God that we have through Jesus' abiding presence, we are not to despair, for 'the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin ... and if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1John 1:7,9).

Picking up the theme of the Gospel text on which we are commenting, the author declares: 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'(1John 2:2). The 'atoning sacrifice' is an allusion to the Jewish Day of Atonement when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies bringing the sins of the people before the divine mercy (Leviticus 16:16). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews also refers to the Day of Atonement:

Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus ...let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

– Hebrews 10:19,22

Peter reminds us:

You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

– 1Peter 1:18-19

In introducing Jesus as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', John is reinforcing his earlier claim that 'the Word became flesh'(1:14). It is Jesus' love given to us even to the shedding of his blood that washes over us to cleanse us from sin. This is a constant theme in the Book of Revelation: 'He loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood'(Revelation 1:5). 'By your blood you ransomed saints for God'(Revelation 5:9). 'They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb'(Revelation 7:14). 'They have conquered the accuser by the blood of the Lamb'(Revelation 12:11).

Paul shares John's understanding of the universal scope of God's saving love: 'We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe'(1Timothy 4:10). God saves us through his Son, Jesus: 'Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross'(Colossians 1:20). 'Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son'(Acts 20:28). 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace'(Ephesians 1:7). 'In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ'(Ephesians 2:13). 'We have been justified by his blood'(Romans 5:9).

Here is the one, the Baptist in telling us, who comes to save us. He who is 'close to the Father's heart'(1:18) will cleanse us and take us with him into God's embrace. Jesus supersedes not only the Passover Lamb but all the lambs provided by the cult in the daily reconciliation and communion sacrifices. He is the Lamb *of* (from) *God*. Whoever we are, he comes for us, for he 'takes away the sin of the world'.

It has been revealed by God to the Baptist that his mission is to witness to Jesus who, though coming after him, ranks ahead of him, for Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal Word (see 1:15).

**³²And John testified,
'I saw the Spirit descending
from heaven
like a dove,
and it remained
on him.**

**³³I myself did not
know him,
but the one
who sent me
to baptise with water
said to me,**

**"He on whom
you see the Spirit
descend and remain
is the one
who baptises
with the Holy Spirit."**

**³⁴And I myself
have seen
and have testified
that this is
the Son of God.'**

In the previous scene the Baptist had declared: 'Among you stands one whom you do not know'(1:26). Here he admits, not once but twice, that he himself did not know him. It was God who revealed Jesus to him when he saw the Spirit of God come down and remain on Jesus, as Isaiah had foretold (Isaiah 11:2). Jesus will remove sin because he comes to share with us this same Spirit. The Baptist has been baptising with water. Jesus 'is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit'.

The first creation began with the Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos and God's word calling creation into being (Genesis 1:3). Now God's design for creation is being revealed in its fullness. A new creation is beginning to emerge. Jesus is the new Adam walking the earth (compare Romans 5:12-21; 1Corinthians 15:22,45). He is coming to share this new life with the world.

What kind of spirit was it that came down upon Jesus and remained on him? A reading of the prophecies of the First Testament might have led us to expect the spirit of the Messiah to be that of a warrior, who would forcibly rid the world of sinners. We might have expected the Messiah to have the spirit of a roaring lion, or a fire scorching a forest. We might have expected him to come in judgment like an axe laid to the root of a tree! But such was not the spirit that characterised Jesus. We are told that it was 'like a dove'. Our thoughts go to Noah's ark and the dove that brought the first signs of new growth on a world that had succumbed to the deluge (Genesis 8:11). We are reminded, too, of the following ode:

My beloved speaks and says to me:
'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely'.

– Song of Solomon 2:10-14

The Baptist is introducing us to the one whom the Beloved Disciple came to know so well. It was Jesus who showed him that God's 'voice is sweet' and that God's 'face is beautiful'. The image of the dove prepares us for a saviour who is gentle and who brings peace, for he gives to the world the Spirit which remains upon him, the Spirit of love that binds him to his Father, the Spirit of light that dispels all darkness and that alone can take away sin. This brings us back to the first image evoked by the Baptist's words: 'Here is the Lamb of God'. Jesus is coming in judgment, but what a different judgment from that expected even by the Baptist. We might reflect on the following poem from Isaiah:

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
 I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice ['a just verdict'] to the nations.
 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice ['a just verdict'].
 He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice ['a just verdict'] in the earth;
 and the coast lands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
 who gives breath to the people upon it
 and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord, that is my name;
 my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
 See, the former things have come to pass,
 and new things I now declare;
 before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

– Isaiah 42:1-9

In some manuscripts John 1:34 reads 'Chosen One of God' rather than 'Son of God'. If they are correct, the Baptist may be alluding to the text from Isaiah just quoted. If 'Son of God' is the correct reading, God's reliable witness is assuring us that Jesus is 'the Son of God' spoken of in the Prologue (1:18). The Gospel itself is being presented to us by John that we might come to believe this and so find life (20:31).

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'

³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'

They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'

³⁹He said to them, 'Come and see.'

They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed).

⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

Act I Scene 3. The Baptist introduces his disciples to Jesus

There are four figures on the stage: John, two of his disciples, and, for the second time, Jesus. The narrator has more to say here than in either of the previous scenes, but it is still possible as we listen to his story to watch those whom he presents to us as they converse with each other. We are told that one of the disciples is Andrew. The other is not named. As noted in the Introduction, it is possible that the unnamed disciple is the one identified later as 'the disciple Jesus loved', the disciple whose witness to Jesus stands behind the tradition expressed in this gospel.

The Baptist has already given his testimony to Jesus (1:29-34). Here he begins to fulfil the commission given him by God to bring others to believe in him (see 1:7). Having pointed Jesus out once again as the 'Lamb of God' (see 1:29), the Baptist steps into the background and his disciples set off to 'follow' Jesus. Later we will hear Jesus say: 'Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also' (12:26). For the first time in the Gospel Jesus speaks. His words are meant to echo throughout the Gospel, for he is speaking not just to the two disciples but to all of us who are listening: 'What are you looking for?'

What are we looking for? Why am I writing this commentary? Why are you reading it? Do we know what our hearts truly desire? John is inviting us to do what the two disciples did. He is inviting us to take Jesus as our teacher ('Rabbi'), and to accept Jesus' invitation to 'come and see' and to stay with him. If we do, we will recognise him as the 'one whom our souls love' (Song of Solomon 1:7), and, like Andrew, we will see in him the one who alone satisfies the longings of our souls and fulfils all the promises that life holds for us: we will recognise him as the Messiah, the Anointed One.

They ask Jesus: ‘Where are you staying?’ and they discover the answer by ‘remaining with him’. The verb translated here as ‘staying’ and ‘remaining’ is one that John has already used when telling us that the Holy Spirit ‘remained’ on Jesus (1:32-33). The whole Gospel is, in a sense, an answer to the disciples’ question, an answer already given in the Prologue: Jesus is staying ‘with God’(1:1), ‘close to the Father’s heart’(1:18).

John is already presenting Jesus to us as the incarnation of God’s Wisdom:

Wisdom is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her ... She goes about seeking those worthy of her and she graciously appears to them in their paths.

– Wisdom 6:12-13,16

Happy is the person who listens to me ... for whoever finds me finds life.

– Proverbs 8:34-35

The narrator informs us that one of the disciples we have been watching is Andrew, whom he introduces as ‘Simon Peter’s brother’. No sooner is Simon introduced than he appears. Andrew goes to him and tells him about Jesus and then brings Simon and introduces him to Jesus. Jesus looks at Simon and sees the one who is to become the leader of his disciples. He names him ‘Cephas’(Aramaic for ‘rock’). John tells us that this means Peter (from *petra*, Greek for rock; compare Matthew 16:18). The Venerable Bede in his commentary on the Gospel of John writes:

He is called Peter because his faith is strong and because he adheres to that Rock of whom the Apostle spoke: ‘The Rock was Christ’(1Corinthians 10:5).

The fact that John feels the need to translate ‘Cephas’ here, as well as such ordinary Hebrew words as ‘Rabbi’ and ‘Messiah’ is an indication that he is writing for Greek speakers who are, for the most part, non-Jews.

John is portraying Jesus as having supernatural insight. As mentioned in the Introduction, because John sets out to portray the divinity of Jesus by focusing on the intimacy of his communion with the Father, it is difficult to draw conclusions from his Gospel in regard to Jesus’ human psyche.

Jesus’ words to Simon also alert us to the truth that following Jesus involves more than any decision which we might make to seek him. Mysteriously, the initiative is always with Jesus. To be a disciple is to be attentive to the Word of God and to welcome what Jesus has to give.

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'

⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'

⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you get to know me?'

Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

⁴⁹Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

Act I Scene 4. Two more disciples join Jesus

The initiative here comes from Jesus, who approaches Philip and invites him to be his disciple: 'Follow me'. Philip's words to Nathanael alert us to the fact that he has a lot yet to learn about Jesus. He refers to him as the 'son of Joseph'. We have been told that he is the 'Son of God' (1:18,34). He refers to him as being from Nazareth. We have been told that he comes from 'close to the Father's heart'(1:18). Philip is not wrong in speaking of Jesus as the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel (Jesus himself will claim later that the Scriptures testify to him – see 5:39,46), but we already know that he is much more than simply the fulfilment of God's promises.

Nathanael hesitates and is invited by Philip to 'come and see', echoing the invitation given earlier by Jesus (1:39). Nathanael responds to Philip's invitation and approaches Jesus. In the Prologue we learned that the 'true light enlightens everyone'(1:9). We learned also that though everyone is invited to come and see, 'the world did not know him'(1:10), and 'his own people did not accept him'(1:11). John seems to be alluding to this in the words with which Jesus describes Nathanael: 'a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit'. Jacob, to whom God gave the name Israel, was quite capable of deceit. He deceived his twin brother Esau into handing over the inheritance due to the first born and he deceived his father Isaac into giving him his blessing. Many Israelites proved unfaithful to the covenant and 'did not accept' Jesus. Nathanael, however, represents those in Israel who 'received him' and 'believed in his name'(1:12).

Nathanael acknowledges Jesus as 'the Son of God' and the 'King of Israel'. Both are Davidic titles and on one level represent an acceptance of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah by a faithful member of Israel. John wrote his Gospel 'so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God'(20:31). Nathanael may seem to be an example of true faith, but he does not yet know the special intimacy of Jesus' relationship to God his Father that is expressed in the words 'Son of God'.

Once again John presents Jesus as having special powers of insight (see 1:50). John is reminding us that the one we are watching is the incarnate Word of God.

In Rabbinic literature the fig tree was a symbol for the knowledge of good and evil discovered through a study of the Torah. Jesus, the Word of God, was already drawing Nathanael to him as he was ‘under the shade of the Law’ (Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 18,20). Nathanael is the first person described as believing. However he is just beginning on the road of faith, for Jesus is more than the fulfilment of the Scriptures; he is more than the Davidic Messiah, as Nathanael will see.

Jesus’ final words are proclaimed to everyone (the ‘you’ in verse fifty-one is plural). For the first time we have a saying of Jesus beginning with the expression ‘Very truly, I tell you’. This is reserved for especially solemn revelations and, as was suggested in the Introduction, it may also indicate an actual saying of Jesus remembered and handed down in the community. Others have declared their faith in Jesus using titles that capture well certain elements of the way Jesus’ disciples came to understand him. Now we hear, from the lips of Jesus himself, his own proclamation of who he is.

Nathanael ‘will see heaven opened’: he will see God revealed. Once again Jesus alludes to the story of Jacob (‘Israel’), to the time he dreamed that he saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, and ‘angels of God ascending and descending’:

Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’.

– Genesis 28:11-17

Jesus is now the place where heaven touches earth. He is the ‘house of God’, the sacred place where we encounter the divine.

⁵⁰Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’

⁵¹And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

The Son of Man

The final title used of Jesus in this compendium of early Christology is ‘Son of Man’. To our ears this is a rather strange expression. In the New Testament, apart from Acts 7:56 and Apocalypse 1:13 and 14:14, it is found only in the gospels and always on the lips of Jesus himself. By placing it here at the conclusion to this passage, and by placing it on the lips of Jesus, John is wanting us to see in it his understanding of the true identity of Jesus, and the proper way to understand the titles used by others earlier in this passage. It seems to be the title Jesus himself preferred as best conveying his own sense of himself and his mission,

We find ‘Son of Man’ in the Old Testament as an idiomatic way of speaking about a human being (Psalm 8:4 and frequently in Ezekiel). There is a quite specialised use, however, in the Book of Daniel, and it is to this text that we must turn to discover the meaning of the expression as found here in John. The Book of Daniel was written at the time of the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king, Antiochus IV (c.165BC). The invading army seemed to be winning, but the author of the Book of Daniel gives expression to his faith in God’s providence in an imaginative portrayal of the last judgment: ‘The court sat in judgment and the books were opened’. Daniel sees:

One like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One [God] and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 7:13-14

Who is this ‘Son of Man’? For the author of the Book of Daniel it is certainly not the Syrian king, in spite of his pretensions to power. The explanation of the vision makes it clear that it is the heavenly counterpart or representative of the ordinary, downtrodden and persecuted people of God who will ultimately prevail and who will be exalted by God in the final judgment. The text reads:

The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

– Daniel 7:27

In identifying himself as the ‘Son of Man’ Jesus is declaring that he comes from heaven. He is declaring also his solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, the victims of injustice in all its forms. In this there is already a hint that this solidarity is expressed by suffering with and for the oppressed. The Word truly ‘became flesh’ (1:14). Belief in Jesus as the Son of Man is at the heart of Christian faith (see 9:35). The title Son of Man plays an important role also in the Synoptic Gospels (see especially Caesarea Philippi [Mark 8:30-38], Jesus’ Transfiguration [Mark 9:7-9] and his trial [Mark 14:61-62]). As we shall see, John especially develops the idea of Jesus coming down from heaven to reveal God’s judgment *now* in offering us eternal life. His keeps our attention focused on the cross, of which the ladder in this scene is a symbol.

Act I Scene 5. The marriage feast at Cana

¹On the third day

there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee,
and the mother of Jesus was there.

²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

³When the wine gave out,

the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

⁴And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?
My hour has not yet come.'

⁵His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'

⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars

for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.'

And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.'
So they took it.

⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine,
and did not know where it came from

(though the servants who had drawn the water knew),
the steward called the bridegroom

¹⁰and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first,
and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk.
But you have kept the good wine until now.'

¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs,
in Cana of Galilee,

and revealed his glory;

and his disciples believed in him.

¹²After this he went down to Capernaum

with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples;
and they remained there a few days.

The prototype sign

John's Gospel is highly symbolic because he wishes us to penetrate below the surface events of Jesus' life and the actual words which Jesus spoke to the mystery which the events and the words reveal. We have already seen this in the way John has portrayed the witness of John the Baptist and the meeting of Jesus with his first disciples. We will see it again in the events of Jesus' life which John selects and in the way he presents them in such a way as to highlight various aspects of the glory of God which they reveal.

While this is true of the whole Gospel, there is something quite special about this scene which John calls 'the first of his signs'. This might better be translated 'a prototype of his signs', for it contains the essential revelation of which each of the following signs brings out one or other aspect. Whatever event or events in Jesus' life are behind this scene, they are so submerged in the symbolic portrait that they cannot be retrieved.

Jesus has just told Nathanael that he will see greater things (1:50). John then takes us to Nathanael's home town (see 21:2) and to a wedding feast. He paints for us a scene in which Jesus' mother symbolises Sion crying out to God in distress because the promises of God have not yet been realised. She accepts Jesus' challenge to believe and, through the ministry of Jesus, God hears her plea and responds with an astonishing superabundance of grace. The steward expresses to God, symbolised by the bridegroom, the wonder and gratitude of all who have been invited to the wedding feast. As Paul says: Jesus is the Yes to 'every one of God's promises'(2Corinthians 1:20).

Before examining the scene in detail, I want to suggest a different translation for verse four. Firstly, the idiom translated in the NRSV as 'What concern is that to you and to me' occurs a number of times in the Bible. It can indicate a rejection. More often it indicates that there is another point of view and challenges a person to change his or her way of approaching a situation. Its precise nuance depends upon the context. Since Mary acts as though Jesus is going to do something and since Jesus does in fact respond positively, we must conclude that he is not rejecting her. He is saying something like: 'How does God want us involved in this? Do you see this the way I see it?' There is some similarity with Jesus' response to the father of the epileptic boy who came to Jesus and pleaded: 'if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us'. Jesus replied: 'If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes' (Mark 9:22-23). The man rose to the challenge and so does Jesus' mother.

There is a long and ancient tradition which translates the rest of verse four as a question rather than a statement: 'Has not my hour now come?' Throughout the Gospel we will frequently hear that various things do not happen because Jesus' hour has not yet come. The hour of the accomplishment of God's design must await the crucifixion. It is possible that Jesus is affirming this here, but it is also possible that Jesus is saying to Israel, symbolised by his mother: 'Is not this the moment for me to begin the mission on which my Father has sent me? Is this not the 'third day' and will not God reveal his glory? Why are you so anxious? God hears the cry of the poor. Can you imagine that God will not respond to your plea?'

The symbolic nature of this scene is signalled from the opening words ‘on the third day’ which prepare those familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures for a theophany: a revelation of divine glory. The classical text concerns God’s self-manifestation on Mount Sinai:

The Lord said to Moses: ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for *the third day*, because *on the third day* the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people’.

– Exodus 19:10-11

It was on Sinai that God revealed his glory (Deuteronomy 5:24; the Hebrew *kabed* in Exodus 19:16, translated as ‘thick cloud’, is perhaps better translated ‘glory’).

The prophet Hosea uses the same language to speak of the certainty of God’s coming salvation:

Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; *on the third day* he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.

– Hosea 6:1-3

Luke records a saying of Jesus in which he assures his disciples that whatever may happen to him today (in the present) and tomorrow (in the foreseeable future), ultimately (‘on the third day’), he would complete his mission (Luke 13:32-33). Matthew records Jesus’ confident assurance to his disciples that ‘on the third day’ God’s glory would be revealed by raising him to life (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19).

We should not be surprised that the Beloved Disciple, the disciple who learned the secrets of love so well from the one against whose heart he rested at the supper (13:23), the disciple who stood with Jesus’ mother when the pierced heart of Jesus poured forth saving blood and water (19:26,34), would choose to open Jesus’ public ministry with a wedding feast. Jesus has come that we ‘may have life, and have it abundantly’(10:10). God the bridegroom is in Jesus offering love to his bride.

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee

God as husband

Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:5-8

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

– Isaiah 62:4-5

I will bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ... and she shall respond as in the days of her youth ... On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband,' ... I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:14-16,19-20 (see Jeremiah 2:2)

In the Cana scene it is God who is revealed as the bridegroom. Jesus is the one who shows the superabundance of God's gracious love for his people. Because Jesus is the Word and because the Word is God, it is only a small step to seeing Jesus himself as the bridegroom. We find this in the Synoptic Gospels which portray Jesus as a bridegroom coming to release us from the burdens of a religion that has forgotten the tenderness of God's love, and to woo us back to the intimacy which God longs to lavish upon us (Mark 2:19). Paul, too, uses married love as an image for the love which we experience from Jesus and which we share within the community:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

– 2Corinthians 11:2

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

– Ephesians 5:25

We find the same imagery in the concluding section of the Apocalypse:

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready ... Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

– Revelation 19:7,9; see 21:2

The Beloved Disciple selects this theme to set the focus for his whole work. As we listen to Jesus, he wants us to know that we are listening to 'the bridegroom's voice' (3:29).

Before mentioning Jesus, John speaks of his mother. She is symbolic of the people of Israel who have longed for the Messiah, longed for the promised one, longed to see the fulfilment of God's promises, and have laboured to bring to birth a faithful covenant people enjoying the fullness of God's intimate presence. The promises of God are slow in coming and so she cries to God on behalf of her children: 'They have no wine'. Her cry is not only for Israel. It is for all the world. She is 'Woman', the new Eve, mother of all the living, pleading on behalf of the whole human race.

In challenging her, Jesus is challenging all who long to receive God's gift. Is not God the one who hears the cry of the poor? Is not God the one who is faithful to his promises? At the same time, as was made clear in the Prologue, we receive God's gift, not because of race, or personal striving or the exercise of will or power (1:13). Jesus does not respond to his mother's request because of any family bond. He acts only as his Father commands him to act, and those who would receive the gift of God must learn the same obedience. Her instructions to the servants show how well Jesus' mother accepts this. Her trust is based on his word alone, not on her position as his mother..

As will be noted a number of times throughout the Gospel, Jesus' 'hour' is the 'hour' of his glorification. It comes in its fullness only when Jesus is 'lifted up' to the Father, on the cross, in the resurrection and when he ascends to enjoy the glory which, as Jesus says to his Father 'I had in your presence before the world existed' (17:5). Only when the hour is fulfilled can Jesus pour out in its fullness the wine of the Spirit. However, while the hour will be fulfilled later, it begins here at Cana in response to the Woman's cry.

It is no accident that Jesus' mother makes her second appearance when this 'hour' finally comes, where she is presented as the mother of the people of the new covenant (John 19:25-37). In the present scene, John portrays her as the perfect disciple, concerned only to obey, and, as a mother, instructing all her children: 'Do whatever he tells you'(compare Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7).

and the mother of Jesus was there.

²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

⁴And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

[Are you seeing this the way I see it? Woman, has not my hour now come?]

⁵His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

In the Prologue John contrasted the revelation of God found in the Mosaic Law and the revelation of God in Jesus: 'The Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'(1:17). This contrast is highlighted in the present scene by the presence of the stone water jars 'for the Jewish rites of purification'.

Jesus' contemporaries divided people and things into the 'clean' and the 'unclean'. The water in the stone jars was there to give ritual purification to those who had incurred 'uncleanness' of one sort or another. To understand these categories we need to go back to the ancient regulations forbidding contact with certain foods, certain objects (for example a corpse) and certain people (for example lepers and women at the time of menstruation and childbirth). The reasons for such regulations varied from the desire to avoid disease to a determination not to encroach upon the sacred. This latter was especially important in the regulations concerning women, for blood was deemed sacred.

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to be 'purified' before being allowed to enjoy social contact. It was especially important that the unpurified not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (see Amos 7:17). The same held for their inhabitants, the Gentiles (Isaiah 35:8; 52:1). A person who separated himself from God by sin was thought of as being 'like one who is unclean'(Isaiah 64:6). Popular imagination thought of the 'unclean' as being outside the protective power of God's holiness and so as being easy prey to the influence of 'unclean demons'. The stone water jars are there to purify people from any inadvertent impurity they may have incurred.

We have already heard the Baptist acknowledging the limits of the ritual purification which he was practising. We have already heard him promise that Jesus will 'baptise with the Holy Spirit'(1:34). We are now witnessing the beginnings of the unfolding of this promise. There are six water jars and they are filled to the brim. The First Testament has come to the point of fulfilment. There is a hushed silence as we await the word of the Messiah. Only he can offer a purification that goes beyond ritual washing, for only God's Holy Spirit for which all are waiting can purify us, and it is Jesus, upon whom the Spirit rests, who alone can pour this Spirit into our hearts (Romans 5:5), and so 'take away the sin of the world'(1:29).

John is portraying Jesus as the incarnation of divine Wisdom, inviting us: 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed' (Proverbs 9:5). Wine, the 'blood of the grape'(Genesis 49:11), symbolises the blood of Jesus' life poured out for us. It is the blood of the sacrificed paschal lamb (John 1:29). It is Jesus 'given for the life of the world'(John 6:51). It is the true vine giving to the branches (John 15:1ff) the gift of eternal life (John 17:2). It is 'the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin'(1John 1:7). This theme is developed by John in his First Letter:

Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree ... God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

– 1John 5:5-8, 11-13

God's gift does not come as if by magic. It is the water that becomes wine. There are things we must do to prepare ourselves for the astonishing grace which God is offering in Jesus.

The steward recognises the quality of the wine. God (the bridegroom) has indeed 'kept the good wine till now'. The steward does not know the part Jesus is playing. John is reminding us that Jesus remains unknown except to those who are open to the light and willing to respond to God's invitation to come to him, to see him and to remain with him (see 1:39). Only a disciple will see 'the sign', recognise the glory of God and 'believe in him'.

⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it.

⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bride-groom ¹⁰and said to him,

'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

¹²After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there a few days.

A wondrous gift of wine

Only a disciple will see in Jesus the one sent by God to fulfil the promise:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines
strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.

– Amos 9:13

The superabundant gift of God is drawn from the jars of the people who received God's promises. The promises made by God to the human race and in particular to Israel have not been abrogated. They are fulfilled in Jesus.

Immediately after this scene John mentions that 'the Passover of the Jews was near' (2:13). In placing his scene, as he does that of the multiplication of the loaves (see 6:4), in the context of the Passover he links both scenes with the Last Supper (see 13:1). The Eucharistic symbolism of the wine would seem to be intentional.

As mentioned earlier, the highly symbolic nature of John's writing, especially in this scene, makes it impossible to reconstruct the event or events that stand behind this portrait. In any case, it is clear from the text that John's purpose in composing this scene is not to focus on physical water becoming physical wine. He is interested in the 'sign', that is to say the revelation of God signified by Jesus' gift of wine at a marriage feast. At the same time, Augustine reminds us that we should not be surprised that miracles such as this should happen:

The miracle of our Lord, Jesus Christ, by which he made wine from water is certainly no wonder for those who know that God did it. For he, the very one who every year does this on vines, made wine on that day at the wedding in those six water jars, which he ordered to be filled with water. For just as what the attendants put into the water jars was turned into wine by the Lord's effort so also what the clouds pour down is turned into wine by the effort of the same Lord. But that does not amaze us because it happens every year; by its regularity it has lost its wonderment. Yet it merits even greater reflection than that which was done in the water jars.

– Tractate 8 on John

John has composed the scene in such a way as to manifest the glory of God revealed by Jesus as the one sent by God to pour out upon the world God's abundant and saving grace. He has captured the essence of the revelation that will be apparent, to those who believe, in each of the scenes which follow. He wants us to see in the ministry of Jesus the Lord appearing in his glory.

At the conclusion of the Cana scene we are told that Jesus' disciples 'believed in him'. What John means by 'believe' will emerge as the gospel unfolds but it is important, even at this early stage, to begin exploring a theme which is clearly central to John's understanding of the proper response we should have to Jesus. At the conclusion of his gospel he tells us that his purpose in writing is 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). In the Prologue he announced that the Baptist came as a witness to testify to the light, 'so that all might believe through him'(1:7). He went on to declare that the gift of becoming children of God is given by the Word to 'all who believe in his name'(1:12). Jesus spoke of believing in his conversation with Nathanael (John 1:50).

The key importance of this theme for John is underlined by the fact that the word 'believe' occurs ninety-eight times in his gospel, It is also significant that it occurs only as a verb (Greek: *pisteuô*). John is interested in the dynamic movement of our actual relating to Jesus. Incidentally, the verb 'believe' is found nine times in the First Letter of John, where we also find John's only use of the noun 'belief' (faith: Greek: *pistis*; see 1John 5:4).

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek verb *pisteuô* or by the related noun *pistis*, or adjective *pistos*. These latter only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn.

The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated 'faithfulness'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, certain, and so trustworthy (note, *trustworthy* - which is not the same as *trusting*).

God has this quality in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that he is the real God, not a false God, that he always acts according to the truth, and so we can find our security in him, we can rely upon him and we can place our trust in him.

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

– Psalm 33:4

I will take you for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:20

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your *faithfulness*.

– Lamentations 3:22-23

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are *trustworthy* because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of the Lord, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18).

Faith

Abraham is said to have a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

When we come to the Hebrew verb *'mn* we find, as we would expect, that it means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness. The verb 'believe' then has two essential components. It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness and it also means to behave faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is. But who is God? Among the many necessarily imperfect answers to this question found in the sacred Scriptures, there is one that stands out: God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. When he first appears to Moses, God declares:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

Exodus 3:7-8

Say therefore to the Israelites, "I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians."

– Exodus 6:6-7

This loving kindness of God is stressed throughout the First Testament. It finds its most sublime expression in the New Testament in the First Letter of John where we read: 'God is love' (1John 4:8,16). Since God *is* love he can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God, therefore, is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed. This is expressed in a psalm alluded to later by John (10:34):

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'

– Psalm 82:1-4

Jeremiah challenges king Zedekiah:

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? ...
He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 22:15-16

King Josiah, Zedekiah's father, acted justly and so can truly be said to have put his faith in the faithfulness of God. The idea recurs again and again in the writings of the prophets:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.
– Amos 5:24

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.
– Hosea 4:1

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.
– Hosea 6:6

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
– Isaiah 11:9

The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor. They are to remember that they were once oppressed and that it was the Lord who redeemed them. The following text is typical and similar injunctions can be found throughout the books of the Law:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry.
– Exodus 22:21-23

In the New Testament, including as we shall see the Gospel of John, Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures who are totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (1:13) or, as Jesus will say later, like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (15:1ff).

Faith

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to ‘be’ in ‘love’. It is to be in God’s love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the Word enjoys in the eternal mystery of God’s being and which the Word-made-flesh invites us to share. It is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God’s love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion. To believe is:

- to listen to God’s word as revealed in Jesus.
- to heed what God says (reveals) in Jesus, trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God’s will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love.

Jesus reveals the central importance of obedience: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work’(4:34). ‘I can do nothing on my own ... I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me’(5:30). ‘I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’(6:38). If we really are ‘born of God’(1:13; 1John 3:9; 5:1), if we really are ‘children of God’(1John 3:1,10; 5:2), if it is true that God’s word is abiding in us (1John 1:10; also Colossians 3:16; James 1:21), then we will live as Jesus lives (1John 2:6). We will obey God’s word coming to us through Jesus (1John 2:3,5,17; 5:2-3). This has implications for every aspect of our lives, for we are to purify ourselves as Christ is pure (1John 3:3). However, as with his treatment of sin (see commentary on 1:29), John keeps a sharp focus. God is love and so the key obedience upon which he concentrates is our obedience to the command of love (John 13:34-35; 14:15,23; 15:17-18; 1John 3:16; 4:7,11).

The First Letter of John is especially insistent on living a life of justice and love as being essential to living a life of faith. The author writes: ‘Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten by God’(1John 5:1). He also writes: ‘Everyone who loves has been begotten by God’(1John 4:7), and, to stress the reality of the love of which he is speaking, he writes: ‘Everyone who acts justly has been begotten by God’(1John 2:29). As we follow John in keeping our focus on believing in Jesus, let us not overlook that real faith will reveal itself in a life of obedience to God’s will – what John likes to call ‘doing truth’(3:21) or ‘doing justice’(1John 2:29; 3:10). Not to do justice is not to know the true God (John 17:3; 1John 5:20-21).

John is not alone in insisting on loving behaviour as an essential element in believing. For James too faith must be shown in action; any other so-called faith is counterfeit:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

– James 2:14-17

Paul has the same teaching:

The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

– Galatians 5:6

In this they are all being faithful to the teaching of Jesus:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

Another element of the call to believe which we find in John is its urgency. This too is a common theme in the New Testament. Paul writes:

Present your members *now* as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

– Romans 6:19

It is *now* the moment for you to wake from sleep.

– Romans 13:11

The revelation of the mystery is *now* disclosed ... to bring about the obedience of faith.

– Romans 16:26

Before giving us the summary statement of belief upon which we are commenting (2:11), John has already said a lot about what it means to believe. We believe when we go to him ‘who enlightens everyone’(1:9). We believe when we receive God’s word (1:12,16) and when we live as creatures whom Jesus empowers to become ‘children of God’(1:12). We believe when we accept that God has sent Jesus to ‘take away the sin of the world’(1:29). We believe when we follow Jesus (1:37) and accept his invitation to ‘come and see’ him and ‘stay with him’(1:39; see also 1:14,46), when we seek him and find him (1:38,41,45). We believe when we recognise that we are totally dependent upon God and act in this dependence accepting that of ourselves we ‘have no wine’(2:3). We believe when we heed the words of Jesus’ mother, the perfect disciple, and ‘do whatever he tells [us]’(2:5). We believe when we witness to Jesus (1:7,8,19). We believe when we recognise the gift of the Spirit as the outpouring of God’s love, revealing the glory that Jesus has as ‘God the only Son who is close to the father’s heart’(1:18), the one sent by God to reveal him (2:11).

John tells us that at the conclusion of the marriage festivities Jesus went to Capernaum ‘with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples’. We should note that in Jesus’ culture the term ‘brothers’ is used for all male members of the extended Jewish family.

The Synoptic Gospels focus on Jesus’ Galilean ministry right up to the period just before his death. John, as we shall find in the following scene, focuses more on what Jesus did in and around Jerusalem.