

ACT II : SHARING IN THE NEW COVENANT
JOHN 2:13 - 4:54

Act Two

In Act One of his Gospel drama, John introduced us to Jesus through the witness of John the Baptist who spoke of Jesus' baptism and introduced him as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'(1:19-34). He then introduced us to a number of Jesus' first disciples and we heard them giving expression, in imperfect ways, to the beginnings of faith in Jesus. We also heard Jesus speak of himself as the Son of Man (1:35-51). Finally, we found ourselves at a marriage feast, symbolic of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus, a covenant that is a love commitment from God the Bridegroom, mediated through Jesus (2:1-12). John concluded with a statement that 'his disciples believed in him'(2:11).

Now in Act Two, John examines what belief in Jesus means. He launches into scenes that demonstrate the radical challenge which Jesus' revelation has for the world, including the world of Judaism. We will never learn to follow him unless we recognise the revolutionary approach which he brought to religion. In the first scene the temple is cleared. The old ways have attained their goal. They must now open up to the new (2:13-25). John then draws out the implications of this, firstly for the Jews, represented by Nicodemus (3:1-21), then for the followers of the Baptist (3:22-36), then for the Samaritans (4:1-42). In the final scene in Act Two the life-giving power of the gospel, and the fact that it is meant for everyone, is spelled out dramatically and symbolically when life is given to a young boy and the first Gentiles come to believe (4:43-54).

In each of the scenes, Jesus is centre-stage. John's reflections take the form of long speeches coming from the lips of Jesus as he converses with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, his disciples and the Pharisees. When we compare the speeches of Jesus in John's Gospel with the language of the letters that come from John's community, we see a remarkable similarity in style. The most satisfactory conclusion is that John is the author of the discourses given by Jesus in his Gospel. He has taken actual sayings of Jesus and woven them into reflections which bring out the significance of Jesus and his message. The speeches as we have them come from John, but they are placed on Jesus' lips because they include words actually spoken by Jesus and because they express the insights of the Beloved Disciple into the mind and heart of the one he loved so dearly.

Act II Scene 1. Jesus and the temple of God

We are in the outer court of the temple in Jerusalem. It is being used as a market in which people are buying animals for the various sacrifices. Roman and Greek coins bore imperial or pagan portraits and so could not be used to pay the temple tax; hence the money changers. The narrator tells us that the 'Passover of the Jews' is near. The way John speaks of 'the Jews' and his description of the feast as being one of *their* festivals indicates that he and those for whom he is writing identify themselves as a quite separate religious community. As noted in the Introduction, this favours a date for the Gospel after the definitive excommunication of Christian Jews from the Synagogue in c.85AD.

The origins of the Passover go back to a time when it was a pastoral festival celebrated on the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox. The finest year-old lamb from the previous spring was offered in sacrifice to God by way of a prayer for a good crop of new lambs. It took only a small step to use the festival to celebrate God's choice of Israel as his 'flock' (see, for example, Psalm 95:7).

In their liturgical reliving of the Exodus, the Jews recalled how God 'passed over' their ancestors when he rejected the first-born of the Egyptians. It was the blood of the 'Passover' lamb which protected them. Its body was eaten in a communal meal, celebrating the familiarity of the people with their God. According to the ritual, the Passover was first celebrated on the eve of God's saving act. From then on it was to be celebrated as a memorial, so that each year the community would re-enact the Exodus and receive anew the grace and the promises attached to it. The ritual text is found in the Book of Exodus:

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; through-out your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

– Exodus 12:11-14

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'

¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'

¹⁸The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'

¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'

²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?'

²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

It is against the background of this redemption theme that John places this scene. The new covenant is being established. The cult of the old must undergo a radical transformation. The sacrificial animals cannot remove sin. Jesus is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'(1:29). He is the 'first-born' who will give his life to redeem the world from all that enslaves it and who will lead us on our journey towards the fullness of the promise.

We are watching the bustling crowd when suddenly Jesus appears. John may want us to recall the promise of the prophet Malachi: 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple' (Malachi 3:1). In a striking prophetic gesture, Jesus begins to clear the temple courtyard, his words echoing those of the prophet Zechariah: 'There shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day'(Zechariah 14:21). Jesus' dramatic action is stating that 'that day' has come.

When John reflected on the significance of Jesus' action he recalled the words: 'Zeal for your house has consumed me'(Psalm 69:9). Jesus was consumed with zeal to purify God's house: to empty out those attitudes and practices that obscured the glory of God. By altering the tense of the verb to the future 'will consume', John points us towards Jesus' passion and death. It was Jesus' zeal for God that led to his being consumed. The objection levelled at Jesus by the religious authorities (the 'Jews', see comment on 1:19) was the beginning of an opposition that was to lead to Jesus' death

They ask for a 'sign', not a revelation of divine glory that would show them who Jesus is (2:11), but something that would fit in with their preconceived notions of God and satisfy them that Jesus was acting within the canons of the establishment of which they were the guardians (compare Matthew 12:38-39; 16:1-4; Luke 23:8). According to the Synoptics, Jesus' reply was to be thrown up against him in the trial which led to his condemnation (Matthew 26:61; 27:40). John is at pains to point out that his opponents misunderstood or misrepresented him.

Jesus is not saying that he will destroy the temple. In fact the implication is that it is their behaviour which is bringing about its destruction. What Jesus is saying is that if they go ahead and destroy the temple, he will raise it up. The objectors take Jesus' words at their face value, thus creating a misunderstanding which gives Jesus the opportunity to clarify his meaning by taking it to a deeper level. John will frequently make use of this literary device of having a statement by Jesus followed by a misunderstanding which gives Jesus the opportunity to clarify his meaning. In this way John is inviting the reader to a more profound understanding of Jesus' words. They speak of the 'forty-six years' that the sanctuary took to build. Herod began working on the temple c.19BC, which would place this episode in 28AD – a likely year for the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. We will find other examples in John of such precise detail, an indication of the degree of familiarity which the author had with the details of Jesus' life.

John explains that after Jesus' resurrection the disciples remembered Jesus' words (under the guidance, as we will be told, of Jesus' Spirit – see 14:26). They came to realise their deeper meaning: Jesus was speaking of the temple of his risen body, for 'the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands' (Acts 7:48). In verse fourteen the word translated 'temple' is the Greek *hieron*, referring, as we indicated, to the whole of the temple precincts. In verses nineteen to twenty-one John uses the Greek *naos*, meaning the sanctuary itself. Believing the promise of God expressed in their Scriptures that he would make his dwelling among them, Jesus' disciples came to believe that the glorified Jesus is the sanctuary in whom we are to find God (compare 1:14). Jesus' disciples also came to believe that when Jesus said he would raise up the temple 'in three days' he was referring to his death and resurrection, the fulfilment of the Passover which they were about to celebrate.

The scene we have just witnessed is, indeed, shocking. It cannot but cause us, as it must have caused John's own community, to question many of the things and many of the practices which we hold sacred. If Jesus takes a whip to institutions as sacred as the temple and the Passover, what must he think of some of our traditions? Are we any less guilty of bottling the wine of God's Spirit in such a way as to make it inaccessible to those who are thirsting for it? Have we, perhaps, reduced religion to a market, putting a price on grace? Do our liturgies really resemble a wedding feast, revealing the fidelity of God to a love that is lavishly poured out upon the world, inviting all to the kind of divine intimacy enjoyed by the Word himself? If religion in any of its aspects fails to reveal God's love and fails to draw people 'close to the Father's heart' (1:18), we must pray that Jesus will continue in his zeal to treat it as he does the temple in this scene.

This is especially needed for the Christian church, for, as is clear from a number of places in the New Testament, including the Letter to the community at Ephesus, the church is the 'body' of Christ in the world, 'the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:23). It is composed of sinful human beings. It has failed, as Jesus' disciples failed, and it will fail again, but Jesus has promised that his Spirit will continue to give it life and to guide it into the fullness of truth (John 16:13). Let us pray that this love will continue to purify us, burning away whatever lacks faith and resists love. May 'all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' (1John 3:3).

²³When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

²⁴But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people

²⁵and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

In the Prologue we learned that the Word ‘gave power to become children of God’ to those ‘who believed in his name’ (1:12). At the conclusion of the temple scene, John tells us that ‘many believed in his name’. In this case however, Jesus ‘would not entrust himself to them’. John is beginning to refine for us what precisely he means by believing. The people to whom John is referring here ‘believed in his name because of the signs that he was doing’. John is warning us that we need more than faith based on the miraculous if we are to share in the life of the Word.

As earlier in the scene with Nathanael (see 1:48), so here, John reminds us that it is the Word of God whom we are watching. He is the Lord ‘who searches the mind and tests the heart’ (Jeremiah 17:10). We cannot know him by looking at him from the outside. We must learn to believe in him by coming to him, seeing him, and staying with him (see 1:39). Jesus wants to entrust himself to us. It is for this that he was sent. But he can share his life with us only when we open our hearts to him.

Act II Scene 2. Jesus and Nicodemus

All is in darkness except for the light where Jesus stands centre-stage, alone. Gradually we discern another figure moving in the dark towards Jesus. We are told that it is Nicodemus and that he is a leader of the Jews (a member of their governing council, the Sanhedrin, see 7:50). We have just learned that the Law is bereft of wine (2:3). The temple is empty (2:15). Where are they to go who have relied on the Law and the temple? John is inviting them to come with Nicodemus to Jesus.

Nicodemus is one of those already mentioned in 2:23 who have witnessed Jesus' signs. He has concluded that God must be working in some way in Jesus. He has come, in John's terms, to the first stage of belief. Jesus responds to Nicodemus's approach with a statement beginning with the words 'Very truly, I tell you' – perhaps, as suggested in the Introduction (page 25), indicating an actual saying of Jesus. Jesus speaks (for the only time in John's Gospel) of the 'kingdom of God'. He is speaking of the reign of God which is experienced in the community of those who believe in Jesus and who live Jesus' life. Nicodemus can share in this only if he is 'born from above'.

The Greek *anôthen*, translated here 'from above', can also mean 'again'. Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean 'born again' (from a mother's womb), thus providing Jesus the with the opportunity to reveal the deeper significance of his words (a device frequently used by John, compare 2:19-21). Already in the Prologue we have learned that those to whom the Word gives power to become children of God 'are born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'(1:12-13). This same truth is now expounded by Jesus himself.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that 'no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit'(3:5). Already the Baptist has spoken of Jesus as the one who will 'baptise with the Holy Spirit'(1:33). Receiving life from the Spirit is clearly John's central thrust in this passage. The fact that Jesus also speaks of 'water' makes obvious the allusion to Christian baptism, 'the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit'(Titus 3:5).

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'

⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

9Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'

10Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

11 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony'

12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?'

13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

A 'teacher of Israel' would have known of the hopes expressed by Isaiah when he looked forward to the time when 'a spirit from on high is poured out on us' (Isaiah 32:15). He would have known of the promise made through the prophet Joel: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh' (Joel 2:28), as well as the word of God spoken through Ezekiel:

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.

– Ezekiel 36:25-26

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he cannot experience the life of communion with God by his own efforts, for the flesh is weak and mortal. It is the breath ('spirit') of God which alone can give life (see Job 34:14-15; Psalm 104:29-30). The 'you' of verse seven is in the plural. Jesus is addressing Nicodemus, but his words reach out to all who, like Nicodemus, are attracted to him but fail to grasp either what he is saying or what they need to do to share his life. The fact that the Greek *pneuma* can mean 'wind' or 'spirit', and that the Greek *phônê* can mean 'sound' or 'voice' enables a play on words in which we are invited to listen to the mysterious voice of the Spirit (compare 15:26).

Jesus goes on to explain to Nicodemus how God has chosen to give his Spirit. Nicodemus has used 'we' in verse two, for he spoke as a representative of 'the Jews'. Jesus responds also with 'we' (3:11), for he speaks not only for himself but for those who, through him, have been 'born from above'. This is the 'we' of the community of the Beloved Disciple:

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.

– 1John 1:1-2

When Jesus says: ‘You do not receive our testimony’(3:11), the ‘you’ here and in the following verse, like the ‘you’ in verse seven, is plural. He is addressing all those whom Nicodemus represents. He begins with a warning. What he has said to this point can, to some extent, be expressed through human analogies and grasped by human understanding. In this sense it can be said to be ‘earthly’(3:12). By comparison, what he is about to say is ‘heavenly’. It can be grasped only by one who is ‘born from above’. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and John is proclaiming to the Jews of his day, that they will never be able to receive Jesus’ revelation till they are willing to let go whatever is blinding them to his light and closing their hearts to his love. Without such a conversion we will never be able to penetrate to the heart of what God is revealing in Jesus, to ‘heavenly things’(3:12).

In the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon we read:

We can hardly guess at what is on earth, and what is at hand we must labour to find; but who has traced out what is in the heavens? Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy Spirit from on high? Thus were the paths of those on earth set right and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved, by wisdom.

– Wisdom 9:16-18

Jesus is the Wisdom of God incarnate. To be ‘born from above’, to share in God’s divine life, we must come to Jesus and believe in him. The author of the First Letter of John expresses it this way:

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 5:12-13

Jesus speaks of what he knows and he testifies to what he experiences in the intimacy of love which he has with God as the ‘only Son who is close to the Father’s heart’. It is because of this experience that he can make God known (1:18; see 6:46; 14:7-9). It is as the ‘Son of Man’ that he experiences God, as one who shares our human condition in all its vulnerability and brokenness and who identifies with the poor and oppressed, knowing that he and they will be vindicated by God’s judgment (see 1:51). Jesus’ human experience of God is the human realisation of the intimacy of communion experienced by the Word who ‘was in the beginning with God’(1:2).

Jesus has warned Nicodemus that what he is about to tell him is a mystery revealed only to those who are ‘born from above’. It cannot be grasped from any earthly perspective. He reminds him first of the story of the healing (salvation) given by God to those who gazed upon the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness by Moses (Numbers 21:4-9; see Wisdom 16:6-7). He then goes on to tell Nicodemus and ‘the Jews’ whom he represents that they will see God revealed only when they gaze upon the ‘Son of Man’ when he is ‘lifted up’. The lifting up includes a reference to the crucifixion. As Jesus will declare in a later scene: ‘When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself’(12:32). Jesus has spoken of the need to be ‘born of water and the Spirit’. It is to highlight the importance of Jesus’ self-giving on the cross that the author of the First Letter speaks of water and Spirit ‘and blood’(1John 5:6,8), for ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin’(1John 1:7).

Jesus' death and God's will

That Jesus saw his being 'lifted up' on the cross as part of God's providential design for our salvation is indicated when he says that 'the Son of Man *must* be lifted up'. We are reminded of a similar statement recorded by Mark: 'Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again' (Mark 8:31). In choosing to accept his death, Jesus saw himself as carrying out his Father's will:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

This text and others like it must be read with care. If Jesus' death (his being 'lifted up') could be described simply as God's will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were carrying out God's will. This would make what they did an act of obedience, and therefore virtuous. Such a conclusion is obviously wrong. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the murder of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus' life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy. It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the 'obedient' soldiers. God's part in what happened is seen in the resurrection. Sinful human beings 'lifted up' Jesus on the cross. God 'lifted up' Jesus into his eternal embrace in the resurrection. This is clearly expressed in the early sermons which we find in Acts:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

– Acts 2:23-24. See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30

The statement that Jesus was 'handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God', is not to be understood in a temporal sense, for God does not exist in time. Luke is telling us to look beyond the sinful human activity to the design of God, for God can use even sin to bring about his will. Our question here is: what is the will of God that is achieved through the crucifixion? What does it mean to say on the one hand that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the sinful responsibility of those who refused to obey God's will, and yet, on the other hand, that it all came within God's providential design and grace?

Whatever we mean by God's providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons; we are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God's loving design, it is also true that much that is good results from our saying Yes.

Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects and loves what he has made.

God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in loving ways. To the extent that we respond to God's inspiration we behave responsibly and God's will is done. To the extent that we reject God's inspiration we behave irresponsibly, and God's will is not done. Any particular decision we make is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that 'displease God' (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God's will. John has Jesus say as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word' (8:37). Stephen links the crucifying of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were precisely 'opposing the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors . . . Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:31-32,37; compare Acts 7:52

God's attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

– Mark 12:6-8

God sent his Son to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen. When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they determined to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do?

Jesus' death and God's will

His mission looked like a failure. The religious authorities were not listening. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

As sometimes happens, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God's saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help. On the night before he died he gave a meaning to his approaching death. His life was all that he had left, and he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died. His death was brought about by others. The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you'(15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us had he not suffered. Suffering is part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him.

When Jesus says that he ‘*must* be lifted up’, he is saying that *we* needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life by reacting to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, despite being faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to ‘look on the one whom [we] have pierced’(19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin. His example and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross make it possible for us to give meaning to our sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his. If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (Luke 19:41). This is God’s reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration. God is all-powerful, all-powerful *love*, and from the broken heart of God enough love pours out over this world to transform it into a paradise, if only we would receive it.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the Beloved Disciple saw blood and water flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (19:34) for the healing even of those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity’s rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God’s love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God’s providential plan, so that ‘by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone’(Hebrews 2:9). It is in this sense that we understand Jesus’ words:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

Jesus' death and God's will

When Jesus said in his agony 'Not my will but yours be done'(Mark 14:36), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represented, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to him would succeed.

When Jesus' early disciples searched the First Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God's love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God's people. Jesus' way of dying, and God's taking him into his embrace in the resurrection, are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God's love-response to human disobedience. Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are. Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope (a hope we renew each time we pray the 'Our Father') of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

Let us return now to John's text. Nicodemus has fulfilled his role. He has asked Jesus how God will bring about salvation. Having asked his question, he fades back into the shadows and our attention is focused solely on Jesus as he reveals how God will 'take away the sin of the world'(1:29), and bring all people to enjoy 'eternal life'.

In the Prologue we were told that the life that exists in the Word is the light of all people (1:4). Jesus has just been explaining that this life can be enjoyed only by one who is born from above (3:3,7), of the Spirit (3:5,8). He concludes his teaching by calling this life, for the first time, 'eternal life'. This life is experienced only by one who 'believes' in the Son of Man as he reveals God from the cross (3:15). It is also the subject of John's First Letter:

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.

– 1John 1:1-2

To enjoy 'eternal life' we must 'believe' in the 'Son of Man', 'lifted up' on the cross, 'lifted up' into the embrace of his Father, 'lifted up' in glory. The whole Gospel is an attempt by John to unveil the mystery expressed in this revelation. For now, he keeps our attention fixed on Jesus, while he makes the following declaration (or is it the chorus that now breaks into song?).

The love of God for the world is revealed in his giving his only Son – a theme repeated in the First Letter of John: ‘God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (1John 4:9-10). ‘The Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world’ (1John 4:14). Paul, too, tells us: ‘God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us’ (Romans 8:32). ‘The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

The theme of love is central to John’s Gospel (the verb *agapaô* occurs thirty-seven times and the noun *agapê* occurs seven times). Though almost all references to love occur in the second part of the Gospel commencing chapter thirteen, it is appropriate that the word first appear here in this text when John is speaking of God. The present text defines its essential meaning. God can be said to love because in creating the world God has made a commitment which he will never withdraw. Having given life, God will never take it back.

God has made us free and, tragically, we can use our freedom to reject his love. We can choose to live in darkness, but the light will always be there for us should we choose to accept it. We can refuse to live, but God will continue to offer us life in the hope that we will open our hearts to accept his offer. ‘If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself’ (2Timothy 2:13).

God’s love is not reserved for a chosen few; it is for ‘the world’ - for the whole of the created universe. God sent his Son ‘that the world might be saved through him’. John has been insisting on the universal (‘catholic’) dimension of God’s creative and redemptive will from the beginning of the Prologue. Everything that exists owes its being to God’s Word (1:3). Life and light are offered to all (1:4). Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29). We have just heard Jesus say that *whoever* believes in him will have eternal life (3:15). No one is excluded from the offer of life. It is an offer made to each of us, an offer we accept by believing in him.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

We might stand condemned by our own conscience for the ways in which we have rejected love and sinned against life itself. We may be condemned, and justly so, by others. But John assures us that God will not condemn us. ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’. We find this same assurance on the lips of Jesus: ‘I came not to judge the world, but to save the world’(12:47).

If we are condemned it is because we ‘have not believed in the name of the only Son of God’(3:18). The translation ‘have not believed’ is not strong enough to express the nuance of the Greek which denotes remaining in a state of disbelief. If we are condemned, it is not by God. It is because we ‘love darkness rather than light’. If we are condemned, it is because, being unwilling to have our evil exposed to the light, we have chosen to reject him who is the light of the world and have remained obstinate in refusing God’s love (compare Mark 16:16; 1John 5:10).

Herein lies the importance of our being committed to resisting sin in all its forms. For, as already noted in discussing the nature of belief (see commentary on 2:11), true belief necessarily produces a harvest of obedience and love. The author of the First Letter of John insists on this: ‘I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin’(1John 2:1). However, if, against our best intentions, we find, as we do, that we sin, we are not to despair:

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

– 1John 2:1-2

We have been watching Nicodemus come ‘by night’ to Jesus (3:2). Jesus’ arms are open, welcoming everyone to undertake the same journey. As we listen to him we are learning what it means to believe. We must ‘come to the light’. We must learn to ‘do what is true’, and to cease from ‘deeds that are evil’. If we come to Jesus and see him and stay with him (1:39), we will learn to live in such a way that all our deeds will be ‘done in God’, for it is the life of Jesus that we will be living.

Act II Scene 3. Jesus and the Baptist

There are two groups on stage, the Baptist with his disciples in one group and Jesus and his disciples in another. Though John seems to be saying that Jesus is baptising, this is not yet Christian baptism, for, as John will state later: ‘as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified’(7:39). It is to make this clear that John later states that in fact it was Jesus’ disciples who were baptising not Jesus himself (4:2).

The narrator informs us that people are leaving the Baptist to join Jesus. The fact that he names the site where the Baptist is carrying out his ministry is another indication of the kind of detail which we find in John’s Gospel, drawing, presumably, on the personal experience and memories of the Beloved Disciple.

A discussion on ‘purification’ begins in the camp of the Baptist. We touched on this subject earlier when commenting on the stone water jars at the marriage feast at Cana, described as being ‘for the Jewish rites of purification’(2:6). In that scene we saw that the Jewish rites have been superseded. In this scene John wishes to reinforce the earlier witness of the Baptist that it is Jesus who is the one ‘who takes away the sin of the world’ (1:29). The baptism which he, the Baptist, is doing has only one purpose. It is to reveal Jesus to Israel (1:31).

Some of the Baptist’s disciples are disturbed at the growing popularity of Jesus. The Baptist corrects them: ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven’. As Jesus himself will later observe: ‘Everything that the Father gives me will come to me’ (6:37), and ‘No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father’(6:65). The Baptist is not concerned with popularity or success. He wants only the will of God. He has already pointed Jesus out to his disciples and we have already witnessed some going to Jesus (1:37-39). If ‘all are going to him’ (3:26), so much the better, for Jesus ‘takes away the sin of the word’(1:29). Jesus is the one who, through the gift of the Spirit, brings about the purification, the need for which is symbolised by the baptism which the Baptist has been carrying out, and by the Jewish rites of purification.

²²After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptised.

²³John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptised –

²⁴John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

²⁵Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew.

²⁶They came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptising, and all are going to him.’

²⁷John answered, ‘No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven.

**²⁸You yourselves
are my witnesses
that I said,
“I am not the Messiah,
but I have been
sent ahead of him.”**

**²⁹He who
has the bride
is the bridegroom.
The friend of the
bridegroom, who
stands and hears him,
rejoices greatly at the
bridegroom’s voice.
For this reason my joy
has been fulfilled.**

**³⁰He must increase,
but I must decrease.’**

The Baptist reminds his disciples of his earlier testimony (see 1:6,20,33), and for the first time explicitly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. At the wedding feast of Cana God is the bridegroom. The Baptist now puts Jesus in that role (compare Mark 2:18-19). The Baptist is the bridegroom’s most trusted friend whose responsibility it is to care for the bride prior to the nuptials (compare 2Corinthians 11:2). He is a prophet, commissioned by God to witness to God’s word. His whole being is tuned to this word and when he hears God’s voice in the incarnate Word his joy is complete. He is delighted to see his disciples leaving him and going to Jesus.

The Baptist is an excellent model for those exercising authority in the Jewish community. He is also an excellent model for anyone privileged to be involved in ministry in the community of Jesus’ disciples. The community is the bride of Christ. Our role is to speak his words and to point the way to him. If others receive enlightenment through our ministry, the light is from him ‘the true light which enlightens everyone’(1:9). We are privileged to relay his light. We are never its source and we should never distract others by drawing them to ourselves.

We must be clear, and we must help others come to realise that it is his voice which they long to hear. Like the Baptist our role is to be alert, listening for his voice: listening in our own hearts, listening to the community which commissions us, and listening in the lives of those to whom our ministry takes us. If others receive love through our ministry, it is his love which is drawing them.

As the Baptist said earlier: ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know’(1:26). It is the minister’s role to help others to come to know Christ and to recognise his voice and to know his love. We should be filled with gratitude and humility when he chooses to speak through us and to love through us. Every one in such a privileged position knows that people can be attracted to the minister, as they were attracted to the Baptist. Grace is very attractive. The Baptist, however, is not deceived. He knows who the bridegroom is. He is the bridegroom’s friend and will not betray this trust.

Alcuin, the teacher of Charlemagne, in his commentary on John writes:

The spouse is the Church formed from all the nations. She is virgin because of the integrity of her understanding, because of the perfection of her charity, because of the unity of her catholic faith, the harmony of her peace, the integrity of her soul and of her body. She constantly receives life from her Spouse.

Theophraktos, an Eastern monk, writing towards the close of the 11th century, has this comment:

Christ is also the Bridegroom of each soul, and the place where the marriage is celebrated and the union consummated is the place where we are baptised, namely the Church ... There is no other Bridegroom than Christ. Teachers, like the Baptist, are only friends of the Bridegroom. Only one distributes the gifts of grace, the Lord. All others are only servants employed to administer the gifts which the Lord gives.

After reading the Law, Nehemiah could say: 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep ... Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine ... and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'(Nehemiah 8:9-10). John's disciples have more cause to celebrate than the people to whom Nehemiah was speaking. Jesus is now in their midst. He has come 'to take away the sin of the world' (1:29). This is the purification for which they have all been waiting: the fire of the love of the Holy Spirit that alone can purify their hearts. For effective purification we need love, the love that is 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit'(Romans 5:5), the love that comes from the heart of 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart'(1:18).

In presenting this scene here John is hoping that those disciples of the Baptist who are listening to his Gospel (see Acts 19:2-6) will heed the Baptist's words, join the community of Jesus' disciples, and enjoy the embrace of the 'bridegroom' who has come to share with them the communion with God which he himself enjoys. He wants them to '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).

While we are savouring the Baptist's words, the narrator goes on in the following passage to reflect on what we have been witnessing. (If the dramatic presentation of the Gospel employs a chorus, it would chant this passage; compare 3:16-21.)

³¹The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

³²He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony.

³³Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true.

³⁴He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

³⁵The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.

³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

John reflects on the scene we have just witnessed by recalling major themes that have been presented in the Gospel to this point. Jesus is the 'one who comes from above'. He is 'from heaven' and 'above all'. In comparison to him everyone is 'of the earth'. He is God's 'Word' who enjoys divine intimacy before the world was created. He is 'God the only Son' who alone reveals the Father, for 'he testifies to what he has seen and heard'. 'The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands'. Jesus alone is 'descended from heaven, the Son of Man', and 'from his fullness we have all received'. He alone makes it possible for us to 'become children of God'.

John laments the tragedy of those who fail to accept Jesus. 'The Word was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him ... his own people did not accept him' (1:10-11). In the Cana scene John portrayed Jesus as revealing God as the bridegroom pouring out the wine of the Spirit 'without measure', 'yet no one accepts his testimony'. If we would only believe in the Son, we would see that 'God is true' (Greek: *alêthês* - see commentary on 1:9). We can rely on God's word and the God revealed by Jesus is the one, true, God. If we would only believe in the Son, we would experience 'eternal life'. If we persist in refusing belief in the Son, if we 'disobey' and refuse to 'do whatever he tells', we 'must endure God's wrath'.

The expression 'God's wrath' occurs frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. While recognising that much human suffering comes because people fail to do God's will, the inspired authors still worked from an underlying assumption that everything that happens is in some way willed by God. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that disasters of all kinds and human suffering were understood to be punishments from God and expressions of divine anger. The following texts are typical:

I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you.

– Ezekiel 22:20-22

Gather together, O shameless nation ... before there comes upon you the fierce anger of the Lord, before there comes upon you the day of the Lord's wrath.

– Zephaniah 2:1-2

God has willed human freedom and so has accepted the consequences of its misuse. Much of the bitterness, dislocation, violence and suffering that is so prevalent in human experience is the consequence of what John has named disobedience in the passage upon which we are commenting (3:36). When we reject the light we plunge ourselves and others into darkness. Rather than project anger onto God, ought we not look to our own and other people's behaviour? It is not God who is punishing us. We are experiencing the effects of human refusal to obey.

The suffering experienced by the innocent Jesus has also brought about a change in our assumptions concerning suffering. John has just been telling us that 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'(3:17). In light of the revelation of God which we see in Jesus, ideas of a punishing and angry God have to be radically rethought. In the New Testament, 'God's wrath' no longer refers to divine anger bringing punishment upon those who oppose his will. It retains the elements of fire and passion, but now it is understood as the passionate love of God which opposes evil. 'God's wrath' flows from his commitment to love both the victims of oppression and its perpetrators.

God's love is a devouring fire. Everything that resists love must be purified in this fire and the purifying is necessarily painful. As we suffer this purification, we feel that God is angry with us, that he has turned his face away from us, that we are rejected. Our faith tells us that this is not true. When John speaks of 'God's wrath' he is describing in traditional language what happens when we resist the purifying love of God and lock ourselves within the horizon of our own stubbornness and disobedience. 'God's wrath' is the experience of impenetrable darkness in which we find ourselves when we shut out God's light. It is the incapacity we experience to give or receive love when we deliberately and persistently reject the love offered us by God.

To reject Jesus is to reject the one who sent him. To reject the Son is to reject the Father. It is to consign ourselves to eternal darkness, to the bitterness and frustration of choosing to exist apart from the source of all light, all life and all love. It is not God who is punishing us. It is we who are choosing to reject his love and so are suffering the self-inflicted consequences of this rejection. God is not condemning us, but 'God is true' and God cannot and does not pretend that things are other than they really are. When all is revealed, we will be declared blessed if we have accepted grace; we will stand condemned if we have rejected it. John's warning is clear: 'whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath'. See also Paul:

Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

– Romans 2:4-5

**¹Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, 'Jesus is making and baptising more disciples than John' –
²although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptised –
³he left Judea and started back to Galilee.
⁴But he had to go through Samaria.
⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar [Shechem], near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.
⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well.
It was about noon.
⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'
⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)
⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)**

Act II Scene 4. Jesus and the Samaritans

There is a well centre-stage and Jesus is sitting at it. The narrator sets the scene. He clarifies his earlier statement about Jesus spending time in the Judean countryside baptising with his disciples (3:22). It was his disciples rather than Jesus himself who were baptising. Jesus' baptism was to be with 'water *and Spirit*' (3:5; see 1:35). This must await his death and resurrection (7:39).

John tells us that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria. Jesus is sent by his Father (3:17), and, as he himself will state later in this scene, 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me' (4:42). The necessity is one of obedience to his mission.

Jesus is sitting by Jacob's well. There is evidence in the Aramaic versions of Numbers 21:16-18 that the people of Israel (including, therefore, the Samaritans) believed that this well was a gift from God and a miraculous and inexhaustible source of water. It is fitting that John would stage this highly symbolic scene here. It is midday. A Samaritan woman appears on the stage. She approaches the well to draw water. John highlights the fact that Jesus and the woman are alone. 'His disciples had gone to the city to buy food'.

Jesus is tired and thirsty. He breaks the silence and asks her for a drink. In doing so Jesus is breaking across customary social taboos. Firstly, he is a Jew and he is speaking with a Samaritan. This surprises her (4:9). Secondly, he is a man and he is speaking alone with a woman. As we shall see shortly, this surprises his disciples (4:27). Jesus has already told a leading Jew that God's Spirit is not bound within the confines of Judaism: 'The wind blows where it chooses' (3:8), and that eternal life is offered to 'whoever believes' (3:15). We are watching the Word of God who enlightens 'all people' (1:4,9). He breaks across all religious and social prejudices. His words tell us of God's longing to draw everyone into the intimacy of divine communion.

Augustine writes:

Jesus is thirsting for the faith of this woman. He is thirsting for the faith of all those for whom he has poured out his blood.

– 83 Quaestiones, 64

Let us examine briefly the background to the antipathy that existed in Jesus' time between the Jews and the Samaritans (see also 8:48 and Luke 10:29-37). A Jewish account of the origin of the Samaritans can be found in the Second Book of Kings (17:24-41). When the Assyrians conquered Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, in 721BC, they deported many of its inhabitants and colonised Samaria and the northern kingdom generally with peoples from other subject races. Five races are mentioned (2Kings 17:24) – a detail that may be behind the mention later of 'five husbands'(5:18). This mixing of populations was part of the Assyrian imperial strategy to weaken the possibility of national uprisings. In the eyes of the Jews it meant that the Samaritans had lost their racial and religious purity.

While the Jews insisted that all who were faithful to the Lord Yahweh had to worship in Jerusalem, those in the conquered north, who saw themselves as the true descendants of Israel, continued to hold to the validity of their traditions. They had some respite from the oppressive interference of the kings of Judah when Judah collapsed in 598BC, and they resisted the restoration of Jerusalem when the exiles returned from Babylon (see Ezra chapter 4, c.520BC).

Sirach, a Jewish teacher, gives us some idea of the bad feeling that existed at the beginning of the second century BC.

Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir [the people of Edom], and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem [the Samaritans].

– Sirach 50:25-26

Later in the second century BC the Samaritans sided with Syria against the Jews and in 128BC the Jewish high priest had the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim destroyed. The feeling between the two groups is briefly summed up by John: 'Jews do not share things in common with the Samaritans'. Jesus will not be bound by such antipathies.

¹⁰Jesus answered her,
'If you knew the gift of
God, and who it is that is
saying to you, "Give me
a drink,"

you would have asked
him, and he would have
given you living water.'

¹¹The woman said to him,
'Sir, you have no bucket,
and the well is deep.
Where do you get that
living water?

¹²Are you greater than
our ancestor Jacob, who
gave us the well, and
with his sons and his
flocks drank from it?'

¹³Jesus said to her,
'Everyone who drinks of
this water will be thirsty
again, ¹⁴but those who
drink of the water that I
will give them will never
be thirsty.

The water that I will give
will become in them a
spring of water gushing
up to eternal life.'

¹⁵The woman said to him,
'Sir, give me this water,
so that I may never be
thirsty
or have to keep coming
here to draw water.'

As in Jesus' dialogue with the temple authorities (2:19-21) and with Nicodemus (3:3-5), the double meaning of a word is used by John to occasion a misunderstanding which leads in turn to Jesus taking us to a deeper level of meaning. In this case it is the word used to describe the water that Jesus is offering. The Samaritan woman understands Jesus to be speaking of 'running' water, the kind that keeps bubbling up fresh from a spring, the kind of water that God has guaranteed by his gift of Jacob's well.

Jesus, however, is speaking of 'living' water, 'life-giving' water, a 'spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (see comment on 3:15). She has come to the well to quench her physical thirst. If only she knew the gift of God, if only she knew Jesus (see 3:16), she would know that she has come to one who can quench a deeper thirst, the thirst of her soul for God. We recall the words of the psalmist:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

– Psalm 42:1-2

You give them drink
from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

– Psalm 36:8-9

We hear also the invitation of Isaiah: 'All you who thirst, come to the waters' (Isaiah 55:1). As well we hear his promise: 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3). The water offered by Jesus is the fountain of wisdom offered to us by him who is incarnate Wisdom (Proverbs 13:14; Isaiah 55:1-3; Sirach 15:3; 24:25-29). Yet it is more than that for 'those who drink of wisdom will thirst for more' (Sirach 24:21; see John 4:13), whereas those who drink the water that Jesus is offering will have no need to search elsewhere to slake their thirst. 'To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life' (Revelation 21:6).

The water that Jesus is offering is the love pouring out from his heart, from the wells of salvation, quenching our thirst for God and cleansing us from all that hinders divine communion (compare Zechariah 13:1; Exodus 17:6). It is the Holy Spirit (1:33; 3:5) given ‘without measure’(3:34). As Paul says: ‘In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit’ (1Corinthians 12:13). This will become clearer when John explains another saying of Jesus:

Jesus cried out ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”’. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.

– John 7:37-39

Jesus’ invitation to the woman calls to mind the words of the Psalmist: ‘Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart’ (Psalm 37:4). The woman’s response to Jesus’ offer indicates that she is still thinking in terms of physical water (4:15). This is John’s first use of the device of irony. Because as author he is informing his readers of certain truths from his position as someone who is writing in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and in the light also of his years of experience of the Spirit of the glorified Jesus present in the community, we find as the Gospel proceeds that we know things that the characters within the narrative could not know. We find ourselves recognising the imperfect faith of Jesus’ disciples and the ignorance of many of the characters and thereby being challenged to a deeper faith ourselves.

The woman in this narrative is a case in point. Her words show that she is not aware of the depth of the meaning to which we have been introduced. Her misunderstanding reinforces for us the need to move to a more profound understanding if we are to come to know who Jesus really is and the divine import of the revelation being offered to us through his actions and words.

In his presentation of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman John has, to this point, focused on Jesus as the one who comes searching for us, though we do not know at first that it is he for whom we are thirsting. In what remains of the first part of this scene, the Samaritan woman becomes a symbol for all the Samaritan people whom Jesus is inviting to come to him, so that through believing in him they may find life (20:31).

¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

¹⁷The woman answered him, 'I have no husband' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

¹⁹The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

²¹Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.'

²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

The Semitic word for husband, *Ba'al*, is also the name of a Canaanite deity (see Hosea 2:18). The woman is symbolic of the Samaritan people. Her 'five husbands' are the five pagan tribes that intermarried with the remnant of the northern tribes to form the people of Samaria (2Kings 17:24-31).

The conversation between Jesus and the woman expresses elements of the kind of dialogue that would have gone on when the Christian missionaries first went to Samaria (Acts 8:14-17). The prophets had insisted on worship of God not being limited by place (Isaiah 11:9, 66:1; Malachi 1:11), but the insistence on worshipping at the temple prevailed. Since the Christian missionaries were Jews, the Samaritans would have been surprised when they did not insist on the Jerusalem cult. For the Christian community the temple in which God dwells and where we are to find and worship God – or as Jesus says here 'the Father' – is neither in Jerusalem nor on Mount Gerizim. God's chosen temple is the risen and glorified Jesus (2:21) and the community of his disciples in whom Jesus dwells.

Jesus acknowledges that the Jews have a special place in God's providential design (see Romans 9:4-5). Those Jews who became disciples of Jesus saw him as the flowering of their religion and as fulfilling its deepest aspirations. Salvation came to the Samaritans 'from the Jews'. Because of the Father's love (4:23) the time has come when Abraham is to be truly the 'father of many nations'. All the tribes of the earth will now bless themselves by him (Genesis 12:3). Jesus is bringing God's covenant to its fulfilment, offering the water of life to everyone who thirsts for it. All that is required is that we open our hearts to the Spirit that binds Jesus to his Father, the one whom Jesus will call 'the Spirit of truth'(14:17; 15:26). True worship is that which rises to God from those who share Jesus' Spirit and who call God 'Father'.

We find the same thought in Paul:

You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

– Romans 8:15-16 (see Romans 8:26-27)

The Samaritans, of course, rejected the idea of a Davidic Messiah, but they did look forward to the coming of the Messianic prophet promised by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). They spoke of him as the *Ta'eb*, 'the one who is coming'. Jesus resists being identified with the Jewish Messiah, but he is at home with the prophetic Messiah of the Samaritans. Jesus assures the woman: 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you' (4:26).

This apparently straightforward reply takes us into the mysterious depths of Jesus' identity. The Greek *egô eimi* ('I am'), translated here 'I am he', has mysterious overtones because of its use in the Book of Exodus to explain the significance of the divine name Yahweh (see Exodus 3:14). We find Isaiah using the same term:

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that *I am he*. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

– Isaiah 43:10 (also 45:18)

John will use *egô eimi* as a constant refrain throughout the Gospel, reminding us that the one who is speaking is 'the Word who was God' (1:1). He is the Lord, the one sent by the Father to redeem his people.

²⁵The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ).

'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.'

²⁶Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?'

²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' ³²But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.'

³³So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' ³⁴Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'

The quiet of the intimate dialogue at the well is broken by the return of the disciples from the city where, as John has already informed us, they had gone to buy food (4:8). Upon their arrival, the woman leaves her water jar and goes off to the city. In the absence of the woman the jar remains as a symbol of her thirst, but also of the fact that she now thirsts for the gift of God which Jesus is offering to her and to her people. Echoing Jesus' words to his first disciples (1:39), she invites the inhabitants of the city to come and see Jesus. His words have made her wonder if perhaps he might be the *Ta'eb*. The Samaritans begin to move towards Jesus, and our attention, too, is turned towards him by the conversation that begins at the well.

The subject is food. Once again Jesus' words are misunderstood. His disciples are listening at a superficial level. This opens the way for Jesus to invite us to explore his deeper meaning: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work'(4:34), which, as Jesus will say later, is to give eternal life to 'all who see the Son and believe in him'(6:40).

Jesus will declare that he has completed the work given him by his Father (see 17:4; 19:30). Here he speaks of his obedience. One thinks of the words of Deuteronomy: 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3; see Matthew 4:4).

We learned earlier that the Father sent his Son so that 'the world might be saved through him' (3:17). Now we hear that Jesus' hunger is to complete the mission given him by his Father (see 5:36; 9:4). Obedience to his Father is an essential element of Jesus' faithfulness: '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).

Jesus looks towards the people of Shechem as they approach. Though four months was expected to elapse from sowing to harvest, the seed of the word that has just been sown by Jesus in his meeting with the Samaritan woman has already come to harvest. The time has come for the fulfilment of the promise made through Amos (9:13):

The time is coming, says the Lord, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed.

They should rejoice at the harvest which is itself the reaper's *reward* (not 'wages' as translated in the NRSV). Nor is the harvest *in view of* eternal life. The harvest *is* the eternal life which is God's gift through Jesus (see 2John 8). John is reminding his community which is composed of Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles to rejoice in the harvest but to take no pride in the reaping: 'this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2Corinthians 3:18).

The people of Shechem arrive at the well. The narrator informs us that they have reached the first stage of belief. The woman's testimony has awakened their interest and they have responded to her invitation to 'come and see'(4:29). They invite Jesus to stay with them and he goes off with them. John tells us that he stayed with them for two days. Just as Jesus' first disciples came to a deeper faith by staying with Jesus (1:39), so these first fruits of the Samaritan harvest came to believe in him 'because of his word'.

We are watching them converse with Jesus. Suddenly they turn towards us and in chorus proclaim their faith. They know Jesus because they have heard for themselves. They know that 'truly, he is the Saviour of the world'(compare 1John 4:14). These words addressed to the woman are addressed to us. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God sent the Son into the world in order that the world might be saved through him'(3:16-17). The Word of God is reaching beyond Judaism to 'take away the sin of the world'(1:39).

³⁵**Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages [his reward] and is gathering fruit for [of] eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.**

³⁷**For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'**

³⁹**Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.'**

⁴⁰**So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.**

⁴¹**And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'**

⁴³When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee

⁴⁴(for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet's own country).

⁴⁵When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival.

⁴⁶Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine.

Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum.

⁴⁷When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

⁴⁸Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.'

⁴⁹The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies.'

⁵⁰Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.

Act II Scene 5. Jesus' word gives life

Jesus is standing on stage, alone. The narrator tells us that at the end of the two days (the days spent at Shechem, 4:40) Jesus set out for Galilee. We are then reminded of a saying of Jesus about a prophet not being honoured in his own country (compare Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24). For John Jesus' own country is Judea, not Galilee, for 'his Father's house' (2:16) is in Jerusalem. Jesus is welcomed in Galilee.

A man approaches Jesus. We are told that he is a court official from Capernaum. Presumably he works for Herod who dwells in nearby Tiberias. While it is not explicitly stated, the movement of the Gospel leads us to assume he is a Gentile.

He asks Jesus to come down and heal his son who is at the point of death. Jesus' response is addressed not only to the official but to us (the 'you' in verse forty-eight is plural). He is telling us that he is not satisfied with belief based on 'signs and wonders'(4:48).

The man persists and asks Jesus to come down with him to Capernaum. Jesus does not go, but assures him that his son lives. We are told that the man believes Jesus' word (4:51). As we saw in regard to Jesus' mother in the first Cana scene (2:5), it is faith in Jesus' word that opens the way for Jesus' life-giving action.

This is only the second miracle that John has chosen to recount. There have been many others (see 20:31; also 2:23; 3:2; 4:45). He mentions Cana twice (4:46,54) for he wants us to see Jesus' action as an illustration of the new covenant, of the unbounded love of God, the bridegroom giving life to those he loves.

After the scene in the temple, John indicated Jesus' lack of trust in belief based on miracles (2:23-25). He has selected this scene as his conclusion to this section of the Gospel because the court official demonstrates how we can grow from faith based on the miraculous to believe that Jesus' word does indeed have the power to give life. If we believe Jesus' word (if we believe in Jesus the Word) we too will live, for to believe is to receive from him the life which he shares with his Father.

Jesus was not physically present with the son of the royal official when the boy was miraculously restored to life. The official believed in Jesus' word, giving us an example of the kind of faith asked of us.

In the Prologue we were told that 'life was the light of all people'(1:4). We heard Jesus telling Nico-demus that whoever believes in the Son of Man may have 'eternal life'(3:15) – words which were immediately picked up by the narrator: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life'(3:16).

After the scene with the Baptist, once again John declares: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life'(3:36). Jesus promised the Samaritan woman: 'The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'(4:14), and he assured his disciples that 'the reaper is already gathering the fruit of eternal life'(4:36). Faith in Jesus may bring physical recovery. It certainly brings 'eternal life'.

Jesus has just been declared 'the Saviour of the world'(4:42). We are all invited to share in the faith of this court official and so in the eternal life which is the gift of God's Word.

Alternative accounts of this story can be found in Matthew (8:5-13) and Luke (7:1-10). The fact that the accounts differ in a number of details is a good illustration of the different ways events are remembered, as well as of the different ways in which a story is told depending on the interests and intentions of different authors.

⁵¹As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive.

⁵²So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at one in the afternoon ['the seventh hour'] the fever left him.'

⁵³The father realised that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' So he himself believed, along with his whole household.

⁵⁴Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.