

## ***Journeying with John: Series 1***

These studies are based on a selection of readings from the Gospel according to John.

1. John 1:1-18 – The Word Says it All
2. John 2:1-12 – From Water to Wine
3. John 2:23 – 3:21 – New Birth
4. John 4:5-42 – Living Water

Unlike the other gospels, John's gospel includes relatively long passages which begin with incidents and to which the author has added either speeches or dialogues. The readings above take up just selected portions, but the commentary discusses each in its broader context.

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from John, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation.

The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

### **Making these studies work for you and your group.**

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions *or* you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions *or* you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above *or* you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start:

### ***Meet John!***

Like the other gospels, John's gospel contains no information about the author except to say that the authority behind it is someone called "the beloved disciple", whom many identify with the disciple, John. This gospel stands at the beginning of a time when authors felt the need to claim special authority for their gospels, which differed considerably from the first three. We have, for instance, gospels claiming inside information through Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and even Judas Iscariot. Such claims are without foundation. In the case of the fourth gospel it is likely that the author wants to reassure the readers that his gospel has a link with the first disciples. Perhaps his congregations owe their origin to John and we are meant to guess that he is "the disciple whom Jesus loved". He certainly functions symbolically as a kind of companion and rival to Peter, nearly always outdoing him, so representing the author's claim that his gospel is also in some way superior.

This gospel is certainly different from the first three and contains very freely composed speeches and dialogues which depict Jesus speaking in a different kind of way with different key terms than the way the earlier gospels portray him. It is as though the author is like a modern artist who is intent on portraying the meaning of Jesus through key concepts and ideas, rather than reproducing an historical account. Jesus is the Word, the bread, the light, the life, the vine. This is the language of faith. At one level it is creative embellishment and fictional. At another level it profoundly captures the message and importance of who Jesus was and in this way portrays what the other gospels were less able to do.

With the other gospels it is fairly easy to see how Matthew and Luke have copied and reworked Mark. With John most specialists these days would say that the author is basically familiar at least with Mark, but does not have a copy of Mark in front of him. We sometimes find echoes of Mark in quite incidental details, but otherwise the reminiscences are slight. Perhaps he had read Mark aloud many times to his congregations, so that some details stuck in his memory when he set about composing his own very free and creative account.

Historically John also carries some information not found in the other gospels, which does not belong to his elaborations, but to earlier tradition. This includes information about Galilee and Judea, It may also include the information that Jesus' ministry lasted not just one year, as the others have it, but three years, and that Jesus visited Jerusalem during his ministry not just at the end but at least three times in between and that he died on a Friday which was not Passover Day, as the first three indicate, but the day before Passover Day.

This all makes John a fascinating mixture of highly imaginative artistry, including dialogues and speeches which are largely fictional, but also some gems of older tradition. The author has composed a gospel whose focus is not on the details of history and on specific sayings and events, but on the event of Jesus' coming as a whole and what it means now. Its images of light, life, bread, water, speak a universal language which has endeared this gospel to many and made it the basis for communicating the gospel across human culture.

For further information on John as it appears in the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/lectionaryindex.html>

*These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Literal translations in appendices and photos are his own.*

## Session One

### John 1:1-18 – The Word Says it All

Unlike the other gospels, John begins with what is like an overture for an opera, in which we hear the main melodies which are to follow. It is very simple, almost poetical, and sets the scene for the work as a whole.

‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God’ (1:1-2). Jesus is the Word, God’s voice and God’s action, and so part of God and yet he is neither God in a literal sense nor a second god. Was he God or was he with God? Can both statements be true?

To understand the imagery in his opening statements we need to enter the author’s Jewish world, where people had become very daring in the way they spoke of God. They spoke of God’s wisdom, sometimes also called God’s word, as coming from God like a separate person and seeking to be welcomed. Some said that God’s Word could also be seen in the Law of Moses, preserved in the Old Testament. They could then draw on the psalms which spoke of the Law of the God as light and life, and being like bread and water for the hungry and thirsty.

John and his community transferred these ideas to Jesus, so that not the Law, but Jesus himself embodies God’s wisdom, God’s Word. He and he alone is light and life, bread and water. Thus they spoke of Jesus as the Word who came from God and became embodied in human flesh and blood. This was a new way of describing who Jesus was. It created some puzzling thoughts, such as how he could be a human being and yet be God or part of God, but the author simply held these things together. He never tried to explain.

In the centuries which followed, John’s image of Jesus became the dominant one and much ink was spilt trying to find answers to these puzzles. We find some of the answers articulated in the creeds. As in John, there were two main insights which they held to firmly: Jesus was really human and in Jesus people really did encounter God. Thus, John tells us from the beginning what to expect. His opera is going to celebrate who Jesus is in these terms. He is the one who has come from God to make God known. That is the tune we should expect throughout the gospel.

The Word is more than simply a word. The Greek word John used for “word” is “*logos*”. For many this would have evoked the idea of logic or meaning. In Jesus we see the logic or meaning of the universe. Indeed, John makes a connection with the account of creation in Genesis which also commences with the words, “In the beginning ...”. In Jesus as the Word we therefore see what helped bring the universe into being and what sustains it. These are big thoughts and, like much that is in John, these are meant to bring us face to face with life’s big issues: what is the meaning, the logic, of life? What satisfies our human hunger and thirst for meaning?



John 1:1-18 tells the story of Jesus as the Word. The Word came into the world and was rejected (a hint already at Jesus' death), but some welcomed him and became God's children. John the Baptist was not the Word, but he witnessed to the Word. Nor, for John, was the biblical Law given by God the Word. That was God's gift but, in its stead, God sent Jesus, an even greater gift of God, to which the biblical Law also bore witness.

The overture then reaches its climax in the claim: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is the Father's embrace, he has made him known" (1:18). This is not a claim that people never knew of God or knew God before Jesus. Clearly the author believes that they did. Rather it is a claim that Jesus opens a relationship with God in a unique and direct way. It was not that he gave information about God. Rather, it was that he offered a relationship with God dependent solely on faith. Earlier the author wrote: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, glory as of God's only Son, full of grace and truth" (1:14).

For the author Jesus is like a window on God. When he speaks of terms like glory, light, life, truth, grace, bread, water, he is not talking about anything other than these as ultimately God's qualities. In this sense Jesus is not really presenting himself, he is presenting God. Using family imagery, he is the eldest and only son, who reflects the best in the Father, but unlike in the ancient family, he would not one day replace his Father. Rather, as the Son, his role was to point to the Father, to communicate who the Father is and what he has to offer. In this sense he was and is the Word, the Word of God.

Most of the gospel serves a single aim: to show that Jesus really was and is the Word, and so invites people to find their way to God through him. Ultimately, God is the centre of the story, its main theme.

Thus, the gospel's overture introduces us to the tune which repeats itself in endless variation through the gospel. We hear it symbolised in stories. We hear it in sayings. We hear it in dialogues and speeches. The author has taken sayings and anecdotes and shaped and moulded them to serve this single purpose. Thus, the feeding of the 5000, for instance, present also in the other gospels and already used by them symbolically, gives rise in John 6 to an orchestral flourish going far beyond his predecessors. It becomes the basis for celebrating Jesus as the bread of life and also for reflecting on Holy Communion as a means whereby the soul is fed. In a similar way the healing of a blind man in John 9 becomes the basis for affirming Jesus as the light of the world and the raising of Lazarus in John 11, for affirming Jesus as the resurrection and the life

Listen to the overture. Enjoy the opera. Note the common theme of the arias. Hum its tune, its constant refrain. Let John's music inspire you.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

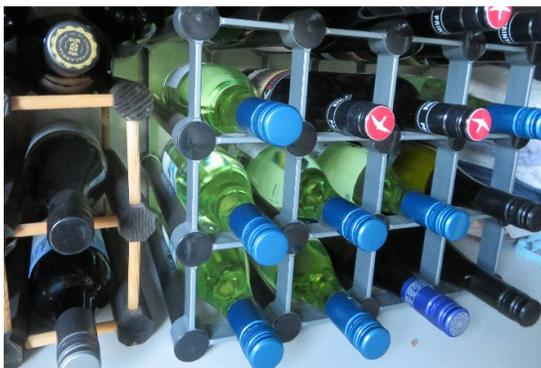
1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What images do you prefer to use to describe who Jesus was and what he offered?
3. If John models creativity in portraying Christian faith, how can we use the same creative freedom and creativity to speak of faith today and what should guide our efforts to ensure we avoid distortion?

## Session Two

### John 2:1-12 – From Water to Wine

The story of the wedding feast at Cana has many levels of meaning, something typical of the author's artistry. At its base is a sensational miracle story of the kind which was popular in the market place of competing religions and ideologies. The author appears to have had access to a collection of such miracles which at some stage had been told in order to win followers for Christ. They typically emphasise the sensational.

Half the account of the healing of the official's son in 4:46-54, for instance, is taken up with emphasising that it was exactly at the time that Jesus spoke that the boy was healed. Lazarus was raised from the tomb after he had been dead for four days. For three days people believed the spirit still hovered around the body. By four days the person is really dead. The sensational in the wedding miracle is the enormous quantity of wine produced: upwards of 500 litres, 700 bottles' worth! Mostly people believed such miracles, though many would have smiled knowingly about their similarity to other marketplace stories and many today would simply smile in incredulity. The stupendous quantities alone suggest we should look beyond a literal interpretation.



At a literal level one might ask how responsible it was to make so much wine available when people had already consumed what was available. The assumption of the original storytellers is that getting drunk belonged to feasting. The author has no such concerns, indeed he appears much more interested in using and developing the story for symbolic purposes. Those listening to his story would recognise this more easily than we can.

One of the ways of expressing hope was to picture a future where food and wine would be abundant and people would come together to feast. This made sense then because, unlike in our world, feasts, whether at weddings or associated with bringing an animal sacrifice to the temple, were rare occasions for a proper meal. The historical Jesus frequently spoke of the future in these terms and like some groups of the time used meals to celebrate that hope in advance and, where possible, make it a reality in some small way by being inclusive. His last meal with the disciples set a pattern for generations to come, now celebrated as Holy Communion – sharing food and vision of hope together. The sumptuous feast became a symbol of hope.

John's hearers would also not have missed the significance of the six stone jars. Jews believed that stone jars protected water from ritual contamination, so were a favoured as water containers. In their world the number 6 was a symbol of what was not yet complete or perfect, represented by the number seven. So changing the water to wine was a way of claiming that Jesus replaced the old order. This would have mattered to many of John's Jewish hearers who had had to leave their former faith behind, or at least, embrace its new form as represented in their new community of believers. The next episode in chapter two depicts Jesus replacing the temple, thus following the same theme.

The story has more to tell. Jesus' mother instructs the servers to follow Jesus' instructions, as those serving Jesus should always do! John's hearers would smile when the master of ceremonies pondered where the wine came from. John frequently has his characters ask such questions, especially where Jesus came from. One can almost hear John's audience answer every time: he came from above, from God. That's where the true wine comes from.

Jesus' exchange with his mother seems harsh. He points to his hour which was to come. His "hour", a term to which he will often refer, is about the climax of his life, when the eyes of unfaith will see him lifted up onto a cross and the eyes of faith will see him lifted up in exaltation through his death to God. By having Jesus point forward to that climax, the author is probably also hinting at what will follow as a result: namely his presence in the "feast" of holy Communion in the bread and wine. Starting the story with a reference to "the third day", coming immediately after Jesus' words about his being lifted up to God through his death as Son of Man in 1:51, seems also designed to evoke this awareness in his hearers.

The author has turned what was originally a propaganda miracle story into a highly complex piece of art. In a gallery you would need to sit for a while to take it all in. Our marriage services use the story to say that Jesus blessed marriage by his presence at the wedding, but that was the least of the author's concerns, for whom weddings and marriage were a normal part of human life as were the feasts which accompanied them.

There's a lot to see in this picture. It would have meant a lot to John's hearers. Some of its symbols still speak today.

#### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Of the many symbolisms in the story, are there any which you find attractive or appealing?
3. Do meals matter? Can meals still serve to represent your faith and hope?

## John 2:23 – 3:21 – New Birth

Often people start reading the story of Jesus and Nicodemus at 3:1 instead of seeing the important introduction in 2:23-25. These verses indicate that many people believed in Jesus because of his miracles. The Greek states bluntly: but he did not believe in them! “Believed in his name” was a standard expression for becoming a follower of Jesus. We met it in 1:12. So these verses are criticising a certain kind of Christian faith, one based on miracles. For the author, that is not enough.

These verses give as the reason: that Jesus knew what was in people (literally “man”) and had no need to be taught about what is in people (literally “man”). It then goes right on in chapter three to give an illustration of this kind of believer: “Now there was a man”. The word, “man”, connects these verses closely to chapter 3. So in the drama John has composed, Nicodemus serves as a negative stereotype to express the kind of faith criticised in 2:23-25, when he declares: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, because no one can do these miracles which you are doing unless God is with him” (3:2). The author has Jesus say, no, to that kind of faith with the famous words: “Truly, truly I tell you: unless someone is born from above, they cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3).

The believer, Nicodemus, like the believers in 2:23-25, failed to see who Jesus was and what he represented. Warnings against faith based solely on miracles, which turned Jesus into just another competitor in the marketplace of teachers touting their miracles, are not uncommon in the New Testament as the new faith struggled to put the emphasis where it needed to be. They had no problems believing in miracles, but the meaning and importance of Jesus and his message lay elsewhere.

Matthew, for instance, concludes his account of the Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount by having Jesus declare:

*Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.” (7:21-23).*

Similarly, about 30 years earlier, Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (13:1-2).*

John returns to the theme in 4:48 where he has Jesus complain: “unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” and in his version of the feeding of the 5000, where those who followed him because of the miracles (6:2) want to crown him prophet and king and Jesus will not have a bar of it (6:14-15).

When Jesus tells Nicodemus he needs to be born again, born from above, he is challenging him to take a completely different approach to faith and to see Jesus not as just another miracle worker,

but as the one who has come from God to offer God's light and life. When the author has Jesus rephrase his words in 3:5, we hear echoes of baptism: "Unless a person is born of water and Spirit they cannot enter the kingdom of God". To enter the kingdom of God is to enter the realm of the Spirit, to be born of the Spirit.

The imagery of birth was widely used in the early church to describe the new beginning to which the gospel called people. It was widely associated with baptism and with the intimate experience of God's presence, expressed as God's Spirit. The word for Spirit also means wind and breath. Paul challenges the Galatians to walk in the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit which is love (Gal 5:16-23).



Nicodemus is a stereotype not only of inadequate faith, but also of the faith of those Jews who had not joined their fellow Jews and become followers of Jesus.

The author values his Jewish heritage, but has been arguing that its temple, rituals and festivals were really just pointers, at the earthly, fleshly level of existence, to the truly spiritual which in Jesus has come into being.

In the dialogue he has constructed, John depicts Nicodemus as rather naïve and dull, using him as a negative stereotype to make his point. He uses it also to bring to his hearers a further aspect of truth about Jesus which Nicodemus, he suggests, was even less likely to understand (3:12). In doing so, he returns to his central message about Jesus as the one who as the Word came down from God and who will return to God. He then adds the famous words of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

God's love comes into full focus. Eternal life means life lived in relationship with this God, which begins now and lasts for eternity. In so many ways John will tweak the stories he has received to bring out this core message again and again: God offers life. Jesus came to make it available to all. We must all decide whether to accept it or not and in doing so we pass judgement on ourselves. It is typical of John to take an idea like the day of judgement and personalise it: our day of judgement is when we respond to God's gift. True faith is to embrace this gift and live in relationship with the God of love.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. "Born again" is usually used for people becoming followers of Jesus, but how does John use it?
3. What is your experience of hearing miracles used as the main argument for believing in Jesus? Why are John and other New Testament writers so cautious about it?

## Session Four

### John 4:5-42 – Living Water!

In the drama that is John's gospel the author has composed a scene set in Samaria and full of subtle surprises. At times one can almost hear the audience laugh. The characters, including Jesus, are drawn as larger than life, so that this is a genuine play, which includes irony and double meaning. Behind it is very likely an anecdote about Jesus being seen talking with a Samaritan woman. It would have been one of those stories which depicted Jesus crossing barriers.

The element of Jesus crossing traditional barriers is present in at least two if not three ways. First, the woman is a Samaritan and, as the author explains, Samaritans and Jews do not usually share vessels because Jews saw Samaritans as unclean or as not giving appropriate attention to ritual purity. Jews often looked down on Samaritans, even though they shared the same ancient origins as descendants of Abraham and the patriarchs and they both treated the first five books of the Old Testament as scripture. They were descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel and had their own sacred mountain, Gerizim, where they worshipped. Jesus refused to discriminate against them. In his parable of the good Samaritan Jesus made one of them his hero.

Second, she was, of course, a woman. Normally Jewish men should not be having one-to-one conversations with women in public places. This is why the author depicts the disciples as surprised that he is talking with a woman (4:27). Again, Jesus crosses a boundary and shows her respect. A third aspect is disputed, namely that she would have been a woman of whom others disapproved, in short, a sinner. This seems implied in Jesus' mentioning that she had had so many husbands and was living with a man to whom she was not married. People would therefore have seen her as a sinner. This may account for her coming to draw water not in the cool of the day but at midday.

There is further significant colouring of the scene because John's hearers would have been familiar with stories from scripture about men and women meeting at wells in the context of finding a marriage partner, such as Jacob and Moses. That is not happening here, but it would have at least raised for John's hearers the image of marriage, which was often an image for people's relationship with God.



The dialogue is deliberately playful. John's Jesus comments that he can offer living water, a typical theme in John. The woman misunderstands. The audience would laugh. They understand the theme: Jesus comes offering eternal life in relationship with God. The author has then elaborated the dialogue to have the woman address the controversy between Jews and Samaritans about which mountain should be the locus for worship.

Here, again, we find the author's theme shining through when effectively he has Jesus announce that neither mountain now matters, for true worship is not bound to a place, but to a person. In the

dialogue the author lets us know that Jesus clearly takes sides, when he has Jesus explain that salvation comes from the Jews (4:22). Jesus was a Jew.

The scene now takes a different turn with the return of the disciples and their surprise that he was talking with a woman (4:27). It then reports the woman's initiative (4:28-39). She had been gradually moving towards an understanding of Jesus' significance, from wondering if he is a prophet, to mentioning him as possible Messiah, to going to her people and declaring: he told her everything she ever did. The audience might smile, because Jesus mentioned only her various marriages.

The conversation with the disciples plays with the image of food. Asked to eat something, Jesus declares that his food is to do God's will. Typically for one of John's scenes, the disciples miss the point. Jesus persists and so the author has him outline his role, using the image of a sower. They are included because they will reap the harvest as will their successors. The theme of mission suits the scene which follows where people, impressed by the woman's testimony, come out to see Jesus.

Perhaps the author is deliberately alluding to success in the early Christian mission to Samaritans. In the end the Samaritan woman is a missionary hero and model, though there is a twist in the story. The men who believed her come to believe directly for themselves. Is it a put down? Why say to her: "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" (4:42)? Perhaps it is more innocent.

Certainly, the climax is important: they hail Jesus as not just their saviour, but the saviour of the world. Saved from what? Partly it must mean saved from guilt and so from judgement, but primarily the focus is positive: saved into a relationship with God. It is another way of saying what the water symbolised: Jesus has brought the life of God into their lives, like water to quench their thirst.

### **For Reflection and Sharing**

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What is your experience of discrimination on the basis of gender and culture?
3. Water – do you find it a useful image for talking about faith?