

Journeying with John: Series 2

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

1. John 5:1-23 – Setting Priorities
2. John 6:1-15, 35-40 –The True Bread
3. John 9:1-17 – The Light of the World
4. John 10:1-16 – The Good Shepherd

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 is 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 5:1-23 – Setting Priorities

As elsewhere in John, the author starts with an incident which probably has its roots in an anecdote going back to the life of Jesus, tweaks it, and extrapolates from it a dialogue and discussion in which he returns to his main themes.

There are anecdotes about Jesus healing people with some kind of paralysis, such as the healing of the man let down through the roof by his friends (Mark 12:1-12), the healing of the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6) and the healing of the bent over woman (Luke 13:10-17). There was little interest in how Jesus healed. Luke, for instance, usually sees any form of sickness or disability as caused by demons and so frames such events often as exorcisms. An authoritative word seemed often enough to release some people from paralysis and these days we would look for psychological explanations. They simply assumed this was something Jesus and other faith healers of the time could do.

Archaeology has confirmed the presence of the pool, including its structure as described in the passage. On the other hand, the author may well have introduced the number 38 to produce a symbolic allusion to Israel's sojourn in the wilderness which is described in Deuteronomy as lasting 38 years (2:14). That would be typical of the author. Healing the man symbolises healing Israel.

The author may also have introduced the detail that it occurred on the sabbath, although this could well have been part of the story from the beginning. Healings on the sabbath sometimes caused trouble for Jesus, such as in the healing of the man with the withered hand and the stooped woman, mentioned above. In John 9 the healing of the blind man is also noted as occurring on the sabbath. Mark also tells us that some extremists even objected to Jesus' disciples picking heads of wheat to nibble while walking through a field (2:23-28).

The controversies about sabbath law were not confined to Jesus, the disciples, and the emerging church. Many other Jews debated what was and what was not appropriate on the sabbath and still do. Perhaps the best-known response of Jesus is his comment: "The sabbath was made for people; not people for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Jesus did not show disrespect for the sabbath. It is, after all, one of the ten commandments. He gave greater priority, however, to human need. His critics could counter that he could just as easily have come by the pool the next day, but for Jesus that would apparently have seemed artificial. For in his thinking, to God people mattered most. The love command overrode the sabbath command, just as sometimes we might see the need to get someone in urgent need of hospital care safely and swiftly to the hospital as requiring that they breach the speed limit, or at least an ambulance might. It is a matter of priorities.

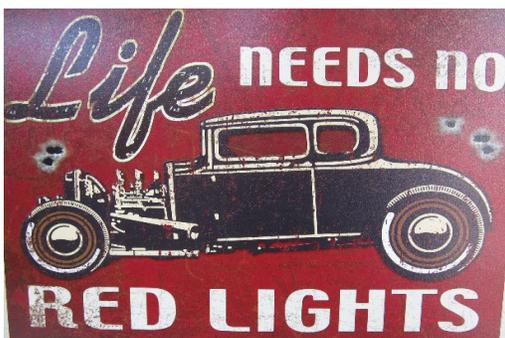
Controversies over the sabbath dogged not only Jesus, but also the emerging church. This appears to have been the case in John's community, so that in his retelling the story and in the discussion which followed we may well be seeing reflections of what would have been arguments in the synagogue between Jesus' followers and others. Eventually the church gave up the sabbath law altogether and replaced it with the following day, the Lord's Day, Sunday.

That happened, however, long after another important development, also reflected in John's stories, namely their decision to withdraw from the local synagogue. They separated to form their own synagogue or, as they preferred to call them, assemblies (*ecclesiai*), usually translated as "churches". John 9, which also begins with a controversy about a healing on the sabbath, even has the blind man expelled from the synagogue, which some take as a reflection of the history of community which John represents. The author has Jesus predict such expulsions in his farewell advice to the disciples and their successors (16:2).

While such expulsions will have occurred, the grounds for serious division lay less in arguments about the sabbath, which were not uncommon among Jews of the time, as noted above, and more in the way believers came to speak about Jesus. We see this reflected in 5:16-18. The author has Jesus respond to criticism about his healing on the sabbath with cryptic words about his working and his Father's working.

This is a family metaphor: sons doing as fathers do, as apprentices. But it is much more than that. Father, here, means God and the author knows that many Jews would say that while God rested on the seventh day of creation, in reality he continues to work to keep creation going. The author has Jesus use this understanding to defend himself, but that entailed a claim that he was not human but divine, or at least part of the divine family – in that sense equal to God. For Jews that was an outrageous claim. It was like saying there are two gods! Anyone making such a claim had put themselves outside Jewish faith.

We may be sure that this very serious conflict reflected not conflicts of Jesus' own day, who never spoke in these terms, but conflicts in the author's day. What follows in John seeks to defuse the charge. It insists that as the Son he is not equal to but subordinate to God, the Father, in much the same way as Jews saw God's Wisdom or Word as a person subordinate to the Father. For centuries the church made every effort to avoid all such objections, settling for statements in the creeds which simply affirm: he was truly human and he was truly God. It expressed this as a mystery and developed the doctrine of the Trinity to express it. In part it echoed what Jews had already been saying about God's Word and Wisdom, combined with the memory of Jesus as a real human being.



While John's way of explaining how God meets us in Christ created extensive intellectual reflection, John's depiction of what mattered most to God, namely compassion for people, remained simple and consistent with Jesus' own approach as we can retrieve it from all the sources available. It continues to inform our approach to what is right and wrong today and where our priorities should lie.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Does keeping the sabbath or Sunday matter?
3. Getting priorities right. Does this mean "life needs no red lights"?

Session Two

John 6:1-15, 35-40 – The True Bread

Once again, we begin with an older tradition which the author probably knew from having read it aloud from Mark, where it is also associated as here with the miracle of Jesus' walking on water (6:32-52). Once again, he tweaks the tradition and composes an extensive dialogue and discourse to follow, in which he returns to the main message he wants to bring about Jesus. This time he uses the image of bread: Jesus is the bread who can feed the hungry human spirit.

Food was a common image for spiritual food. The Jewish Law as guide for living a right relationship with God was seen as providing water and bread for the thirsty and hungry. Mark plays with the imagery to depict the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000 as representing the good news of the gospel coming first to Jews (symbolised by the 5000 and the 5 loaves, reflected the five books of the Law, and by the 12 baskets) and then to Gentiles (symbolised by the seven loaves and baskets and the 4000, representing the 4 directions).

John's knowledge of Mark's creativity probably inspired his own much more extensive elaborations. His first main addition is to highlight an inappropriate response to the miracle, like the inappropriate responses found in 2:23-25 and illustrated by Nicodemus. Some who had followed because of the miracles (6:2) acclaimed him prophet after the miracle and wanted to make him king as their hero (6:14-15). Jesus will have none of it. John knows that the only kind of king Jesus would be, would be a crucified one and that after Easter that lowlines would be hailed with a different kind of kingly honour.

The second segment in our reading picks up part way through a speech in which the author has Jesus explain who he truly is. He had scolded the crowd for staying at the material level of concern with physical food and not seeing the meaning of the miracle (6:26) and then, as in John 4, had switched to use food as a metaphor for the task God had set him (4:34). When the crowd asked about the manna as a miraculous sign, the author has Jesus declare that he, himself, is the true manna, not what Moses provided (6:31-33). This is another instance of distancing from what the author had once believed and his fellow Jews still did. The author has been depicting Jesus as fulfilling and replacing the Law by what he claimed it prefigured.



In 6:35 the author has Jesus return to the central theme of the gospel when he says: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 had provided the platform for the author to depict Jesus as offering living water. The feeding of the 5000 now serves as the platform for having Jesus declare that he is the bread of life.

On a number of occasions the author has Jesus use the words, "I am", to say who he is. That may seem simple enough, but for John's hearers it would probably have reminded them of passages in the Old Testament where God spoke similarly. God declared to Moses at the burning bush: "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14). Isaiah the prophet depicts God speaking similarly (43:10-13). When Jesus

uses these words in John, it is likely that the author wanted his readers to note the link. Not that he was wanting to say Jesus is God, but it was something close to it. He was after all the Word of God.

This means, therefore, that when Jesus declares himself to be the bread of life, he is not claiming to offer something which God did not. On the contrary, God is the real bread of life and Jesus represents God in his person. Jesus can claim to be the bread of life only on that basis. The author makes that clear when he has Jesus explain: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (6:38). As repeated endlessly across the gospel, he comes offering the gift of eternal life. Eternal life means life now in relationship with the God who loves and took the initiative in the first place. And this love and life endures to eternity, to the day of judgement, resurrection and beyond.

There is sensitivity here to the fact that not all will accept this gift. The author has Jesus make what appear to be contradictory statements. The first is: only those chosen by God believe: "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me" (6:44). The second is: anyone can come. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35); similarly: "Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away" (6:37). No one will be excluded. Follow the first statement and it sounds like it is all predetermined. You find the same thought in 3:19-21. This has led people to a doctrine of predestination according to which God has already decided who is to go to heaven and who is to go to hell, a terribly thought that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had to confront in his day.

Wesley famously declared, using the non-inclusive language of his time: "All men need to be saved. All men can be saved. All men can know that they are saved. All men can be saved to the utmost". He did so based on a profound understanding of God as loving and taking this as his starting point. Claiming something was "meant to be" was and still is a common way of coming to terms with disappointment.

Such apparently conflicting statements occur not only here, but in many other writings from the Jewish world of the time. We should see them for what they are – attempts to come to terms with disappointment, which, we can see, are best not taken as statements of fact. For Wesley was surely right. God never predetermines rejection. The language of saying something was "meant to be", is the language of feeling rather than fact. We sometimes hear its positive version when someone declares to their marriage partner: "you were meant for me from before the foundation of the world", when the reality is that one could probably have a successful marriage with possibly one in four people if you work at it. We need to let the language of feeling be just that and not confuse it with fact.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. It was "meant to be" – why do people say this?
3. Do you find the image of "bread" helpful or useful for thinking and talking about your faith today?

Session Three

John 9:1-17, 39-41 – The Light of the World

Here again, we find that the author has taken a simple anecdote about the healing of a blind man and elaborated it into a drama to restate his central theme. This time, it is expressed in having Jesus claim, “I am the light of the world” (9:5). The drama is at one level faith entertainment, as it switches from scenes of the healed man with Jesus, to the man and his neighbours, to the man and the Pharisees, to the authorities and the parents, back to the authorities again with the man, to Jesus and the authorities, and finally to Jesus and the man.

Beside the positive statements about Jesus, the drama highlights conflict, probably as a way of reflecting on conflicts members of the author’s community have had with synagogue authorities. It was, and is, a common place to use blindness as an image for those who refuse to ‘see’ things in the sense of comprehend them. We know the saying, “There are none so blind as those who will not see”. The Old Testament prophets frequently confronted their contemporaries with the charge that they were refusing to see what God was doing.

Mark employs the story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus in 10:46-54 to set up a contrast with the disciples who in the preceding chapters are shown to be blind to Jesus’ values (8:27-33; 9:31-37; 10:32-45) and to the deeper meaning of what they were experiencing (8:14-20). They think greatness means having might and power and fail to see that Jesus was saying the opposite.

The story in John 9 begins with an exchange between Jesus and his disciples. They express the common view of their time that illness or disability must be the result of someone having sinned. It can be so, as is assumed in the healing of the paralysed man let down through the roof in Mark 2:1-12, where healing came through his being told that his sins were forgiven. It need not be and with our modern understandings of pathology and disability we would say it rarely is. Tragically some people give themselves a hard time over illness, feeling shame as though it is their own fault which it often is not.

It is at least helpful to have that common ancient view challenged, even if the author appears to have Jesus say that God planned it in order to promote Jesus’ significance – also a rather doubtful interpretation. It does, however, set the platform for the drama to follow and allow the author to have Jesus state at the outset another one of his “I am” sayings as the theme: “I am the light of the world” (9:5).

The author then returns in 9:6 to what was probably part of the original story. It shows Jesus using ancient medical methods, which assume healing properties in mud and spittle and in bathing in the sacred waters of the pool of Siloam, which the author somewhat playfully points out means “sent”.

There is a sense of fun as the neighbours wonder about the man’s identity (9:8-12), but it becomes serious when they brought him to the Pharisees and it is here that we learn for the first time that the healing took place on the sabbath (9:13-17). That had spelled trouble for Jesus in the healing of the man at the pool in John 5 and it spells trouble again. All they can see is someone who broke the sabbath, while the man moves along in his faith to think of Jesus as a prophet. The fun continues as the Pharisees interview his parents, but with a touch of the serious as the author notes the parents’ fear about being expelled from the synagogue community (9:18-23).

In the confrontation between the man in his simplicity and the authorities (9:24-34), the latter are exposed as blind to what has happened and who Jesus is, while claiming superiority. It is a stereotyping of unbelieving Jews on the part of the author, but such is the nature of characterisation in a drama.

The climax comes with the encounter between Jesus and the man, who comes to a fuller faith in acknowledging Jesus as Son of Man and Lord (9:35-39). "Son of Man" features here because the "Son of Man" was traditionally seen by many as the one through whom God would conduct the day of judgement at the end of time. Christians claimed that Jesus would be that one, so hailed him as Son of Man.

Instead of focussing on the traditional day of judgement the author uses the idea to depict Jesus as already bringing the judgement day into the present (9:39-41). He did so by confronting people with the offer of life and death now in the present. In this sense people passed verdict on themselves. Using the image of light and darkness, people could choose to stay in the dark or enter the realm of light.



As he does with the images of water and bread, the author has Jesus use the image of light to express his central theme: Jesus offers eternal life. To embrace the relationship with the God of love is to enter life and to see. Not to do so is to be blind. The author, however, goes beyond this contrast as a general truth to point to religion as a potential form of blindness, especially when all it sees is rules and fails to see and care for people.

People of Christian faith have been just as good at doing this as the stereotyped authorities in this drama: blindness to human need, to injustice, to inequality, to poverty, to climate change. Being confronted with light's exposure of reality enlightens some, but for those who turn from it renders them blind. It creates a crisis, as John has Jesus put it: "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (9:39). Intentionally making people blind may also have been in the author's mind as an unhealthy rationalisation for some who rejected the message, which at times occurred – but this would need correction in the light of the love which leaves no room for notions of God choosing only some and predestining others to damnation.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. "Feeling bad/guilty about being sick" – have you met this experience in yourself or others?
3. What is your experience of the kind of blindness the author writes of – generally and in faith contexts?

Session Four

John 10:1-16 – The Good Shepherd

The image of the shepherd goes back a long way. In ancient Egypt the Pharaoh, the king, was to be like a shepherd, caring for those under his rule. Perhaps the best known biblical use of the image comes in Psalm 23, which begins “The Lord is my shepherd”. Jesus used the image of the shepherd to illustrate God’s love and compassion for the lost in his parable of the 99 sheep and the shepherd who goes out to find the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7).

The author harnesses sheepfold imagery to further his depiction of Jesus and his concerns about competitors. Indeed, he uses two different images. He has Jesus declare that he is the shepherd, but also that he is the gate. The first concern is to warn against thieves and bandits (10:1). This has to refer to those whom the author sees as a threat. In real life these could be either the Jewish authorities who might be seeking to persuade Jews who were following Jesus to return to the synagogue, or other Christian leaders of whom the author disapproves. We cannot know for sure, but those who were first to hear the gospel read would surely have known.

On the positive side, the author emphasises that as the shepherd, Jesus knows his sheep, cares for them and leads them (10:3-4). The focus then shifts in verse seven to the gate, almost as though the first six verses are now being reflected upon in a new way. Again, there is the warning about thieves and bandits, almost certainly targeting the same rivals (10:7-10). Here, however, the focus is on joining the flock of God’s people, by coming through the gate, which means coming to God through Jesus. The most positive statement comes in this context when the author has Jesus declare: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10).



The author takes another run at the imagery from 10:11 onwards. Here he has Jesus declare: “I am the good shepherd”. Again, there is a negative side: there are bad shepherds, in particular, hired hands, the assumption being that because they do not own the sheep, they will not care for them when it costs them something. This opens up the possibility for the author to relate the imagery of Jesus as shepherd to his death.

The image of a shepherd giving his life to protect his sheep has its limitations; the sheep survive protected by the shepherd, but the shepherd is dead, perhaps killed by a wild animal that had been threatening the flock. This does not quite fit when applied to Jesus. What danger did his death avert? Answers vary, but most likely the meaning is to be found in the tradition that Christ’s death was like a sacrifice for sin. Or possibly his death is understood as finally exposing the devil and so disempowering him.

The author fixes the potential weakness of the imagery by having Jesus declare: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again” (10:17). This is an additional thought. Not only did Jesus as shepherd die to save the sheep, but he rose, taking up his life again, and returned to the Father. That made a difference because, as John sees, Jesus returned to the Father in order to have the Father send the Spirit. The Spirit would make it possible that the life which Jesus had offered during his ministry

could now be offered to all people everywhere. This is why the author has Jesus speak of other sheep who are to be brought into the fold:

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (10:16)



The author appears to be writing in a community which includes both converted Jews and converted gentiles, which is why at times he needs to explain Jewish words and customs. Holding the flock together is a high priority. Oneness is a key theme in John: oneness with God, oneness together. Unity is not an extra, but the essence of what it means to belong to the one flock.

Ecumenism, in that sense, the vision of the church being one, is, as I once argued in a paper written in the 1980's: "the cake, not the icing". It will be Jesus' prayer for his own in John 17. That vision, which inspired the church worldwide especially in the early decades of the second half of the twentieth century, is always in danger of fading when churches and denominations become preoccupied with their own survival. For the author of the fourth gospel becoming one with God and with one with each other is the essence of faith.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Does the image of Jesus as shepherd still carry its message today?
3. What are your memories and thoughts about the vision of ecumenism. How can this vision best be fulfilled in your context?