

Studies in John 1-3

Introduction - My Approach To the Bible

I want to begin by saying a few things about my view of the Bible - which could be a course in itself. I hope what I say is simple rather than simplistic. If it appears the latter - well, I'll qualify and expand at a later stage or you can question me.

Also, what I say is only intended to be a guide so you have a better idea as to where I am coming from.

I see the Bible as God's 'communication' to us in its primary and defining source. By that I mean that what God says and has to say to us is governed by what he reveals in the Bible. For example, if someone says 'God has said to me ...' and it neither resonates with scripture or the nature of God revealed there, then it is highly questionable.

I think that what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16 is right,

All Scripture is God-breathed

It is my conviction that scripture is not only 'God-breathed' but also God-preserved. To beg the question why would he reveal all he want to reveal and then allow man to mess it up by forgetting it or changing it?

I trust the integrity of the Bible and its writers as a true and honest record of what God wants us to hear from him, about him, his ways and his purposes. I accept that he doesn't 'tell us all' but on a 'need to know basis', he speaks at a level where we

can understand' - There are things we want to know that if God explained them to us we would be unable to comprehend. When all is said and done he is God, infinite, immortal and all knowing and we aren't.

Job had a lot of questions and he wanted answers from God. At the end God sort of says, 'You explain the dynamics of the seen world and I'll explain to you the questions you ask.'

In addition to that we have to see that the bible contains a variety of different styles of literature and that some of these are unique to it, e.g. a gospel. Given that we have to read them accordingly and you can't read a letter the same way as history or apocalyptic etc.

Not using traditional words all the way and seeking to be even more specific I identify:

Law, history, poetry, prophecy, lament, gospel, letter, wisdom, proverbs, census, apocalyptic.

People ask about the bible being true or not. I have been asked if I believe everything in the bible is true which is a difficult question to answer. I believe God is true, his word is inspired and accurate, but on top of different kinds of literature that we read appropriately many types of literary devices are also deployed. I list a few that I can think of:

Exaggeration, simile, metaphor, parable - including acted ones at times, parallelism (a form of being repetitive), graphic description.

One example - the parable of the Good Samaritan. It could have happened but whether it did or not

is of no consequence because it is true to life.

Having said that I want to sound a caution. There are those who want to say, for example, that things that are recorded as 'fact' are only an 'extended parable'. Jonah would be a good example of that. Putting it in my words along with what I have just said about the good Samaritan, in this instance it would be described as not being true to life because people can't get swallowed and regurgitated by big fish. So, it can only be a parable or that part of it is fable or whatever. I am aware that this is God's world and that he does incredible things with it!

To pursue that further would be a 'red herring'!!

I am aware of later 'false' writings in abundance that take the names of Bible people, not least NT ones, but, they are false and from outside the time of the first generation of witnesses and believers. Also, if you were to look at them you would find they leave behind the 'matter of fact' type of material we have in the NT to the more obscure and way out.

In terms of dating I subscribe to the conviction that the NT was written before AD 70 - the fall of Jerusalem. There may be indicators that it was about to happen but no evidence that it had. The point being that if it had the writers would have linked that to Jesus predictions concerning it which they don't. To have done so would have been quite a point against unbelieving Jews.

Being bold I would say that some scholars are naive in not suggesting that Jesus did what many do - repeat himself and from different angles. Having

said that I know there are some passages between gospels which are hard to reconcile.

Going to the OT a little more specifically, I know that one of the hardest issues is that of God leading his people to war and allowing what we describe as racial cleansing. There are though differences and a way of seeing that which does justice to the plain text as it stands and without saying that it is written from a 'human perspective'.

We then have the whole issue, for some, that God in the OT is presented as 'tough' but in the NT as 'loving'. This is a totally false analysis.

Now, having raised two big issues and with you waiting in anticipation, I am going to stop there and move on to John because I am only giving a guide to my way of looking at the Bible and not seeking to deal with all these issues.

Before finishing this one other observation and that is that if you look to see if there is common thread running through the bible you will or should find that it is about God in relation to human beings and the place of sin. In Genesis 12 that starts to develop into call and promise, nation and a people belonging to God and, accountability and judgement. From Exodus 3 salvation become a more explicit theme which persists to the very end - as do all the others in one form or another, and, from that all else dovetails into place pretty well.

Introduction to John

Very briefly in addition to what I have already said.

Authorship - a hot potato in many circles but I see

no reason not to trust the internal implication that it is the one referred to in the gospel as the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', namely, John.

Date - I have already commented on NT dating and I stand by what I said and go with a date before AD 70. This is endorsed to a high degree with the discovery of a papyrus in the 1920's, P52 which is a fragment of John's gospel dated AD 125 and having its origin in Lower Egypt and now in Manchester at John Ryland's Library. For John's gospel to have travelled there and been copied there demands a date back into the 1st century.

Purpose - John answers this himself in John 20:30-31

30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

That is very explicit and as good a reason as can be wanted for writing. Others would say more but I believe we can trust his integrity.

If we ask why he has written so differently to the other gospel writer the answer isn't quite so simple.

It is normally accepted that John was written after the other three and we would expect him therefore to know something of their content but even allowing that question to be begged and allow us to conclude he was 'adding' to what was there already, why should he not have simply chosen to write in this more reflective form focusing on a number of 'key signs' and dialogue? At that he has chosen to make the teaching of Jesus his substantive basis for people to believe.

The other 3 use about half of their space for the time leading up to the passion with many more events, healing and parables, John has 5 chapters reserved for one evening!

For all four the passion is central to their message and takes a vast amount of space thus showing its significance.

It is these sort of things that make gospels unique types of literature.

End of part 1 - Questions and discussion

John 1:1-14

Often referred to as the prologue these words have a separate yet united relationship with the rest of the gospel. They have been likened to an overture of a symphony where the key themes of all that follows are introduced. These verses are brilliant, dynamic, far reaching in what they say and above all, highly challenging. Indeed, v 12 introduces the first specific challenge to believe.

Before Creation

1:1 In the beginning

I dare go no further for now for those words in themselves are significant. They not only invoke but echo exactly the opening words of the bible. Genesis 1:1 starts at the beginning of time and as John begins to tell of the beginning of a new time or new era he wants the first in our minds.

I am told that neither the Hebrew or the Greek

words have to be translated or understood as time specific but bring us to think about origins. More soon.

So, to vv 1-2

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning.

Here we are introduced to 'the Word' and we immediately think 'Jesus' but that's because we are so familiar with what follows, so don't, hold back and follow John as he writes for his first readers. Enjoy and be held in the dynamic of the divine Word (Logos) and his activity before the Incarnation. Also remember that until his birth there was no name for the one John describes as the Logos and it is not until v 14 that we are introduced fully to the Word Incarnate (made flesh) although John is leading to it from v 10.

It is John's choice not to use the saviour's name here and so we must move in to what he wishes to say by using the term Logos.

Before that let's see exactly what he tells us here about the Logos.

He was there in the beginning and He was with God - the two need not be the same. Then follows the mind shattering statement from and within the whole concept of monotheism - the Word was God.

Here we have another being with God who is also identified as God.

Do we have a problem? It seems not for the early Christians were thoroughly monotheistic and for all

they were accused of it was never dualism! The debate on the nature of Jesus, Christology as we refer to it, was not an issue till long after the NT era and the emergence people saying a variety of things about him.

There are those who seek a different translation (in modern times the Jehovah's Witnesses) which reduces the Logos to 'a god' by pointing out that there is no definite article in the Greek. The vast weight of argument goes behind the translation as we have it as being the only adequate one.

John's use of the term Logos has led to the spilling of much ink and a lot of it around a later use of this term by people known as Gnostics.

The name comes from the Greek for knowledge and is referring to groups of people whose belief systems were formed on secret knowledge and from the second century when their teaching formed and they gained momentum this impacted seriously on Christianity as there were many who were bringing or trying to impose such beliefs with Christian thought. We have parallels today so perhaps a warning.

In turn this led to John's gospel being associated with their teaching and people saying it had its origins then and so well into the second century.

It is commonly accepted that the problem of Gnosticism was not a problem in the time of the NT as it was not anything of a belief system till later. It is accepted that some of the letters of the NT reflect responses to teaching similar to it but not in anything of a developed form.

Why then Logos? Although we have no incarnation at this point there is certainly personification. This is not just 'a word' but 'the word' who has independent existence.

What I am saying to you now has no existence apart from me. As I prepared the words came from me, I looked at other sources, recalled things from the past. They then existed on computer, were printed and are now being spoken.

John says the Logos was there in the origin and with God. Total, full, separate, independent and without suggestion of being created.

If we go back to Genesis 1, and I am deliberately not going to talk about creation because we start that with v 3, central to that chapter is the phrase in vv 3, 6, 9, 14, 20 & 24:

And God said

In v 26 it becomes:

Then God said

So, without saying more, central to that passage is God's word of command and authority as we also see it to be.

By his use of Logos John is invoking the whole passage before himself taking us to creation. The primeval mist is starting to clear but only very slowly. And, as the earth was void and without form so what John brings to us slowly takes shape.

The difference here though is in what the first function of the divine Logos was to be because here in John the Logos is personified. He is alongside God and is God.

John then develops what he has to say about origins and in two short sentences placing the activity of the divine Logos at the very heart of it all.

Creation

John 1:3

3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

It is didactic, direct and dictatorial. It leaves no room for debate although debate rages even though we have no doubt about the intention of what he says within the circle of those who are theists.

It is like saying to a child, 'You are going to bed, you are not staying up, go and get in bed!'

The difference is the child may disobey as what I have said is a command for a forward action and what John says is the description of a past action.

John is in no way unique in ascribing creation to 'the second person of the trinity'. Paul in Colossians 1:16-17 in words that have other similarities with John in our passage, affirms this and the writer of the letter known as Hebrews refers to Jesus as (1:3b),

sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Then in as curt a way John ascribes the actual origin of life itself as being from the Logos, v 4

In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

John states that the Word is the source of every and all kinds of life and then specifically 'and that life was the light of men'.

It is a fact of 'nature' that light and life are linked but it is also a fact of faith that 'light, life and the Logos' are linked and that takes us to a different realm altogether.

More, in John light is a key theme and also life. The latter more than in any other NT writing.

Before proceeding a small but significant point and a slight excursion - sexist type language and the language of inclusion.

When we talk about anthropology we know what we are talking about even though we may not agree with the conclusions.

The NT regularly uses the word 'anthropos' and that has been translated 'man' which is the case here. The question is, and I am going to beg it, how do we best translate it because for certain the original is not sexist and is inclusive? Suggestions by email or postcard if the former is no good!

Finished, so back to where we were.

In these few verses we come to another big issue. Creation, science and the bible. At this point I am going to throw out some bullet points for thought, further discussion or questions at a later point - which is any time in a way!

- The great mistake of many is to think the bible, particularly in Genesis, is answering the question 'how?' because it isn't.
- The questions Genesis answers, and also John in our passage, are 'who and why'? These are more important than 'how?' which is really a distraction from, 'who and why?' and I mean a very serious distraction!

- Ironically if Genesis, or anywhere else in the bible, answered 'How?' it wouldn't have been relevant for the majority of the history of humanity but more, if it did, and by that I mean God explained how he created the world, I wonder if we would understand it even now!
- I am told that of interest to those of a scientific leaning is to pursue the relationship between DNA coding and the word as spoken by God in Genesis and the Word who is God in John!
- From someone I knew a long time ago, but well after all things were created!!, who was a dentist and with my own thoughts and reflections: Go to Cana of Galilee when Jesus changed water into wine (John 2). If modern scientists could have got hold of that wine they could have proved its vintage and perhaps the very vineyard the grapes were from! Good wine (John says the best) = time for maturation, fermentation, grapes, blossom, developing vineyard to be able to bear good fruit = 3 to 5 years plus! But, in truth, it was bath water until pulled out of the jars! This is given as an offering for reflection and appropriate consideration.
- Finally, the Genesis account of creation, in my mind, is awesome. The whole feel and flow as the writer brings us this incredible emergence of the world we know in such a matter of fact way. There is nothing that jars with our world view apart from the six days - perhaps and they could be six days of revelation to the author with rest on the seventh! Other creat-

ion accounts are elaborate and some with the gods doing weird and wonderful stuff - none of that here. God speaks - it happens and is seen to be good by him.

Finally, for this section, v 5,

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

This verse doesn't resonate easily and I think that is because it is a poor translation. Better than 'understood it', I am told and so also the RSV, is 'overcome it.' The picture then ties in far better with what John writes about light both in the first half of the verse and elsewhere and so we come to a good, down to earth reality picture of light shining in the dark and where darkness can not put it out. In fact, the opposite is more the case, the darker it gets the brighter the light.

Talk about fog, which John doesn't, and the picture fails, but John uses darkness occasionally and as we have said light, regularly. But please note this is not in any typically dualistic way where either could 'win'. John see darkness as the evil ways and wickedness of the human race out of step with and rejecting God in the biblical revelation of himself. Jesus reverses and shines into that and on the cross has defeated them.

I think we also note that 2000 years on the light is still shining brightly and we see that many attempts to extinguish it have failed. Consider Communist China in more recent times.

End of part 2 - Questions and discussion

The Forerunner in brief

1:6-9

For the first time in these verses we have a name, John, but he is only named in reference to being a testimony to the light that was coming. As with other gospels, but maintaining this current style of writing, John makes it clear that John is not the light. And so this incredible flow continues from the Logos to the Light to John the one preparing for the coming of the Light.

The emphasis is on the preparatory work assigned to the forerunner. Again consistent with who John was according to all accounts but at this point without reference to Isaiah 40 which is held until after the prologue. Here is the prologue the words from Isaiah are later placed on his own lips (1:23).

I spent a bit of time with v 7 which is referring to John,

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

The question in my mind was, 'what are people to believe?' because of the testimony of John. That Jesus is the light or more? The former is certainly right and I think it would be fair to say that John, in God's preordained purposes, was a crucial building block in preparing for the belief that was to come through Jesus.

At the end of v 7 a vital clause:

so that through him all men might believe.

The preparatory work of John had a specific end -

that others might believe and John the author is keen to point this out and stress it. He is writing that all might believe (20:31) and the herald is clearing a way for Messiah that will make it easier for people to come to him and believe.

John 1:8-9

8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

John the author now stresses that John isn't the light only a 'witness' to the light and this point I am going to say no more about the forerunner as we come back to him in more detail in v 19ff.

Verse 9 enhances and maintains the suspense as we wait for the revelation of the true light.

The Presence of the light

In vv 9-11, as that suspense and revelation continues we have an interesting progression, 'was coming' - v 9, 'was in' - v 10, 'he came' - v 11. Now I will read John 1:10-11

10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

There is a sort of enigma to these words and v 10 doesn't necessarily refer to after his birth but could pertain to all time which ties in with the progression I have just pointed out. Of course it was true after his birth, and remains so - in the world but not recognised, but, initially I think it is a reference to before birth with another significance post birth!

John adds this sad note of none recognition and couples it to him being the creator to heighten the sense of sadness. A note I hope we can sympathise with as we look into our world and just even round about us.

Most are getting ready to celebrate Christmas but each year debate rages about what is appropriate and relevant to the celebration. More and more are reverting to a mid winter celebration rather than that of the birth of the Messiah.

Should it bother us, at one level no because people who don't know or want to know who Jesus is shouldn't have to have 'Christian' forced on them. Those of us who believe can quite happily celebrate Christmas for what it is.

On the other hand we should be sad because people are missing out and we should want to give them the opportunity to at least hear what it is about and should use the opportunities afforded to us to do so.

The good news is that people will come to or come back to faith this Christmas - the question is, will there be those in our area?

Verse 10 broadens and makes specific the presence of the light of the Messiah. 'He came to that which was his own' - well, this world is his own because he made it, but, it also became his own because he became a real part of it as one of us.

But, as John adds, 'his own did not receive him' and that means they rejected him which, as we have just considered, continues to be the case. Should this surprise us, well frankly, no, Jesus said this would be

the case. In fact what he said is even stronger, John 15:18-19

18 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Which acts as a very good link to the next two verses in John 1. John 1:12-13

12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

John's thought process continues so he completes a vital aspect of what the presence of the light did in the lives of people and having mentioned the reality of the majority response - none reception or recognition he completes with some vital truths.

There are a number of things happening in these two verses.

First, we have a clear delineation between believers and none believers.

Second, there is a definite basis and it is 'receive and believe' which is significant in our culture where the word 'belief' can equate to intellectual assent. Being a Christian is about wholehearted commitment and following.

Third, when someone receives and believes, their action, they are 'given the right to become God's children' and verse 13 indicates that this is not a human but divine process - God's action.

Too many people refer to all people as God's

children. I find that unhelpful. I have no problem with all people being described as members of God's creation - in other words as God's creatures - that ties in totally with what John has said in the preceding verses, but, to become God's children requires something else. John describes that as being born of God. Paul in both Romans (8:15) and Galatians (4:5) talks about us being 'adopted' as God's children by the Holy Spirit although it is not very clear in the English.

John 3 of course brings us more of this when Jesus encounters Nicodemus so we will look at it more closely then. Remember, in the prologue John is introducing themes and ideas that are in detail and were part of the ministry of Jesus.

End of part 3 - Questions and discussion

The Explosive break in of the Divine Word who is the Light

John 1:14

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John has already established very clearly that the Word / Logos is God, not a god, and at the same time separate because he is also with God.

Now with equally strong and clear language he states that the self same Word came and in doing so shares fully in what we are. Not just as a human,

he doesn't use that sort of word, no the word became flesh and that is very explicit.

There were and have been and probably will be those who are not too happy with this. Around the time of John there were those (Docetists) who said he only seemed to be a person and so wasn't a real person.

Godhead and humanity, in the eyes of some, cannot sit comfortably together.

In Paul's 'contacts' (cp 1 Corinthians 15) there were those who denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus and regarded it as purely 'spiritual' - similar noises have been heard in our own time.

In most ages and cultures at some time or another there have been those who were ascetics who did everything they could to subdue the flesh because they thought it was intrinsically evil. Over the years Christianity has had its share in varying degrees.

In a different but not too dissimilar way we sometimes draw distinctions between that which is worldly and spiritual.

John, by using the word 'flesh' has left no room for such debate. As Graham Kendrick puts it 'manhood and deity in perfect harmony'.

More classically I think there is a phrase about this relationship being 'without distinction or division'. I thought it might be from the creed of St. Athanasius, but it isn't. However, for interest I now quote some of that in part because this is another 'classic and historic' expression of the relationship between Father and Son and we are more familiar with the

Apostle and Nicene creeds and what they say:

Now, the right faith is that we should believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both God and man equally. He is God from the Being of the Father, begotten before the worlds, and he is man from the being of his mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect man, having both man's rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards his divinity and inferior to the Father as regards his humanity; who, although he is God and man, yet he is not two, but one Christ; one, however, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh but by the taking up of humanity into God; utterly one, not by confusion of human and divine being but by unity of Christ's one Person. For just as the rational soul and flesh are one man, so God and man are one Christ; who suffered for our salvation, ...

Back to John 1:14

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Literally 'pitched his tent'. A tent is a temporary and movable dwelling, but the word also has to invoke the whole concept of the tabernacle in the wilderness where God had his earthly dwelling. The last part of the verse seems to endorse this,

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The pillar of cloud or fire which descended brought something of the glory of the Lord and the incarnation of Jesus does the same. Although John doesn't mention it in the main text here he may be

recalling the transfiguration for there in a very dynamic way he with James and Peter witnessed Jesus in his glory. Peter certainly mentions it very strongly in 2 Peter 1:16-18

16 We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

In John this slow process of identifying the Word is coming to a head and although Jesus isn't mentioned we are at the point where he is clearly and unmistakably to be understood as being the subject of these verses. Jesus is the divine Logos who became flesh.

I have made a lot of this but is it really important? The answer is a very loud yes. Jesus is shown in the NT to be the perfect offering for sin if he was but a man the he would not have been perfect. If he were only God then what he went through wasn't real but just some kind of show or act.

As man and God, indivisible, he has in every sense suffered, died and in doing so paid in full the price of sin. In and through his resurrection we know death is defeated and that victory is for sure for those who receive and believe.

End of part 4 - Questions and discussion

The Forerunner - part two

Having introduced JTB briefly in v 6 we now come to a little more but, at this point, he is still only part of the introduction.

In v 6 John is introduced as the one who has come a 'witness to testify to the light' and then John makes it clear that he is not the light.

Now, in v 15, this secondary role of JTB is emphasised. v 15

He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.

If you look at vv 14-18 v 15 almost seems an interruption and certainly what John is writing flows better and more logically without v 15 at least in my mind.

Was John the author trying to answer some who placed too important a significance on JTB? As late as Acts 18:24-25 there was one who only knew of the baptism of JTB so no doubt there were others:

*24 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.
25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John .*

On the other hand this could be just part of the dynamic way in which John wishes to introduce Jesus. Remember Jesus has not been named yet but JTB is now on his second reference. Even if my other suggestion is relevant I think this would have been

uppermost as John is out to stress the divine nature and primacy of Jesus in and before all things.

The end of the Prologue

We are now returned to the Word become flesh and at long last, in v 17, Jesus is mentioned by name.

v 16 seems to be an inadequate translation depending upon how you view certain words. A more literal translation would be:

for out of his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

The NIV uses blessing and I know that can be as obscure in meaning as grace or the same. Fact is John uses the word for 'grace' and not 'blessing'. In context John is also using the word 'grace' quite a few times and to maintain it here help with a better flow of thoughts.

A sound bite definition for 'grace' is 'getting what we don't deserve' and that is the fact with Jesus. From all he is in all his supremacy, power and authority we receive so much that we are just not worthy to receive.

In the next v we have John drawing together 'law' and 'grace and truth' on top of that there is another reference to 'grace and truth' back in v 14.

So v 17 states that we get the law through Moses but grace and truth through Jesus. Is John being 'against the law'? No, far from it because Jesus wasn't, he makes that clear in Matthew 5:17

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.

In fulfilling them John informs us that he 'adds' grace and truth.

In Romans Paul argues, and I hope I do justice to him, that the law cannot save us from sin and death, and, that all the law ever did, and still does, is show us what sin is. Knowing that we then confess our sin and through the atoning work of Jesus receive forgiveness and salvation through faith in him and what he has done.

In v 18 the prologue ends with a bang. John 1:18

No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

John states that Jesus shows us God and with good warrant, Jesus says the same. In the upper room in conversation with his disciples and in response to a question from Philip he states, John 14:9

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

I consider this to be one of the most challenging statements from the lips of Jesus is regards to who he is. It does not follow to say that if you have seen someone you have seen their father.

Some of you have seen my father but we are not the same by a long way either in looks or anything else and if I said to people, 'whoever has seen me has seen my father' they would be right in wondering what on earth I was on about.

John 1:1 explains why he could say it even if we can never fully understand it and what John says here is the corollary of v 1 and v 14. Out of what he is, Jesus reveals what the Father is.

End of part 5

The Denials and Confessions of John the Baptist

John's activity at the Jordan must have been creating quite a sensation because it was enough to get officials from Jerusalem to explore his activity.

The first thing he does is deny that he is the Messiah - v 20. This was crucial for him in keeping the ground clear, so to speak, for the arrival of Messiah.

They then question him, 1:21

"Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

This he denies emphatically. The significance of this question was in what Micah said, 4:5

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

This was and remains for Jews an expectation before the arrival of the Messiah. In fact, a place is still left for Elijah at the table when the Passover is celebrated. John is not Elijah. So they ask him, 1:21

Are you the Prophet

Again, he denies this and this time this is a reference to Deuteronomy and I quote fully for the sake of context, 18:14-16

14 The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practise sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. 15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. 16 For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire any more, or we will die."

Here I confess, was one I missed until now but it gives another angle on Jewish understanding and expectations from their scriptures. John though, following further interrogation because of their desire for a reply for the others in Jerusalem, answers, John 1:23

in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Which brings another angle and a change of direction because we are now dealing, not with the Messiah, Elijah or prophet, but the voice preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

Let's pause for the Isaiah passage has John as a great big JCB levelling mountains and filling valleys! Isaiah 40:3-5

3 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

That is highly graphical language and it points to John's role being that of the one who makes it easier for the true light to progress. John prepared a good highway for the Messiah - the Lord - to come down. He was the herald or forerunner.

A role that is essential today. Barriers have to be flattened and pitfalls avoided! These may be from the circumstances of life, past hurts, 'popular' objections against God or Christianity, real doubts etc., of course, we may do this by showing that the Lord is

real in our lives and not just by word or discussion. The Jerusalem delegation isn't satisfied and they want to know, as he doesn't fit with any Messianic figure, what he is about. John 1:24-25

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

Ritual washings or baptisms (but not as we know it) were not unknown in Judaism and the Essenes practised them quite a lot, hence the question to John, 'what lies behind your baptism?'

John answers after a fashion and I say that because he answers in accord with his brief to point to the Lord, John 1:26-27

26 "I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

John is not out for any glory, he realises he is a messenger and he wants people ready for the Messiah.

Perhaps in that is the reminder that in Christian witness we need to keep to essentials and not be derailed or set on the agenda of others. We are here to bring them to Jesus and Jesus to them. We build a kingdom and not an empire, we bring him the glory and not ourselves or the institution of the Church. It is good to keep centred on Christ.

What Paul writes to the 'challenging' Christians of Corinth is apt, 1 Corinthians 2:1-2

2:1 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed

to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

That gives a good link to what follows.

The Arrival of Jesus, the Lamb of God

John 1:29-31

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

As I read this again I think I get an answer to something I have asked a few times, what did John know about Jesus and I mean Jesus the man not the Messiah?

As he stood there baptising, calling people to repentance and giving testimony to the imminent arrival of someone greater who would be far more effective than himself; what or who did he expect? Well, before we move on let's hear more in his own words, John 1:32-34

32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' 34 I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

God had given him a 'sign' so as to identify the Messiah, 'the Spirit descending and remaining upon

him.'

What we note is that unlike the synoptic's we have no record of the actual baptism of Jesus only this round about description that signifies it happened and that the sign was there.

Look back at v 31, 'I myself did not know him . . .' and v 33, 'I would not have known him, except ...'

Do you see it, cousin Jesus arrives, and from what we have just read, the Spirit must have started moving for John before baptising Jesus because as he arrives there is an instant declaration of the arrival of the Lam of God. However, it now seems to me that right up until that moment John was not expecting this to happen to cousin Jesus. I even wonder if in the double denial of knowledge is an expression of his surprise.

These two were of a similar age, only perhaps 6 months between them, they would have possibly / probably played together as children. According to Luke Elizabeth acknowledged the significance of the Mary's child, Luke 1:41-45

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

So we are left with a lovely gap of who had told who what in the circle of Mary, Elizabeth, John and Jesus. Of course, this is of no real relevance except

that we are looking into the circumstances and lives of these key people who are so significant in the gospel. But there is something small and significant to take home, Jesus does like to surprise us and he is always far more than he ever seems.

Three things though are significant in this passage.

1. Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is a powerful description and acclamation about Jesus and what he was to accomplish.

Lambs at that time only took away or had an effect on sin by being offered and slaughtered as a sacrifice for sin. Here, and with whatever questions it might raise about Messianic expectations for John or others is an unequivocal statement about Jesus. John, in the power of the Spirit, and in good prophetic tradition, may have uttered this without realising the implication of his words.

2. John points to Jesus as of greater significance than himself which was a common theme of his preparatory work, and,

3. He also underlines, perhaps in answer to the previous day's questions about what he was about, that this is his sole role in life - to reveal the Lord's servant to Israel. Oh, and it may be those guys had already gone!

Again, in what we see and hear, a pointer for ourselves with a slight difference - our role is to reveal Jesus to those round about us.

End of part 6

An Additional Thought on 1:33

One bit of John's testimony I failed to take on which I probably should have, John 1:33, and it is God speaking to him:

'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.'

If we reverse that to 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' then we raise a controversial issue, what does it mean? Watch my fingers blister - I am taking hold of a hot potato!

I am well aware that it is interpreted in a variety of ways. Some take hold of verses in Acts to say that it is a separate action from Water Baptism and that could be understood from some good down to earth facts.

Many people are baptised in water before they are Christians and so any opportunity for a manifestation of the Spirit is well delayed.

Many other people, when they become a Christian do not understand the full implications and their inheritance.

Others, who have been Christians for years, know little or understand little of the work of the Holy Spirit - he is the neglected person of the trinity and as someone once said, tongue in cheek, 'all he does is endorse the work of church meetings!'

From that there are those who develop the whole concept of Spirit Baptism as a second experience, second blessing or whatever on the basis of limited biblical data and in conjunction with either poor teaching or the Churches' inability to take seriously

the work of the Spirit.

I do not think it is good to base theology and good bible understanding on bad experience or poor teaching. God is God and he acts according to his word.

The incidents in Acts where water and Spirit Baptism are on separate occasions are too limited and none specific in what they say to form our theology.

I accept that water baptism often proceeds conversion by a long way and not least when we baptise babies. In corollary to that it has to be stated that the only justification for infant baptism is upon the profession of faith and commitment by the parents.

I want to approach the matter from the other way round by determining what makes a person a Christian because it is from there we can express theological belief more accurately and thus, I hope, prevent some of the problems that occur when approached from the more experimental angle.

I shall deal with this in shorthand and minimal references to the bible.

To be a Christian is to receive and believe in Jesus (John 1:12). Within that we confess the alienation there is between us and God because of sin, and that Jesus dealt with that sin on the cross, then, in response to that, we are reconciled with God and seek to walk in obedience and faith following Jesus.

Within that we are born of the Spirit (John 1:13 and John 3:1ff), as such we are adopted as God's children (Romans 8:15).

Here comes the make and break point for me. I

cannot go with a 'quantitative' view of our receiving the Spirit because the Spirit is a person and not a force or power. In other words when we are born again and adopted by the Spirit that later on we can receive more of him by baptism in the Spirit.

After conversion we may have a mighty experience of God through the Spirit - great, but let's not have it end there but go on and on. I also am quite sure there are times when we are more open and sensitive to the work of the Spirit and so there are times when he may use us more effectively. It is also true that preconceived ideas or lack of understanding may lead to a blocking of the work of the Spirit and that we need him liberated in our lives, a bit like taking the cork out of a bottle.

In my understanding we either have or have not the Spirit living in us. Of more significance is our understanding of who he is, what he does and what he can do. That is what may change and as we grow we become more open to God working in and through us by his Spirit. Indeed, this should be a fluid matter according to all sort of things.

As far as I see it we have arrived when we are born again and from then on we grow and mature. There are no first and second class Christians neither are there any who are inferior!

As we grow in Christ we should manifest both the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and some aspect(s) of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12-14).

I think the motto is 'bad experience often leads to bad theology'. Let us then get the bible view

correctly, theology more accurate and then seek, experience and explain God in the light of that.

The final comment for now on this is that we should all be open for God to work through us as, when and how he wants.

Into Action with Jesus and the first disciples

From here on we see John on the wane and Jesus on the rise. John's last word in v 36 again point others to Jesus and again as the 'Lamb of God' and at this point some of his own follower start to take more interest in Jesus and start to follow him.

It starts with two of them wanting to see Jesus more closely and in his current setting (vv 38-39) and all we see is that they spent part of the day with him.

Who are these first two (v 37)? Well, Andrew is identified in v 40 and it is possible that John the author is the other.

Of significance is what Andrew did, v 41, found his brother, Simon, and starts to tell him about him with excitement and expectation,

We have found the Messiah.

From there Simon's future name is identified - Peter - which is formally given to him after his profession of Jesus as Messiah at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:18).

So we have talk about Messiah but what do they mean and what did they understand? What is the difference now as to a year or so later and then after Pentecost?

We can't fully say and all we can say is based on observation of these people through the gospels and into Acts. What is clear is that their understanding grows - consider what we were thinking a few moment back or how you looked on Jesus when you first started getting 'interested and involved' with him.

I think at this stage it is fairly light and probably laden with popular opinion regarding Messiah but that again is hard to ascertain. All we can really be certain about it is that it was pretty earthy and bound to earthly power and geographic areas.

However, let's not lose sight of the significance of what Andrew says to Simon - it is in the right direction and as good as it could be at that time.

The other thing to note is that for now Simon (Peter) is quiet. This isn't his profession yet and there is some evidence that he may have had his own doubts about Jesus - cp Luke 5:4-8

4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets ." 6 When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. 7 So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

Had he doubts and does this reflect a turning point for Peter? I have a feeling that until this point the jury could have been out for Peter but I may be

reading too much into it.

However, I note the contrast to what is reported about Nathanael in vv 43-50. But more of that in a minute. First, we note where they have been since on the scene 1:28

Bethany on the other side of the Jordan

Further we are told Jesus is off to Galilee, about 65 miles away, and he is gathering his little group to go with him. We also note that Philip, along with Andrew and Peter are from Bethsaida which is about 80 mile away! That's a long way from home and even today we can meet a handful of people who don't move that far from home ever!

Look at map

Again, let's enter this setting - what took them all that way from home and work and how long had they been there? If, as we assume, it was John, then he really was having an impact on the land - Jews and Pharisees from Jerusalem, nearly 20 miles away - 1:19 & 24 and this contingency from up north about 80 miles away (all as the crow flies!).

Well, all this was in the Roman empire and news did travel although we don't know how. Later in the gospels news flies round about Jesus and now and again over a fair old distance.

Let's get into this bit, Jesus finds Philip and invites him up north with him, and we assume the other two are coming too as it is homeward, and Philip goes to get his brother Nathanael. What Philip says to him is again interesting, John 1:45

"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the

Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Perhaps this tells us a little more about the preaching of John but again I don't think we put too much significance into what they say about Jesus except that they see him as Messiah - the one promised by God, John has merely identified Messiah with multiple scriptures thus doing a good job!

This time some personal details are added and they may have got them from Jesus. Of smile type interest is Nathanael's response, John 1:46

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

It sounds like version 1 of the war of the roses! Nothing new in regional conflicts and tensions. But then, they could all be tarred with the same brush because we have something similar said to Peter at Jesus' trial, Matthew 26:73

73 After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away."

Galilee had an accent and Nazareth was looked down upon by some as a place where all were beyond the pale! All local, real life colour.

However, Nathanael is in for a shock, John 1:46-48

Come and see," said Philip. 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." 48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you."

Is it what Jesus said or just that he had seen and known who he was that got through to him? Well, assuming he wasn't too vain let's assume just that

Jesus knew who he was looking at when he saw him under the fig tree and Jesus' later response, v 50, endorses that.

From Nathanael we have another mighty declaration, John 1:49

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

All true, but I think again given the later evidence we must treat these ascriptions cautiously unless we want to say John the author is writing later ascriptions back to an earlier time and I think that raises other problems.

Some thoughts on this: John had drawn crowds as we have seen from all over so his teaching must have been striking. To bring official from Jerusalem may indicate that he was using strong language for Jesus. As to what he understood in what he was saying is open to debate. I have noted before that later John had doubts and that we don't know what he expected of Messiah. A significant fact, I would maintain that he was speaking in the power of the Spirit and and the spirit of the prophets who we can see spoke in obedience rather than in understanding - God gave them something and they spoke it.

Therefore what we have may be the product of a good work by John the Baptist which would gain its real substance for the disciples as they journeyed with and understood Jesus. I will also, in saying that, maintain the position that they only fully understood all these things post Pentecost.

Perhaps some of that is underlined in Jesus response John 1:50

"You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You shall see greater things than that."

But then, in what he adds he moves on, John 1:51

He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

We have an allusion to Jacob and his ladder but it is also suggested that Jesus also means that a new channel between earth and heaven was being opened in his ministry. His allusion to the Son of Man takes us to his preferred self ascription which is based on Daniel 7:13-14

13 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

It seems this was a 'neutral and clean' title as no one ever seemed to bother about it and so it seems that the religious leader failed to see his use of that as linked to Daniel 7 because the picture there is certainly one loaded with implications!

But then, people missed and still miss the point about Jesus and what he has to say about himself and to us. So we return to the wonders of filtered hearing. I would now ask as we end chapter 1, are you starting to see Jesus more clearly and entering more into this wonderful growing picture that we are being presented with? That is part of John's aim.

End of part 7

Water into Wine

John 2:1-11

The NT, and not least the gospels, record many happenings that we quite easily block together and refer to as miracles. However, the word 'miracle' is only really satisfactory for one of the three ways these are described in the NT.

There we have three ways to describe these actions: signs, wonders and acts of power. Sadly the English translators aren't very helpful in indicating which are which.

In brief: signs point to something beyond the event; wonders make people stand in awe and describe the effect therefore on those who witnessed them and acts of power are a demonstration of sovereignty and authority over the created order. The word 'miracle' relates best to 'wonders'.

Described as 'the first of his signs' in v 11 this is the first of a short series of signs recorded in John. The NIV adds the word 'miraculous' to this in an attempt to convey something but I think the word is unnecessary.

Through these signs John want his readers to look and see something more about Jesus and who he is, they are not stand alone events and even those in the other gospels which might appear to be that are not. One of the reasons Jesus refused to turn stones into bread was that he was aware that on their own these acts of power were no good and there are plenty of times when he refuses to give 'a sign' and on one occasion I recall rebukes the crowds

saying they are only there because he fed them!

The 'more than' John wants his readers to see is highlighted in the rest of the verse. John 2:11

He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

One other thing to note before looking at this incident is that John does not record many of Jesus signs and wonders, indeed, he doesn't record any parables, but then we recall he has a different aim and approach to the other gospels which may be because he knew something of them and their content and had no desire to duplicate another similar account.

What I like about this incident is that there, right at the start of his public ministry when he could have been out and about preaching the kingdom, which is where Mark starts us off, and is probably what Jesus was doing, John, rather than bringing that takes us to a wedding.

Jesus was, chapter 1, speaking and teaching, but the first 'action' so to speak is at a wedding. There in the midst of everyday life and celebration. John shows that Jesus had time for the everyday events of life and not just preaching.

Therein we have something important which we see many times with Jesus and that is that he joined in ordinary events, remember he went to people's homes for meals, and shared in day to day life. He wasn't aloof and remote. Many have noted that if Jesus were around today we wouldn't find him in spending all his time in Church and at church events but in pubs, market places and even the red light

districts etc.

I ask, how often, in what ways and for what reasons are Christians in such places?

So, we have Jesus at a wedding and we don't know a lot about the customs but on keeping with similar cultures I can envisage that most of the village would have been there and that it would have gone on for days not hours - nothing like our weddings where thousands can be spent in a few hours. I suspect these events were good old knees ups but at this wedding something went wrong. Either, not enough wine was ordered or people were drinking it too fast because it ran out.

When Mary suggests that Jesus can be part of the answer and prevent the hosts embarrassment there is an interesting exchange which is a bit odd and difficult. John 2:3-5

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine 4 "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

On the surface this appears a bit blunt and almost rude. NIV adds 'dear' to 'woman' to soften it and apparently rightly so because in Greek a straight 'woman' is not as harsh as in English. But, why woman and not mother?

The suggestion that makes the most sense to me is that Jesus is directing Mary to see him less as her child and more of who he is with all that he had to do.

Mary knew although probably did not understand

much about what he was about as this was made clear when he was conceived and born. Now is the time for her to start and move on in her thinking about Jesus with all that is to come - hence, 'my time has not yet come'.

There is probably an indicator too to what I said early about Jesus choosing 'how' to use his power and so resisting being pushed to do so!

Having established his grounds he then proceeds to act and orders the filling of six large jars which were for ritual bathing with water from which wine is then drawn and declared to be the best. The latter was a surprise because the logic would normally be to serve to good wine first and the poor later when people's appreciation levels were lowered!

Note though, only Jesus, Mary, the stewards and the disciples are aware of what happened.

What do we take on board from the best wine? At a complete surface level I would state that Jesus couldn't produce anything but the best. I could well believe that it would have been the finest wine ever ever to be drunk.

Also, we may be intended to see that in the coming of Jesus the best has arrived and that he has superseded all that went before. Another thing that may be anticipated in what we have is the ultimate banquet when Jesus is presented with his bride - the church. But, that may be going a little too far.

Finally we have a note from John which I have already quoted but to which I return for another observation. John 2:11

He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

In view of our earlier thoughts I think it is interesting to see that John tells us that his disciples saw 'his glory' rather than as we might expect, 'saw his power'. Here we come close to the intentions of Jesus. For him it wasn't just about power, and probably still isn't, but glory. Jesus did, does and will demonstrate his power but not just for the sake of it; it is to reveal more and it is to bring people to him and his Father by showing who he is. God can be seen in his power but to be appreciated in his glory and at that we should stand in awe of him. So we have recorded in the NT, signs, wonders and acts of power!

In response we are told that his disciples 'put their faith in him' and in the Greek it is 'into him' which implies personal commitment and not some sort of assent or loose allegiance which is where we can go too often when we talk about faith or belief. Too often we, and many who call themselves believers, want Jesus at a distance. Not to interfere, not to get too close or involved but to be at hand when required for the special occasions or the things we can't handle alone.

Of course, we are actually incapable of handling anything alone should always have the help and support of our Lord. He comes to help, support, save and guide not as one who interferes but as a friend who loves us and is himself totally committed to us and our cause.

End of part 8

The Temple Cleared Out

John 2:12-17

At this point scholars enter into debate and if you are familiar with the other three gospels you may anticipate 'why' this is so.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke the cleansing of the Temple is recorded as an event leading up to the cross and here in John it is right at the start. Is this an example of John rearranging material or, something else?

There is evidence, from the text, that says, 'something else' and that evidence is that if you study the accounts of the other gospels with John there is a lot of different material in terms of words and actions.

For example, here is John Jesus accuses them of making the temple court a 'market' in the others, 'a den of thieves'; John mentions a whip, sheep and oxen and the others don't. The other have Jesus quoting scripture, John doesn't only his disciples remembering an apt scripture (v 17). Also, the synoptic account is more closely linked to the plans to 'get rid of Jesus' whereas in John there is no real record of antagonism to Jesus.

At that we can note that at this stage Jesus was unknown really to them and so why get uptight, later, they were truly opposed to him.

Of further interest is the observation that if the two events are different, one at the start and one at the end of his ministry it is quite natural that people would revert to their former ways as time passed

and it would probably be a good two years before Jesus was back at Passover. That sort of behaviour is quite normal.

To take this personally and apply it to our setting we can consider how often and easily we slip back into old ways with matters that we have dealt with before Jesus in prayer and confession. We all have to learn the same lessons in life more than once for that is a trait of human nature.

The demand for Jesus to 'authenticate' himself

John 2:18-22

The Jews wanted a 'sign', v 18, to show his authority and Jesus astounded and shocked them by his reply, v 19.

In response they think in one arena whilst Jesus is talking about something else altogether, vv 21-21, and after his resurrection his disciples 'got the message' - v 22.

Within these two incidents we may see something else being hinted at which is that after the resurrection, and so after the offering of the perfect sacrifice for sin 'once and for all' there would be no need for a temple and the new temple could be the body of Christ - his people, where God dwells by his spirit. The latter is tenacious but interesting. It could also be more incidental than deliberate on John's behalf.

Fact is: Jesus died and rose around AD 33. the temple was finished in AD 64 and destroyed, never

to be replaced, AD 70! At the time of this incident it had been in the process of being built for 46 years. Jesus' 3 days is certainly a sign to be reckoned with, but wait, his body as a unique dwelling of God was raised on the third day and Paul and other refer to our bodies as being 'a temple' where God abides! (1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19).

Jesus want more!

2:23-25

People were responding because of the 'signs' Jesus performed, and that was good, but, not good enough. He wanted a further dimension to their faith which would enable him to trust himself more closely. Jesus is ever the realist who sees people for what they - fickle and able to forget (cp what we have just thought about in relation to the double cleansing of the temple) and seeing the signs or power of God does not guarantee lasting faith. Sometimes, all it does is fascinate or intrigue!

Having said that I will add that that does not stop Jesus performing signs or acts of power for they have a real place in ministry!

I remain sure that many today need their scepticism shaking and their faith awakening. This may happen through them seeing the authentic faith of believers, the transforming or even amazing power of Jesus in action and so I ask, how do we accomplish this?

End of part 9

Jesus and Heavenly Birth

3:1-12

The meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus is interesting and significant in terms of who he is and the conversation they have.

He is a Pharisee and on the whole these men were against Jesus, indeed, they were his enemies and the 'agents' who led to his crucifixion. I put it like that because I believe we were all responsible for the cross as it was and is our sin that is dealt with there.

I think it is evident that Nicodemus comes genuinely to enquire of Jesus.

Some underline this by saying that coming at night (v 2) meant it was in secret, others point out that night was a time for serious conversation and so it is a complement. Either way his encounter with Jesus is interesting.

For starters he gets an answer from Jesus to a question he hasn't asked, indeed, we don't know what his question was or even if he had one, and, if he didn't, then we realise that Jesus demonstrates what Nicodemus states - that God is with him - and that he has the knowledge to know that he has only come to talk and discover. That would give Jesus the opportunity to set the agenda as he does.

So, Nicodemus comes and affirms Jesus especially if we consider he is a genuine enquirer, from someone else his words could be seen as flattery.

John 3:2

He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we

know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

That, according to John is his opening gambit to which Jesus replies, John 3:3

"I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

I have said Jesus answers a question that hasn't been asked but I dare say any Jewish leader would have been interested in the kingdom of God. It was a relevant issue to Jews in the days of Jesus under the occupation of Rome. But, for them, they were looking for a Messiah who would lead them out of this servitude to Rome and establish a Jewish kingdom (God's) greater than any empire ever.

Jesus is therefore going straight into a vital but also dangerous arena. The Roman's didn't like anything that could be seen to be a threat to their absolute rule and although Jesus' answer leaves no room for that, well, we all know how good words can be made to say anything in the wrong hands!

I also begin to think that we have a bad translation here in the phrase - oft misused - 'born again'. What Jesus literally says is 'born from above' and in light of the following conversation that becomes more clear and also it takes what he is saying about God's kingdom out of the arena of daily and local politics for he is not talking about a kingdom that is of earthly origins but heavenly ones.

However, and now I contradict myself slightly, Nicodemus does see Jesus as talking about ordinary birth in his reply, or, to agree with what I have just said, is he totally confused and can't see there could

be any other kind of birth? Listen to his reply, John 3:4

4 "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

He is confused isn't he? Jesus' answer then brings us to something new, but introduced in the prologue (1:12), spiritual birth and the means by which we become God's children.

Read vv 5-7

Now I am sure that we have all heard of people and even ministers refer to all in the world as God's children. It may be legitimate to talk of the human family in terms of the whole of humanity, but, to describe the whole of humanity as God's children is both misleading and unhelpful.

For starters, some don't want any association with God, others would not want to be grouped in with the Christian faith and above all it is not what scripture teaches.

Jesus here expressly states that there are two kinds of birth: that of the flesh by which we become independent, unique physical beings with awareness and growing awareness as we grow of the physical world; second, that of the Spirit whereby we become God's children (1:12) and are aware of the spiritual elements of life as defined by the Father, the Son and the Spirit and revealed in scripture. We grow and can become more aware but unlike physical development we cannot plot spiritual development in the same way. It is different. Hence perhaps, what Jesus says in v 8 about

the Spirit moving unseen as the wind. He chooses those who are called and they grow and develop as Christians (God's children) according to his agenda and not ours. Interesting though that - God deals (I use the word gently) with us according to his knowledge and love for us and not that of any minister or anyone else. God does not clone us but conforms us and he conforms us to the likeness of his Son. Rom 8:29

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Now, in looking at Romans 8 brings us to almost an exposition of what Jesus says here. Paul's uses the same two words 'flesh' and 'spirit' and in his words details spiritual birth - vv 14-17.

See Romans 8

Back to v 8 and the blowing of the spirit. Nicodemus is again confused by this, v 9, to which Jesus responds, well, if you a teacher in Israel can't understand then how can I go any further, v 12 and like any good preacher Jesus immediately does so!

However, in narrative that follows it isn't clear who is speaking or who is being addressed - and that is for next time.

For now, as we close today, consider what being born of the spirit means to you. This is crucial from the scriptures we have looked at tonight and indeed our eternal destiny could hang on our response to what Jesus is saying which is underlined in what follows.

End of part 10

Jesus and Heavenly Life

3:13-21

Heavenly birth, for want of another phrase, which we looked at last time leads to heavenly life. What follows is an expanded explanation arising out of Jesus conversation with Nicodemus.

I put it that way because no one agrees whether the whole of this or just to the end of v 15 are the words of Jesus. They 'read' seamlessly but some have argued that it is John giving a fuller exposition of what Jesus has said up to v 15. The Greek doesn't help in the slightest because there are far less punctuation marks used in Greek than we use and certainly no inverted commas!

In the NIV the translators have chosen to 'accept' that Jesus is speaking right until v 21 and I am quite happy to go with that.

Last time I did suggest that v 12 could be a link onwards for what Jesus says here, John 3:12. In the preceding verses Jesus has spoken to Nicodemus about being 'born of the spirit' and Nicodemus is certainly confused, Jesus suggests more in v 12,

12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

So, in what follows, is Jesus still speaking of earthly matters or heavenly ones? As my heading indicates he is certainly speaking of heavenly life and the content of these verses compound what he has said and have direct implications for eternity as well as for now.

vv 14-15 start to take us into this new thought and we have a clear anticipation of the cross,

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

First, because it leads into second, let's deal with Moses and the lifting up of the snake.

read Numbers 21:1-10

God was angry at sin and allowed some 'drastic' consequences to the belly aching Israelites and when Moses intercedes (despite having been the object of their complaints as well as God) God gives them a place of 'salvation' - a snake on a pole and all they had to do if they were bitten was look at it, but, if they didn't they would die.

Harsh? Perhaps, but, God is teaching and showing his eternal character and within that he is showing that sin has serious consequences and so, although Moses prays God takes the snakes away, he doesn't, but what he does do is provide a way of salvation. And, God doesn't change which is very clear here in John 3.

Sin, according to Jesus, is deadly. Paul says the same, Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death

I am aware Jesus doesn't mention sin but he goes on to say that we are perishing in v 16 and that those who do not believe stand condemned already - v 18b.

What he also says is that he, the Son of Man (v 13) has come to save us from perishing, v 16, and from being condemned vv 17 and 18a.

So, although he does not mention sin that is what he is talking about - look ahead to v 19. Also, in the context of Moses and the snake he is likening his self giving on a pole - the cross - as the means of salvation from God's punishment for sin - deadly snake venom or perishing.

Fact is, God has always judged sin - go back to the fall in Genesis 3 or the flood a few chapters later. But, God has also always been in the saving business too - the flood, Noah and family, and than a few chapters later again he calls Abram and the 'big' salvation theme is starting which has its culmination and fulfilment at the cross.

Why? v 16, because he loves the world and doesn't want any to perish and that is totally and utterly inclusive. The word for world is *κοσμος* - all the inhabitants of the planet!

The people of the planet are perishing, says Jesus, and God throws a life-belt to save them, Jesus on the cross, out of love. Do we grab it and allow ourselves to be brought into the ark of salvation or do we perish in the flood?

Don't assume the former but look at what follows as Jesus gives the verdict - vv 19-21. He says there are people who are like cockroaches who scurry into the darkest corner for fear of being seen or having what they are doing been seen and so shun every bit of the light!

I heard it put like this recently: Look at any crowd of people and everyone of them needs Jesus, but, many don't want him. Jesus doesn't need any of us, he is safe and complete in the eternal Godhead, yet, as we look at the cross we see that he says 'I want all'!